

Student Co-Teaching to Foster Learning Autonomy: A Case Study in an Undergraduate History Classroom in Hong Kong

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“ENGAGEMENT” AND “INVESTMENT” are popular keywords to describe ideal goals of liberal pedagogy. Instructors must stimulate their students’ genuine interest and enthusiasm not only in the content of particular courses, but also in the very process of learning. Moreover, learning should take place only partially in the classroom, with further enrichment occurring through pre- and post-class meeting interaction between students. Such contact has been proven to increase the quantity and quality of learning—or, to apply an economic metaphor, producing commensurately greater return through more investment than what may be gained merely by participating in classroom activities and solely under the instructor’s guidance.

This paper reports the findings of research conducted on an undergraduate class of history major students at a comprehensive university in Hong Kong.¹ The research aimed to increase student engagement and investment, coupled with the concept of “autonomy,” through the implementation of the Peer Seminar, a pedagogical and assessment form that empowered students to be active instructors

for their own Peer Seminars and enthusiastic participants in other classmate-led Peer Seminars—both roles based on the principle that learning should be a two-way interaction and should concentrate on interpreting information rather than absorbing it passively in “easily digestible” intellectual doses. All students led one Peer Seminar during the semester in pairs or trios, and were expected to participate in the rest of the sessions as engaged listeners and speakers.

The analysis of this pedagogical methodology will be presented in four parts. The first section introduces common practices and relevant concepts that informed the instructor’s motivation for increasing student autonomy. The second part then describes the course and assignment design as well as examples of actual student performance. Assessment of the assignment’s efficacy, based on evidence generated through focus group interviews with participating students, will be laid out in the third section. The conclusion will summarize the principal findings of this project and put forth planned adjustments for future versions of the course.

Current Practice and Basis for Innovation

The norm in many undergraduate history courses given in Hong Kong is that students spend one class period each week listening to a lecture delivered by the instructor and another period—known as the tutorial—discussing the lecture content, learning research skills, or exploring supplementary topics by analyzing primary source documents or watching documentary films. Students generally expect to absorb knowledge that has been guaranteed to be correct and significant by the instructor as implied by its inclusion in lectures and to reiterate such information in the format of a written semester-end examination and essays. Tutorials are often organized so that a group of students deliver a presentation about a particular subject, then answer questions raised by their peers. Although open discussion is theoretically encouraged, students often assume that they only need to be proactive about planning and giving their own presentations and do not respond to others’ work. Such implicit division of labor, with each student or group responsible for a designated fraction of the “burden” to gather and share information, and the preference for receiving rather than transmitting knowledge, leads to Pierson’s conclusion that the typical Hong Kong Chinese

learner is passive, dependent, and lacks incentive to invest effort and interest in learning.² It is a general view that Hong Kong Chinese learners, as with their East Asian peers, under influence of Confucianism, look up on their teachers and see them as providers of knowledge. They do not prefer questioning teachers or textbook knowledge because it could be seen as challenging the authority. They perceive learning as static and think knowledge should be transmitted from a teacher, but not to be discovered by themselves.³ Such learning style may be a result from the Hong Kong education system, which is examination-oriented and very competitive.⁴ Heavy reliance on teachers and specific instructions led to having traditional mode of lectures, tutorials, and seminars being more prominent at universities.⁵ Gan's study also showed that Hong Kong students do not possess strong individual learning orientation, instead preferring teacher guidance.⁶

As such, learners' autonomy was placed at the core of this research to boost students' independent inquiry. The investigators utilized the interpretation of autonomy as a student's ability to take charge of and regulate his/her own thoughts, learning, and actions.⁷ The premise that learners should exhibit autonomy has generally been derived from educational models in Western Europe and North America, which emphasize the values of active participation and individualism.⁸ Although autonomy is much researched in the field of language learning,⁹ it has been underexplored in the field of history teaching.

In view of such findings in previous research and teaching practices, the principal investigator of this study created the Peer Seminar to test the effectiveness of student-centered methods to stimulate more active participation and autonomous learning in class and to facilitate high-level learning in history.¹⁰ As a component of an intermediate-level required course for history majors, the Peer Seminar was intended to foster student competence in the following specific four dimensions of high-level learning:¹¹

1. to think creatively within and beyond one's historical studies
2. to work and learn with others
3. to manage one's own learning within and beyond academic studies
4. to use knowledge and skills in a socially responsible and constructive manner

To foster these skills, which would enable students to pursue more advanced forms of historical investigation in subsequent courses, the instructor incorporated elements of collaborative, interactive, and reflective learning into the Peer Seminar design.

Collaborative learning was the core element of the Peer Seminar exercise.¹² Developed in Great Britain during the 1950s and 1960s for secondary school and post-graduate medical education, this pedagogical format proliferated in the United States during the 1980s.¹³ Students engaging in this instructional mode not only gain more control over what they achieve in class, but also learn more effectively outside of the classroom and independently of the instructor.¹⁴ Collaborative learning is more effective than competitive learning because students are motivated to be more active and involved in the learning process, which Astin has explained as manifesting in expenditure of greater effort because their peers will be evaluating the outcomes, and in greater absorption of information because they are teaching it to their peers, which is a more profound incentive than just for their personal edification.¹⁵ Furthermore, collaborative learning reorients classroom proceedings towards student groups, which inspires more productive relationships to evolve among students as well as between students and the instructor.¹⁶ Through these shifts in social dynamics, students become fully invested in the learning process rather than being passive recipients of knowledge.¹⁷

Interactive, or experiential, learning was another critical aspect of the assignment design. Students leading the Peer Seminars were expected to act as independent instructors, thereby gaining tangible knowledge about challenges in conveying information and eliciting meaningful responses from learners. Participants in Peer Seminars would also benefit from initiating and sustaining interaction among themselves and with Peer Seminar leaders because their engagement would affirm the success of their classmates' leadership, *and* reflect their contributions to the course, translating most concretely in favorable evaluations for "active and constructive participation." Since each participant in the Peer Seminar had to assume the leader role at some point during the semester, every student had the acute incentive to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of others' performances in that capacity. This impetus is in line with Frederick's assertion that more time should be spent on "debriefing" (analysis) than on the actual exercise of role-play.¹⁸

In addition to continual analysis of in-class performance, a third key component of the Peer Seminar exercise was reflective learning in the form of a self-evaluation, which each student completed individually after leading his or her own session. Self-evaluations for each given seminar reflected different aspects of the experience, both positive and negative, and compelled their writers to parse the significance of their own actions. As with other assessment activities prioritizing student reflection, such as the Webb and Scoular case study on sports education,¹⁹ the purpose of student reflection on their own performance was to enhance their independence and creativity, as well as their ability to shape their attitudes and actions in response to their experiences.

Course and Assignment Design

The principal investigator developed the Peer Seminar as a teaching and learning activity for a course on the history of modern Asia that was taught during the fall 2011 semester. Forty-one students, including six exchange students from the United States and France, were enrolled in the course. The local students of this undergraduate class were sophomore history majors. All local students enrolled in the course to fulfill a compulsory requirement for bachelor's degrees in History or History and Liberal Studies Teaching. Exchange students chose the course to earn general education or elective credits. Principal course objectives were to survey major events, personalities, and phenomena in Asia from 1800 to 1945, and to construct theoretical and empirical frameworks for understanding contemporary Asia based on historical precedents. The class met once a week for a lecture period, which was divided into two parts. During the first half of each lecture meeting, the instructor presented background knowledge and introduced analytical tools for examining comprehensive, thematic subjects such as European colonialism in South and Southeast Asia, the Japanese presence in China, and the impact of World War Two on Asian states and societies. After a transition period of discussion about the lecture content involving the instructor and students, the second half of the lecture period was designated for the performance of an activity that would require students to apply the knowledge that they gained from the lecture. Activities included role-plays, debates, and film analysis.

Unit	General Theme	Peer Seminar Module
1	1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War / Negotiations following World War One	Russian Perceptions of Japan, Japanese Perceptions of Russia
2	Mimetic Imperialism: Japanese Domination of Taiwan and Korea	Taiwanese and Korean Students in Japan
3	The Japanese in China: Manchuria and Shanghai	Japanese Influence on Life in Shanghai
4	Diversity and Distinction in Southeast Asia	People of Mixed-Heritage in Southeast Asia
5	Quest for Autonomy 1: Anti-French Movements in Vietnam	Marxism and the Vietnamese Independence Movement
6	Quest for Autonomy 2: Anti-British Movements in South Asia	Subhas Chandra Bose
7	World War Two – Part A	Japanese Volunteer Fighting Corps in World War Two
8	World War Two – Part B	European and American Refugees in Japanese War Internment Camps
9	New Regional Orders 1: Partition of the Indian Subcontinent and the Korean Peninsula	Migration between India and Pakistan during the Partition Era
10	New Regional Orders 2: Decolonization in Taiwan and Southeast Asia	Memories of Japanese Colonialism in Taiwan

Figure 1: Peer Seminar Modules with Corresponding Units and Themes

Peer Seminars took place during the weekly tutorials. Students signed up as pairs or three-person groups for broad subjects during the first week of the thirteen-week course. Each topic corresponded to the general theme for the week. The full list of overarching themes and Peer Seminar modules is shown in **Figure 1**.

Instead of following rigid guidelines about what details should or should not be addressed in each Peer Seminar, each group had to define more specific parameters for its chosen topic, based on what group members learned from reading pertinent primary and secondary sources, as well as their perceptions of the general subject's relevance to course-wide themes. Such autonomy in selecting focal points and the means of explaining them to their peers ideally would galvanize their curiosity about the content of their Peer Seminars and motivate them to utilize creative presentation methods. The wide latitude on how to structure the Peer Seminar was also expected to yield more personalized interpretations of the featured subjects. To preserve the student-centered nature of this pedagogical mode, the instructor acted as a facilitator who reviewed the project proposals and components of the Peer Seminars while they were prepared and enacted, but did not prescribe the particular content that students would teach to their peers.²⁰ Each Peer Seminar was fifty minutes long, to be divided by the student leaders' discretion into two components: a presentation lasting fifteen to twenty minutes and an activity for the remaining thirty to thirty-five minutes.

Agreeing with Bruffee's recommendation that the actual preparation process should not be graded,²¹ the exercise evaluation concentrated on the final product. All members of a Peer Seminar group received the same grade for the overall quality of the content and delivery of the session, and separate grades for their individual performances as presenters and activity facilitators. This evaluation style ensured that outstanding students would not be penalized for the lesser achievements of their group mates, and conversely, that underachieving students would not receive undue "coattail credit." Therefore, according to the designation of 70 out of 100 points maximum for group achievement and 30 points for individual merit, in one case, one out of three group members earned 90 points, another 87 points, and the third 82 points, sharing the group grade of 61 points. Each group also earned a grade for its teaching aid, which could take various forms, including typed presentation outlines, copies of primary and secondary sources to be discussed during the Peer Seminar, or props for activities such as role-plays and debates. Altogether, the Peer Seminar evaluation was weighted as 28% of each student's total course grade.

The instructor conducted a sample Peer Seminar during the second week of the semester, simulating both the presentation and participatory components. All students were invited to contribute to the discussion following the presentation, to ask questions or to reflect upon what they had just learned, and to assume a position in the role-play. The example topic was “Loyalist Samurai and the Korean Royalty in Transition,” which was a subject that only two out of forty-one students had encountered in previous courses or through self-enrichment. Most students responded by reiterating what the instructor had just stated, seeking affirmation that they had understood the information correctly. Others expressed ideas that were judgments of the facts based on their perspectives as either samurai in Meiji Japan or as members of the Korean aristocracy during the late nineteenth century. The instructor prompted all students to think about how these people would react to the shifting balance of power in their respective countries and also how they would teach the same topic. At the end of the sample Peer Seminar, the instructor provided a handout as an evaluation rubric, shown in **Figure 2**.

Since students in the course were assigned to one of two tutorials, each module was covered in two separate Peer Seminars per week. Student groups preparing each Peer Seminar did not have to consult with one another, and in informal interactions before and after class meetings, the instructor learned that most did not exchange ideas with the ones working in parallel out of concern that they would be directly compared to one another and compete for grades.

Opening presentations and activities varied widely among topics and throughout the semester. For the module on the Japanese occupation in Shanghai, one group started by presenting a brief narrative of the invasion of Shanghai in 1932 using a PowerPoint slideshow with mainly images and brief captions. Then the leaders concentrated on the event’s social and cultural impact upon Shanghai’s resident populations, such as what happened to children and non-Chinese, and how Japanese propaganda was spread through newspapers and radio. To contextualize the collective and individual experiences of people living under Japanese rule, the presenters also addressed questions about the economic circumstances, such as restrictions imposed on local companies and the use of Japanese yen as currency. The other group responsible for the same module

Criteria for Peer Seminar Evaluation

1. Verbal Presentation Style [0-70 points]

- speaks in a clear and audible voice
- addresses and engages all members of the audience
- introduces information in a logical way
- provides clarifications as necessary
- answers questions thoroughly during and/or after the presentation

2. Verbal Presentation Content [0-70 points]

- introduces just enough material to meet the time limit
- employs creative and interesting techniques to illustrate main ideas
- provides simple explanations of relevant theories and concepts
- analyzes why the topic is important for understanding modern Asia
- suggests specific sources or types of sources that may be used for further research on the topic

3. Teaching Aid Style [0-70 points]

- is accurately and neatly typed in a word processing program (no spelling errors)
- has a clear and consistent format
- can be converted into PDF format for placement on the course Moodle website
- ideally contains both English and Chinese word-pairs for key concepts (negotiable)
- is no more than two pages long (11-point or 12-point font, 1.5-line or 2-line spacing)

4. Teaching Aid Content [0-70 points]

- matches the content of the verbal presentation
- shows only essential information
- includes properly formatted references to sources
- may recommend additional, related sources
- may include tables, figures, or illustrations (such as maps)

Think about how you like to learn and what would motivate you to attend class, and apply those ideas to designing your peer seminar. You are always welcome and encouraged to consult with the instructor about source materials, sub-topics, and presentation strategies.

Figure 2: Handout for the Criteria for Peer Seminar Evaluation

also concentrated on the daily life experiences of Shanghai residents, but emphasized how individuals, rather than groups, reacted to the changes imposed on their lives by the occupation. Individual classmates were therefore asked to speak “in character” as a comfort woman, a business owner, or even as a Japanese soldier stationed in Shanghai.

Role-play was the most common type of activity, but each leader group added its own variations. For example, for the seminar on “Marxism and the Vietnamese Independence Movement,” one pair of leaders divided their classmates into four groups (A, B, C, D). Each group represented a broad category of Vietnamese society: A = Marxist, B = French colonial official, C = peasant, D = capitalist. The leaders distributed handouts tailored for each group. Each handout contained a paragraph explaining the circumstances in which the group would have to plot a strategy to pursue a set of goals in the wake of growing calls for Vietnam’s independence from French colonial rule from 1916 to 1950, and a schedule of how the remaining class time would be divided into three parts: (1) discussion within the group, (2) presentation of the group’s position to the rest of the class, and (3) questions and answers involving all the groups leading to a full-class debate.

Other types of activities reflected the leaders’ creativity and preferred learning styles. A pair conducting a Peer Seminar on people of mixed heritage in Southeast Asia guided the class through a “maze” of YouTube documentary clips to show how populations such as the Indonesia Peranakan would dress and speak. Both of the students subsequently pursued careers in media after graduation. Another group conducted a mock trial for the module on European and American refugees in Japanese wartime internment camps. The two leaders acted as third-party moderators and appointed one classmate to act as a judge, some to serve as counsel, and some to be prisoners in the internment camps indicted of certain crimes. The rest of the class observed the trial and then discussed whether it was fair and why the prisoners’ crimes and punishments were determined as they were. The last part of this activity involved the whole class contributing opinions about “justice during war” and “race as a factor in judgment.”

Just as they did with the activities, leader groups designed teaching aids with different characteristics. Some prepared outlines of the

main ideas in bullet-point format. The majority of such outlines were organized chronologically, such as for an event like the Sepoy Mutiny and founding of the Crown Raj in 1857. A few outlines were just lists of the topic headings of the PowerPoint presentations with room for notes. Additional features on outlines included questions for students to respond to during or after class, such as whether the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 could be considered as “World War Zero”; citations of relevant books, journals, and media items; and reprints of images. A few teaching aids were distinctive and well received by students. One, created by two international students about migration between India and Pakistan during the Partition era (1947-1957), was a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. The two designer-leaders prompted classmates to fill in keywords as they delivered the opening presentation. Another unique teaching aid was a worksheet that required all participants to fill in ten discrete arguments for *and* against Hindus and Muslims moving across the India-Pakistan border in 1948. Since all the students were proficient in English, but the international students were not expected to know Chinese, the majority of teaching aids were written in English with some key terms in Chinese. Some group leaders chose to create fully bilingual teaching aids to help classmates who were not confident about reading and absorbing information in English within the short time span of a class meeting.

Student self-evaluations, which were due no longer than a week after a given session, were candid and revealing to both their writers and the instructors. Students described their achievements and shortcomings in delivering the Peer Seminars as they perceived them during the experience and afterwards. The minimum requirement for each individual student’s evaluation (plagiarism among even members of the same group was to be severely penalized) was one paragraph explaining positive outcomes and one paragraph troubleshooting weaknesses. Some students wrote three to five paragraphs, often concentrating on what they judged to be areas of improvement. One student wrote a full three-page essay. Many students acknowledged problems such as not speaking loudly or clearly enough, not encouraging certain classmates to participate more actively, and assuming that classmates would already understand particular details. The most critical benefit of the self-evaluation was that students listed ways in which they could do better in future presentations, and the

instructor saw the tangible fruits of this reflective exercise when teaching the same students in subsequent courses.

Student Assessment

Sixteen students, all finishing bachelor's degrees in History or History and Liberal Studies Teaching during the 2012-2013 academic year, were interviewed in four clusters in the form of focus groups by one of the article authors. They represent ten out of the twenty Peer Seminar leader groups in the course. The twenty groups were divided into two tutorials, each consisting of twenty to twenty-two students, which met at different days and times. Only one of these groups led a Peer Seminar to the whole class due to a special arrangement related to a holiday schedule. The rest only led their Peer Seminar to their particular tutorial cluster. All interviewees participated on a voluntary basis, and the interviewers encouraged them to form focus groups with their partners leading the same Peer Seminars so that they could corroborate information about their shared experiences. The interviewer utilized a series of open-ended guide questions that were developed by both article authors to glean evidence about the class participants regarding their attitudes about the exercise before and after leading Peer Seminars. Each interview lasted for one hour.

Each focus group directed the flow of its interview with prompts from the interviewer guiding the participants to explain their memories of the "pre-Peer Seminar preparation" and "Peer Seminar outcomes and reflection." The first half focuses on students' impressions of the Peer Seminar when they started the semester and before they actually carried it out, while the latter half focuses on their reflection and thoughts after they carried out the Peer Seminar and its related assignments. During the focus group, the students were encouraged to speak of anything that came to their minds in regard to their own Peer Seminars and that of their classmates. The students' comments will be discussed with respect to the aforementioned two sections below.

Pre-Peer Seminar

Most students from all clusters participating in the focus groups had never done a similar project or studied in a manner directly

Focus Group Clusters	
Cluster A	3 students from 2 groups Interviewed on January 28, 2013 from 11:30–12:30
Cluster B	5 students from 3 groups Interviewed on January 28, 2013 from 12:30–13:30
Cluster C	4 students from 1 group Interviewed on January 31, 2013 from 12:30–13:30
Cluster D	5 students from 4 groups Interviewed on February 26, 2013 from 12:30–13:30

Figure 3: Focus Group Clusters

related to the Peer Seminar. They were more accustomed to the situations introduced earlier in which, as presenters, they were solely responsible for disseminating most of the contents within a class meeting and expected little or no responses from the audience. Sometimes, these events included question and answer sessions, while at other times, the presenters just received spontaneous comments from peers and the instructor. Only one student had completed a similar class assignment in a public policy course where two teams carried out a role-play to promote their disparate views (Cluster C). The student noted “in the public policy course, role-play was done to persuade each other from one’s stance whereas in the Modern Asia course, the role-play was carried out to transmit knowledge *towards* the audience.”

Given the dearth of relatable experiences, most students did not understand what a Peer Seminar should be when the instructor first introduced it as a course requirement. They thought that the only difference from a conventional presentation was the addition of an activity and presentation “with some creative elements.” Unfamiliarity with this teaching-learning method sparked various concerns from students prior to commencing the actual preparation for the Peer Seminar. They expected that the workload would be heavier because of unfamiliarity with the mode (Clusters A and C) and because of the additional written reflection component (Cluster A). Some students felt overwhelmed by the “new mode of assignment” and were apprehensive about trying it because of their

shy personalities (Cluster C). Others felt challenged from topic selection, the first step of the process, onward, especially about finding enough reference materials and creating questions that would prompt audience responses (Clusters A and D). On the other hand, students from Cluster A also found the freedom to choose a topic and to create an agenda to be challenging because they were accustomed to being guided specifically on sources and on the expected content of a presentation. Some students from Cluster D also preferred more explicit topics or area of presentation to be provided so that it would be “easier for them to focus on.” They preferred more guidance, describing the absence of further elaboration as “too much freedom.”

Many students moreover felt overwhelmed by the imperative of designing an activity and linking the content of the seminar’s first half, usually the presentation, to the activity. They expressed anxiety about having “no idea what is an appropriate activity” or “blurred understanding.” They thought that most of their classmates would choose “less unusual” activities such as role-plays because they are easier and more familiar. Apprehension about grades being too low if the activities were not attractive enough to capture their classmates’ attention and the time constraint of each session dissuaded several groups from designing more complex activities such as scripted or improvisational skits. Cluster D thought that this mode of work was actually easier as there was less material to prepare beforehand since they would have to extemporize during activities rather than follow a set script for the entirety of the Peer Seminar.

Cluster B also cited uncertainty about the difficulty in organizing role-plays as a prominent factor in preparing the Peer Seminar because they needed to consider different perspectives and to introduce enough material about each of them so that all groups could participate meaningfully in the role-play. In this regard, they determined that, in their usual presentations, they are used to approaching a topic from one perspective—the “big picture” angle—while in the Peer Seminar, they had to think from “views from the inside.” They commented that it was interesting to look into such diverse perspectives.

Albeit of the aforementioned concerns, most focus group students generally expressed that the Peer Seminar “could be fun” and were “glad to give it a try.” The students from Cluster B also praised the feedback that they received from the instructor during the

preparation process. Nevertheless, they emphasized that it was hard to feel “safe” about their ultimate choices and suggested that future cohorts could be given more examples. They also recommended the instructor to put limits on the number of times a particular method, such as role-play, is used to increase the variety of activities throughout the course.

Peer Seminar Outcomes and Reflection

The general tenor in responses about how the Peer Seminars proceeded was of relief and surprise at the disparity between anticipated expectations and actual results. The only aspect of the Peer Seminar that students deemed to be predictable was that the seminar preparation took slightly more time than conventional presentation forms (Cluster C). Difficulties included “making a breakthrough in the format,” converting content into an activity, ensuring that the whole audience would understand the procedure and purpose of the seminar, composing handouts, and making up questions to prompt audience responses. Some groups discovered that they could elicit more substantial reactions from their peers if they showed more images than text and asked questions about said images (Cluster B).

All of the interviewed clusters were critical of how audience members chose to participate in the seminars, which can also be interpreted as self-reflexive since all individuals were both leaders and participants. Some students remarked that audiences were “surprisingly active,” which they attributed to the course requirement that participation would be subject to grade evaluation (Clusters B and D) and, therefore, students were attentive for the report components of the seminar so they could do the activities (Cluster C). They even presumed that some students were responding just to earn participation marks or to help their friends who were leading the seminars (Cluster A). Interviewees also critiqued the tendency of some students who served as group representatives during certain activities for monopolizing discussions, turning what should have been full-class discussions into ones among a highly select number of people (Cluster B). Other interviewees thought that most people had the chance to speak as most classmates responded in rotation (Cluster D). Language difficulties were furthermore cited as a factor

affecting audience participation. Students with weaker ability in spoken English lost interest in the seminars (Cluster B), a problem that could be remedied by presenters using more Chinese translations in their textual materials (Cluster C). Despite the language barrier, interviewees remembered there were classmates with low proficiency in English attempting to participate just as actively in the Peer Seminars (Cluster D).

Although audience participation was considered a major challenge of conducting a Peer Seminar, interviewees cited more ways in which leaders, rather than audience members, could improve the overall experience. Principal shortcomings included doing “more presenting than teaching” (Cluster A), developing “formulaic” topics and activities (Cluster B), and mismanaging small-group work during activities. “Presenting” rather than “teaching” manifested in situations such as leaders not responding adequately to questions, whether in terms of relevance or quantity of details, but just giving polite acknowledgment or other rudimentary feedback to questioners (Cluster B). The tendency to imitate other seminar leaders’ ideas, particularly leading to a “glut” of role-plays, was explained as the outcome of insecurity about what learning mode the audience would accept and concern for language limitations. Interviewees cited the “more active” seminars given by exchange students (Cluster B), which was attributed to these individuals’ greater fluency in English and familiarity with “creative learning,” such as one pair of exchange student seminar leaders distributing handouts with blanks in the notes so their audience would have to pay careful attention in order to avoid missing any details (Cluster B). Interviewees recognized that not all weaknesses were inevitably connected to language and culture, mentioning one seminar led by local students that sparked such a lively debate that the leaders and instructor had to persuade all involved parties to compromise and to respect one another’s views. Such “de-escalation” was perceived as a positive sign that the participants were taking the seminar seriously.

Group organization and management for activities was considered relatively more problematic than the overall design and report components of seminars. The familiarity of all students with one another was the most detrimental aspect since questions and answers could be preplanned (Cluster A) and because some groups would reorganize themselves into ones with friends rather than as assigned

by the seminar leaders, so they could converse about unrelated topics (Cluster A). Interviewees recognized that, under these conditions, organizing peers into groups was difficult. Indeed, it was not an intuitive skill, but one that required trial and error (Cluster C). Some of the students who led seminars later in the semester seemed to learn from earlier sessions and three such leader pairs distributed role-play guide sheets to audience members randomly so that group assignments would be “fixed” in a seemingly impartial way (Cluster A). Sometimes leaders also applied similar discipline to activity discussions, inviting certain students to speak or setting a speaking order to guarantee that all participants would have to express their opinions (Cluster C).

Connected to these assessments were areas for improvement in future iterations of the course. All interview clusters suggested that the instructor not only provide more examples to stimulate effective preparation, but also provide more feedback on the outcomes because the presentation format was so new. The instructor could also relieve the time constraint by assigning more class time for each seminar, because in only fifty minutes, with “not many ideas to be concluded from the audience’s discussion,” an audience might parrot what had already been said in the presentation (Cluster C); with more time, the seminars could be “brilliant” and the audience could absorb more information (Clusters A and C), avoiding groups from “staying on the façade” with their seminar content and instead going deeper and more thorough (Cluster D). Utilizing more time would furthermore mitigate the inclination of leaders to encourage only certain groups to participate actively (Cluster A).

Further proposals for better seminars centered on applying more time on activities rather than reports. The most extreme recommendations were that the report component could be eliminated altogether in favor of spending a whole seminar doing an activity like a skit (Cluster B) or a series of “small games” that would excite and engage the audience between the more overtly academic parts of activities (Cluster C). If leaders were going to use role-play as their main pedagogical method, they should diversify the ways in which these scenarios could be played out (Cluster C). Interviewees expressed some disagreement about whether the audience should be divided into small groups of two to three students, which could be less efficient and less serious about participation, or larger ones

of six to eight students so that leaders would only have to manage a maximum of three to four groups, thereby reducing organization time and effort (Cluster C). The aforementioned issue of a few students monopolizing activities could also be controlled with individual voting rather than group voting at the end of role-plays, based on debates from contrasting perspectives (Cluster C) and more proactive guidance by seminar leaders.

Interviewees appraised their own performances in the course of their reflections on the comprehensive results of the seminars. Some students were pleasantly surprised that they could exceed their own expectations (Cluster A). They enjoyed “freedom” of spending the majority of the seminar (thirty-five to forty-five out of fifty minutes) on activities rather than reports (Cluster A) and the “fun” of brainstorming and compiling information (Cluster C). Conducting Peer Seminars also enabled them to retain the content for much longer than for conventional presentations (Cluster C). The post-seminar reflection assignment, which many students dreaded as an unfamiliar and time-consuming task, turned out to be not that difficult to complete and meaningful for identifying both strengths and weaknesses (Cluster C). Others were less satisfied with their seminars, such as feeling that they had not been able to link their reports and activities in an optimally interesting manner (Cluster A). Improvising during the Peer Seminars in response to unforeseen peer behavior and vocalized opinions was yet another challenge that some students cited as affecting their leadership capability adversely (Cluster B).

Discussion and Implications

Both the Peer Seminar and the collective reflection process through interviewing select clusters were mutually beneficial for the instructor and students. The instructor anticipated some student responses based on feedback received during and after the course, particularly the hardship of adapting to a new presentation form and the apparent lack of explicitly circumscribed parameters for “acceptable” performance. To mitigate some of these common difficulties if the Peer Seminar were to be included in another course, the instructor would share some samples from actual Peer Seminars, create a worksheet for each group to brainstorm about the scope

and organization of content for its Peer Seminar, and provide more detailed rubrics that differentiate outstanding, excellent, good, and threshold performances.

Less predictable were the positive comments that revealed the degree of intellectual growth achieved through the seminars. The imperative of autonomy propelled many students out of their comfort zones not only for the actual experiences of leading the Peer Seminars, but even after a year in retrospect. Several interviewed students were surprised that they could cope with such autonomy and teach their peers, especially if they were not confident and even skeptical that they could complete the Peer Seminar exercise successfully. They said that after realizing that having autonomy meant that they could choose the analytical lenses through which they could explore given topics and assert their own opinions about them, they expressed more intellectual independence in other courses. Rather than relying on the instructor to arrange blueprints for their in-class presentations, they looked forward to selecting content from a wide variety of sources that they would identify and glean, and devising creative methods to convey such information to their peers.

Implementing Peer Seminars is a small yet progressing step to foster students' autonomous learning that is not a common scene in history classrooms at Hong Kong universities. Student improvement through Peer Seminars might not be quantifiable, but students' perceptions show us that they are moving forward to achieve high-level learning. This project is also relevant to schools and courses outside of Hong Kong because the challenge of re-balancing responsibility for teaching and learning is globally salient. Students like being empowered to exercise their creativity and leadership in designated environments, but instructors must ensure that such opportunities meet students' needs for rational assessment and for varying degrees of guidance that do not detract from their independence. Peer Seminars contribute to the greater trend of "flipping the classroom," a concept which is not only about students leading the learning process, but also about gaining valuable experience, which they can apply to both academic and non-academic work, in leading and being led while learning.

Notes

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1. A comprehensive university in the Hong Kong context is an institution of tertiary education with multiple faculties, undergraduate and graduate divisions, and a variety of degree-granting programs. There are currently nine public comprehensive universities and one private comprehensive university in Hong Kong.

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no. 3 (2004): 229-245; David Little, Jennifer Ridley, and Ema Ushioda, *Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Classrooms: Teacher, Learner, Curriculum and Assessment* (Dublin, Ireland: Authentik, 2003).

10. Benjamin S. Bloom, "Thought Processes in Lectures and Discussions," *Journal of General Education* 7, no. 3 (1953): 160-169.

11. Alan Booth and Paul Hyland, "Introduction: Developing Scholarship in History Teaching," in *The Practice of University History Teaching*, ed. Alan Booth and Paul Hyland (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1-13.

12. Collaborative learning and cooperative learning are sometimes considered to be synonymous, but the two concepts have developed independently with contrasting meanings in theoretical and empirical discourse.

13. Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" *College English* 46, no. 7 (1984): 635-652.

14. Phil Benson, *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning* (Harlow, United Kingdom: Pearson, 2001).

15. Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

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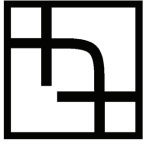
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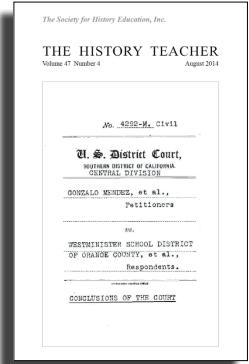
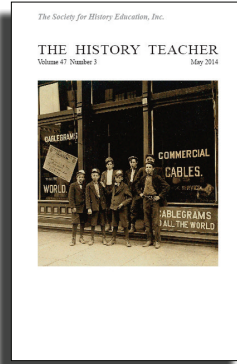
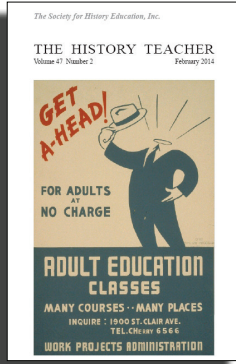
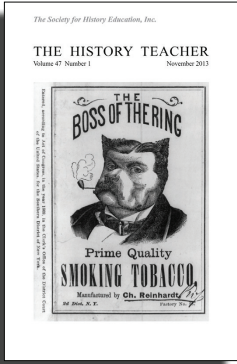
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