

Skills v Content: A False Dichotomy?

Knowledge lacks significant meaning without the accompanying skill base to analyse it.

Ben Lawless

Lawless Learning and Matilda Education

Whether skills or knowledge deserve more prominence in teaching has important ramifications. A teacher's instructional time is a finite resource, and it needs to be used efficiently. This article:

1. examines definitional issues regarding epistemology and teaching
2. discusses the proposition that both skills and knowledge are equally important in teaching
3. rejects the claim that content is more important than skills
4. argues why skills are more important than knowledge
5. discusses whether the entire debate is a false dichotomy.

1. Definitions

Some believe the debate over whether to prioritise skill development or knowledge uptake can be ended by defining knowledge in a way that incorporates both. Levesque avoids the dichotomy by stating that content can be split into substantive and procedural parts.¹ For

example, the boiling point of water is substantial content, while devising an experiment to test the temperature is procedural content. Others make similar distinctions but use different terms, such as first-order and second-order concepts, or substantive, procedural and conceptual knowledge.² For our purposes, 'knowledge' here is contrasted with 'skills' by ascribing to it a meaning similar to 'content'.

Theorists with a socially constructed view of knowledge regard promoting content knowledge as both elitist and self-defeating. Process- and skill-based understandings can be more objective because they allow for falsification.³ Thus, teaching skills rather than just knowledge enables students to update their understanding as new information comes to light.

Victoria's History Curriculum has a much stronger focus on skills rather than content knowledge than earlier curriculum documents. For example, the History curriculum lists four aims for history learning:

- acquire an interest in learning history
- gain knowledge of history
- understand and use historical concepts
- develop historical skills by undertaking historical enquiry.⁴

The curriculum writers may appear to give prominence to both knowledge and skills, but a much stronger focus on skill and conceptual development is evident compared with earlier Australian History curriculum documents.⁵

2. Are Skills and Knowledge Equally Important?

Many believe there is no need to decide whether skills or knowledge are more important. Senechal states that teachers ought to teach the student, and match either skills or content to their needs, thus placing student need above the two.⁶ Curriculum writers appear to be of a similar mind when stating that ‘there should not be an artificial separation of content and process’.⁷ However, this statement more closely resembles a related point, common in the literature, that knowledge and skills cannot be ranked against each other because they rely so much on each other.

3. Is Gaining Content Knowledge More Important than Gaining Skills?

Good inquiry will always involve a degree of interpretation, so one cannot divorce content from process (interpreting the content).⁸ Furthermore, skill acquisition is impossible without content knowledge as material; skills cannot be taught in a vacuum.⁹ Seixas’ well-known historical thinking concepts tie thinking to competencies in literacy.¹⁰ Therefore skills and knowledge might be equally important in History teaching.

Some claim that teaching knowledge is more important than developing skills. For example, Senechal claims that the primary purpose of skills is to process content. While

this may be true, it does not follow that content should be prioritised over skills.¹¹ There seems to be a number of educators who are frightened of the idea that skill development comes above delivering content.¹² This may be because many teachers have a passion for certain areas of content rather than the potentially more difficult task of teaching skills. I would also argue that it is this passion for knowledge that often attracts teachers to history, and this personal interest in the content leads them to focus on it more.

To some extent, teaching content above skills in itself makes a judgment call on skill development; it ranks the skill of memorisation above subject-specific skills. Teaching that focuses primarily on comprehension and memorisation is centred on lower-order thinking.¹³ Seixas points out that it is incorrect to assume that learning more facts results in increased understanding.¹⁴ For example, memorising algebraic formulae, which are easily stored in an advanced calculator, is less useful than understanding when to use different formulae.

4. Is Skill Acquisition More Important than Content Knowledge?

I will outline five arguments for why skill development is more important than content knowledge.

First, content lacks significant meaning without the accompanying skill base. Historical knowledge must always be an interpretation of source material from the past.¹⁵ Experience without narrative organisation is incoherent to us.¹⁶ The implication of these claims is that if History teachers wish to make their students truly information-literate they would do best to foster skill development.

Second, without the existence of skills, it is unlikely that teachers would have a body of knowledge to explore with students. The pre-academic knowledge people acquire from

- 1 Stephane Levesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-first Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
- 2 Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, (2003). ‘A Scaffold, not a Cage: Progression and Progression Models in History,’ *Teaching History*, 113 (December 2003): 13–23; Erik Lund, *Historiedidaktikk: En Handbok for Studenter og Lærere* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2009).
- 3 Anna Clark, ‘What Do They Teach our Children?’ in *The History Wars*, eds. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 171–190.
- 4 Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *The Victorian Curriculum* (Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2021).
- 5 Anna Clark, *Teaching the Nation: Politics and Pedagogy in Australian History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006).
- 6 Diana Senechal, ‘The Most Daring Education Reform of All,’ *American Educator*, Spring 2010, 4–16, retrieved 9 November 2021 from https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Senechal_3.pdf/.
- 7 National Curriculum Board, *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), 16.
- 8 Brian Hoepfer, ‘Teaching History: Inquiry Principles,’ in *Teaching Society and Environment*, eds. Rob Gilbert and Brian Hoepfer (Melbourne: Cengage Learning Australia, 2011).
- 9 Lees Shulman, ‘Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching,’ *Educational Researcher* 15:2 (February 1986): 4–14.

- 10 Peter Seixas, 'Conceptualising the Growth of Historical Understanding,' in *The Handbook of Education and Human Development*, eds. David Olson and Nancy Torrance (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).
- 11 Senechal, 'Why Does It Have to Be either or?.'
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hoepper, 'Teaching History: Inquiry Principles'.
- 14 Seixas, 'Conceptualising the Growth of Historical Understanding'; Peter Seixas, *Benchmarks of Historical Thinking—A Framework for Assessment in Canada* (Vancouver: Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, University of British Columbia, 2006).
- 15 Hoepper, 'Teaching History: Inquiry Principles'.
- 16 David Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).
- 17 Seixas, 'Conceptualising the Growth of Historical Understanding'.
- 18 Chris Husbands, *What Is History Teaching: Language, Ideas and Meaning in Learning about the Past* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 1996), 14.
- 19 Seixas, 'Conceptualising the Growth of Historical Understanding'.
- 20 National Curriculum Board, *Shape of the Australian Curriculum*.
- 21 Ibid, 6.
- 22 D. Willingham, (2008). 'Education for the 21st Century: Balancing Content Knowledge with Skills,' *Encyclopaedia Britannica* blog retrieved 15 March, 2012, from <http://blogs.britannica.com/2008/12/schooling-for-the-21st-century-balancing-content-knowledge-with-skills>.

memory traces and second-hand accounts is less useful for explaining continuity and change or offering interpretations of the present than knowledge mediated by skills.¹⁷ Husbands summarises this point by stating that 'interpretations constitute the basis for ... knowledge'.¹⁸

To give an example of how skills play a crucial role in creating knowledge, consider two of Seixas' types of understandings: using evidence and establishing significance.¹⁹ The ability to use primary sources as evidence to create knowledge is an important skill without which there would be little content with which learners can engage. Without the capacity to establish significance it is unclear what selection of information about the past, from the almost endless supply that exists, would be most useful for teachers to discuss in their classrooms.

The new Australian Curriculum mirrors Seixas' use of historical understandings to guide teachers, further noting that knowledge is reflected in the concepts used and can only be acquired with skills.²⁰ The National Curriculum Board's opinion on this topic is clear when it states: 'Historical knowledge and understanding requires mastery of the procedures, tools and methods of thinking that constitute the discipline.'²¹

The third argument for skills being more important than knowledge in teaching is because they are transferable to other subjects and to life outside educational institutions. It is literacy and critical thinking skills that ought to be part of a successful classroom, and that employers wish to see in secondary school graduates.²² There is little mention made in the education literature about whether skills or knowledge are more important based on their relevance to the world of work and life beyond education. However, there cannot be much doubt as to which element is more relevant. It is unlikely that many students from the average classroom will go on to become academics where their content knowledge is of central importance in their

future lives. In the rare instances where this is true, academics revisit and study the same knowledge again at a much greater depth if it is to be part of their professional specialisation.

Fourth, we live in a digital age where access to vast array of content knowledge is available online simply by glancing at our smartphone. Why should teachers devote more of their time to teaching things students can find out in seconds than to skills which require a lifetime to master? We live in an age where learners have access to the sum of all human knowledge at the touch of a button and will do so for their entire lives. Our education system needs to reflect this.

Fifth, when teachers are asked to justify the relevance of their subject, they are inclined to state that developing transferable skills is one of the major benefits of education. Students graduating in 2030 are likely to have seventeen different jobs in five different fields.²³ Developing skills and the ability to learn are more important in this environment than static knowledge.

5. A False Dichotomy?

Finally we need to consider the possibility that the entire content versus skills debate is unhelpful.

We cannot teach skills in a vacuum; we have nothing to use our skills on without a substantial body of historical content knowledge. Equally, having content knowledge of history, but no skills to do anything interesting with this knowledge, prevents us from generating new knowledge or being true historians.

Historians have a huge body of content knowledge that enables them to generate new knowledge by applying advanced skills, such as primary source analysis and interpretation and integration of multiple historical perspectives. High-level historian work isn't possible without both content and skills. Arguing the priority of one over

the other seems like a solution in search of a problem. Teach both and there is no problem.

Another reason that skills versus content could be a false dichotomy is because of a third element: capabilities. We've all heard of the 'four Cs': creative thinking, communication, collaboration and critical thinking.²⁴ These capabilities 'future-proof' students' education. Ideally they will help students succeed in the world of life, education and work in a future that is hard to fathom. If we add this third element into the equation, the notion of 'skills versus knowledge' seems quaint and somewhat irrelevant.

Conclusion

Skills and knowledge are both vital elements in teaching. Without knowledge, skills

have no material for their application. Without skills, knowledge is mere words on a page, stripped of meaning. For History education, it is likely that a good body of content knowledge is required before skill development can commence. Note that professional historians have vast knowledge and highly developed skills.

As we move to an increasingly unknowable future, capabilities must also share in the equation. What are the classroom implications of this?

1. Teach some content first.
2. Engage students with hands-on skill-building activities.
3. Don't forget to give students opportunities to develop 'soft skills' like teamwork.

23 David Coady, 'Future Skills: Report Reveals Tools Schoolkids Will Need to Thrive in Jobs Market of 2030,' ABC News, retrieved 9 November 2021 from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-27/what-skills-will-the-future-generation-of-workers-need/8747610>.

24 Bri Stauffer, 'What Are the 4 C's of 21st Century Skills?' Applied Educational Systems, retrieved 9 November 2021 from <https://www.aeseducation.com/blog/four-cs-21st-century-skills>.

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