

Practical Endeavors in Building a History Education Community: A Secondary School Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract: This paper takes the long-term practice of collaborative teaching and research between secondary schools and universities as a case study to explore the construction mechanism of the “history education community” and its empowering role in teaching reform. By presenting the in-depth, multi-year interaction between theoretical researchers in higher education and secondary school practitioners, and transforming this interaction into concrete lesson examples, it achieves an effective translation of theory into teaching practice. This collaborative model not only significantly enhances students' abilities in historical source verification and historical thinking but also bridges the long-standing gap between educational theory and teaching practice. It offers a replicable paradigm for building a vibrant history education community where theory and practice mutually enrich each other.

Keywords: History education community; Theory-practice integration; Deep historical source study; Collaborative teaching and research

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1. Daily spontaneous intellectual exchanges

From 2013, when I began my teaching career, to 2019, I had won first prizes in municipal, provincial, and national teaching competitions as a young teacher. However, these achievements led me into a professional development bottleneck, leaving me confused about how to achieve a professional breakthrough and innovate my classroom teaching. A chance online exchange with Mr. Chen Deyun, who was pursuing his doctorate at Capital Normal University, opened a new window for my professional growth. A plethora of new terms I had never considered or even heard before kept echoing in my mind, such as “historical thinking skills of continuity and change”, “memory historiography”, “historical time”, “the other and self-reference”, “narratives of the other”, and “serial questioning in historical source teaching”.

Subsequently, Dr. Chen and I began sustained exchanges. Daily history teaching presented new problems, confusions, or fresh ideas, and our topics ranged from history teaching abroad to his reflections on constructing theoretical models. These exchanges were undoubtedly repeated intellectual collisions. I gradually realized the shortcomings of prioritizing practice over theory—it only allowed me to complete the task of teaching basic knowledge but failed to enable students to truly reach the high standard of core competencies in the history discipline. To help students acquire these core

competencies, it is essential to innovate classroom teaching from the perspective of historical teaching theory and promote the improvement of teaching practice.

In his article *On a New Path for Historical Source Study: Model Construction for Deep Learning*, Dr. Chen mentioned the “chaos in historical source study lacking a deep learning orientation”, such as “lack of authenticity in historical sources”, “superficiality in questioning about historical sources”, and “neglect of the originality of historical sources”, which struck a chord with me^[1]. Upon examining my own history teaching process, I found that the historical source teaching designed in some of my award-winning lesson plans more or less exhibited such “chaos”.

During our first intellectual exchange, he stated, “If my teaching theory cannot be used to guide middle school history teaching practice, then it remains worthless on paper”. This sentence has left a profound impression on me. I conceived the idea of applying the theoretical model he constructed to my teaching practice. After communicating with Dr. Chen, he unreservedly used his theoretical model to assist me with lesson design, teaching practice, and teaching reflection, while also sharing his latest theoretical explorations and reflections. These included new achievements such as the “S-QTR historical source study model for deep learning”, the “Four-Dimensional Teaching Method”, “Narrative-Based History Teaching” and “Innovative Design of History Cause Teaching Based on Permutation and Combination”, some of which had not yet been published.

2. Three years of uninterrupted practical attempts

Recognizing the significant value of these teaching theories and models for improving history teaching, I have continuously utilized theoretical models to refine my classroom teaching practice from 2020 to the present. This encompassed various forms: both fragment teaching and overall lesson design; both new lessons and review lessons; and lesson examples characterized by teacher lectures as well as those centered on student performance. I experienced a process where students initially felt at a loss but eventually became enthusiastic and achieved excellent results, and where colleagues initially disapproved but gradually came to recognize and affirm my approach. Here are a few specific lesson examples.

2.1. Practice of evidential inquiry into historical sources based on questioning

In April 2021, after thoroughly reading the lesson plan *Evidential Inquiry into Historical Sources Based on Questioning: Using the “Pictures of Farming and Weaving” as an Example* co-published by Teacher Wang Zihan and Dr. Chen, I was immediately drawn to its rigorous logic, deep excavation of basic textbook historical sources, layered “questioning design” and effective implementation of students’ competency in historical source verification. They readily agreed to my request to transform this lesson plan into teaching practice. Therefore, adapting to the students’ learning situation and teaching needs, I made some adjustments and developed a review lesson titled “Interpreting Ancient Chinese Agriculture from the ‘Pictures of Farming and Weaving’,” which I presented as an open class within the history teaching research group.

This lesson utilized materials from the new textbook and integrated the theory of the “Four-Dimensional Teaching Method”. Some students encountering this type of teaching for the first time found it challenging. Post-lesson evaluations within the group revealed two differing opinions: one viewed this teaching model as novel and unique, believing that continuously designing chains of questions for probing inquiry around a single historical source helped enhance students’ historical thinking skills; the other voice expressed skepticism, arguing that since no teacher had attempted this before, it was too difficult for first-year high school students. Student feedback was also divided: some found the lesson innovative and unique, helpful in boosting learning interest, and felt the serial questioning aided in developing the logical starting point for thinking, recognizing the historical value of images, realizing that “a single piece of evidence is insufficient” and learning methods for interpreting image-based historical sources; others, unfamiliar with this lesson type, found it hard to keep up mentally and perceived it as somewhat difficult.

After this practice, I synthesized the teachers’ reactions and students’ feedback and discussed them with Dr. Chen. He encouraged me to persist with the teaching theories I believed in. He pointed out that entirely new teaching methods

would indeed pose challenges for students and teachers unfamiliar with them, but with long-term persistence, continuous improvement, and refinement, seemingly difficult teaching models would become more manageable. Simultaneously, he advised me to develop the habit of recording my lessons (either video or audio) henceforth. These recordings could serve as classroom feedback materials, useful both for his refinement of theoretical constructs and as a basis for my teaching reflection. With his assistance, I applied the teaching theories he was exploring to refine this lesson's design, particularly the question design and student activities, and indeed achieved better teaching outcomes.

2.2. Practice of studying historical sources like a historian

During our regular exchanges, Dr. Chen frequently mentioned the book *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms*. After carefully studying it, the teaching cases in the book once again reshaped my understanding of history classroom teaching. Meanwhile, he shared the “S-QTR Historical Source Study Model” designed based on Stanford University’s “Reading Like a Historian” framework. This model grounds exploration in students’ learning context using relevant historical sources as the basis, employs reading as the means, uses corresponding questions as the engine, guides study activities with historical thinking, and utilizes knowledge and skills as support to conduct study activities aimed at cultivating students’ core competencies in history. As a frontline history teacher, I was immediately captivated by this entirely new model for historical source study and its associated question design. Thus, I seized the topic of “queue-cutting and dress reform in the late Qing Dynasty” as an opportunity to attempt using this historical source study model in my teaching practice^[2].

In the overall lesson design, to avoid issues like lack of authenticity or neglect of originality in historical sources, I endeavored to seek out primary sources. To highlight the effectiveness of questioning regarding historical sources, the thinking-oriented nature of the study objectives, and the depth of historical source reading, I designed the lesson with reference to the “S-QTR Historical Source Study Model”, aiming to guide students through deep reading and to “think like historians” during the study process.

The first attempt was not smooth, resulting in the failure to complete the intended study activities within the class period. During post-lesson discussions with Dr. Chen, he emphasized that history teaching must consider the “human element” and pay attention to students’ classroom experience, suggesting I hold a class “lesson evaluation meeting” to listen to the students’ voices. After the meeting, I realized the problem lay not with the “S-QTR Historical Source Study Model” itself, but with aspects like the setup of the teaching segments and the guidance provided to students. Consequently, I adjusted the teaching segments and student activity designs based on these insights and conducted a second practice session in another class. The adjusted teaching effect was immediately evident: student responses, performance, and the progression of the lesson were all superior to the first attempt. Following Dr. Chen’s suggestion, I further refined some question designs and implemented the lesson again in other classes.

This teaching practice was also compiled into an article and published. In the second month after publication, it was fully reprinted in the *Renmin University Copying Material Middle School History and Geography Teaching and Learning*. This made us realize that our “theory-guided teaching practice” had received high recognition from experts and scholars, and it also highlighted the significance of the “university-middle school collaboration” + “theory-practice interaction” model.

2.3. Verification, textual research, cross-verification, dialectical analysis—practice in studying image-based historical sources

When practicing the deep historical source study model, the use of image-based historical sources is inevitable. How to study images in depth had long been a bottleneck in my teaching. Therefore, Dr. Chen introduced me to several iconological theories, including Panofsky’s “Three Levels of Image Interpretation”. Upon hearing this, I envisioned that applying this theory to the study of image-based historical sources, combined with the relevant theories and strategies of the “Four-Dimensional Teaching Method”, could certainly create a different form of history classroom. Consequently, we

conducted several practices studying image-based historical sources and also published some cases.

One such case was the study of the Couple Sitting and Feasting mural from the lesson “Economy, Society, and Culture of the Liao, Song, Xia, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties” in the textbook *An Outline of Chinese and Foreign History* (Volume 1). Adhering to the principle that textbook historical sources are “basic sources”, we used this image as study material and had students engage in thorough pre-class reflection on it. During the pre-class preparation stage, many students debated whether this mural could confirm it depicted a “scene of the tomb owner’s daily home life”. This student reaction delighted me, and I immediately discussed with Dr. Chen how to leverage this teaching moment to cultivate students’ core competencies. After multiple discussions and exchanges, we employed the “Four-Dimensional Teaching Method”, advancing the image study through problem-based teaching, using problem discovery, exploration, and resolution as the thread running through all student activities. Simultaneously, we guided students in studying the image through four progressive paths: verification, textual research, cross-verification, and dialectical analysis. Furthermore, we fully integrated iconological theory to achieve interdisciplinary teaching, utilizing the three-level image interpretation theory (pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation) to facilitate the image study activities^[3].

The implementation of this entire case, starting from an initial open class within the group to subsequent continuous refinement of the lesson design and re-practice, consistently adhered to the concept of “keeping people in view in history”. Involving students in teaching became a key feature of this teaching practice, with the impetus for the teaching process stemming from students’ questions. This also represented an attempt in our exploration of the “Four-Dimensional Teaching Method” to shift from the previous “historical source-oriented teaching model” to a “problem-oriented teaching model”.

3. An enlightening academic salon

From July 15 to 18, 2023, at the thematic academic salon of the 7th History Education Academic Seminar hosted by the Editorial Department of Reference for Middle School History Teaching (Shaanxi Normal University Publishing House), the Basic Education Research Institute of Shaanxi Normal University, and the School of History and Culture of Shaanxi Normal University, Professor Zhang Hanlin from Capital Normal University delivered a presentation titled *A Preliminary Discussion on the History Education Community*. He proposed that middle school history teachers, history teaching researchers, history education scholars, history assessment designers, historians, history curriculum standard experts, and history textbook experts should form a history education community to jointly promote the development and progress of middle school history education. Professor Zhang also mentioned three different research orientations: practice-oriented, theory-oriented, and policy-oriented, noting that this process essentially involves dialogue with education scholars, historians, and international scholars. He further indicated that one path to solving practical problems is the transformation based on theory.

Professor Zhang Hanlin’s presentation was an instant revelation to me. Hadn’t the long-term collaborative model between Dr. Chen and me precisely been theory-oriented teaching practice? Dr. Chen was responsible for theoretical construction and exploration; I implemented his explorations into teaching practice and provided timely feedback and exchange; he continuously refined the theoretical frameworks and models, while also publishing some lesson examples. This process of teaching communication and intellectual collision had effectively formed a micro “history education community” (history education scholar—middle school history teacher—history teaching journal). This history education community, or teaching-research collaboration model, possesses inherent advantages: teaching practice cases are supported by teaching theories, and theoretical models are grounded in numerous practical cases. Theory and practice are no longer separate but form an organic whole.

Professor Zhao Yafu pointed out: “The long-standing training model for teacher candidates and the mode of teaching research have resulted in a severe lack of affinity for and ability to analyze theory among both researchers in higher education institutions and the vast number of frontline teachers”^[4]. Even today, neglecting or even despising teaching

theory is unacceptable. I feel fortunate to have found my professional direction and clarified my professional role within the history education community: as a middle school teacher, I might not be at the forefront of theoretical construction, but I will certainly remain at the forefront of applying theory to practice. Undoubtedly, there is still a long way to go for theory-guided history teaching practice. However, I firmly believe that the “history education community” we have built possesses vigorous vitality and will surely bear more fruit in the future, making history teaching more effective and enabling the cultivation of students’ core competencies.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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