

Exploring the Practical Pathways for Cultivating Critical Thinking in History Education for Middle School Students

Chunhui Zhang^{1*}, Shaohua Zhou¹, Xiuli Ji¹, Lun Tang¹

¹ School of History, Taishan University, Tai'an, China

Email Address

zhangchunhui71@163.com (Chunhui Zhang)

*Correspondence: zhangchunhui71@163.com

Received: 9 November 2025; Accepted: 5 December 2025; Published: 25 December 2025

Abstract:

With the deepening implementation of the new curriculum reform, cultivating students' critical thinking has become one of the key tasks in education and teaching. Currently, the history discipline shoulders the responsibility of guiding students to understand the evolution of time and space and social changes, and is regarded as a crucial subject for fostering critical thinking. However, in current classrooms, the selection of historical materials, question design, discussion methods, and historical analysis still exhibit one-sided indoctrination and a test-oriented bias, making it difficult to fully activate students' questioning consciousness and argumentation spirit. Based on this, this paper reviews relevant domestic and international research and proposes practical strategies from three dimensions—teaching materials, classroom activities, and evaluation mechanisms—such as creating diverse historical material contexts, constructing a step-by-step question chain, organizing structured debates, and conducting evaluations of historical figures. These strategies aim to provide actionable references for middle school history teachers to improve instructional design and cultivate students' critical thinking.

Keywords:

History Education, Critical Thinking, Teaching Practice, Classroom Reform, Student Development

1. Introduction

With the advancement of curriculum reform and core competency concepts, history is no longer just about imparting knowledge, but also undertaking the mission of cultivating rational citizens. Critical thinking, as a core competency, is regarded as an important ability for students to understand diverse historical facts and form independent judgments. Scholars at home and abroad have made attempts around the study of historical materials and classroom discussions, but phenomena such as single historical materials, shallow problems, and evaluation emphasizing conclusions over processes still exist, making it difficult to implement critical goals. Based on this, this article focuses on middle school classrooms and combines previous achievements and

teaching practices to propose practical paths from four dimensions: historical context, problem chain, structured debate, and character analysis. It is expected to provide useful references for improving the quality of history teaching and students' deep learning.

2. The Value and Significance of Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking in History Education

In history classrooms, the cultivation of critical thinking is not only related to students' ability to accurately grasp historical facts, but also to their independent judgment when facing complex realities. Historical materials themselves have ambiguity. Without critical awareness, students are prone to staying at the surface of the textbook narrative and ignoring the complex causes and positions behind it. By guiding them to actively question the narrator's intentions, compare data from different eras and regions, and examine the process of constructing power discourse, teachers can help students develop the ability to explore problems, evaluate evidence, and construct arguments. Once this ability is formed, it will extend from the classroom to daily life, enabling students to speak up and engage in rational dialogue in the face of social issues and public affairs. More importantly, critical thinking is in line with the interpretive nature of the history discipline, which requires students to realize that historical understanding is always in a state of revision and dialogue, thus establishing an open and humble academic attitude, resisting the shackles of a single value system, truly achieving the goal of educating people through history, and cultivating public rational character.

3. Analysis of Existing Problems in Cultivating Technical Critical Thinking in Current History Teaching

3.1. Single selection of historical materials, lack of multi-source comparison

In history classroom teaching, teachers often use textbooks or lecture notes as the only historical materials to balance progress and assessment, and students are only exposed to the compiled "standard narrative". The single material structure conceals the fragmented and ambiguous nature of historical materials, making it difficult for students to perceive the multidimensional presentation of the same event in different positions and media, and even more difficult to discover contradictions and question authority through comparison. Lack of multi-source reading leads them to rely on the routes provided by teachers when interpreting historical facts, rather than actively constructing problems, resulting in a stagnation of critical thinking. Textbook historical materials are mostly sourced from official archives or secondary interpretations by editors. Oral history, personal letters, local newspapers, etc. are often excluded due to length or position, and students are unable to access the complete "evidence chain". They have no practical experience in historical methods such as judging the reliability of evidence, cross validation, and contextual reading. Even if teachers occasionally supplement materials, the lack of systematic design makes it difficult to bring coherent impact, and students often treat them as side notes without reconstructing the explanatory framework. The single source of historical materials has become a core obstacle to cultivating critical thinking in history teaching. It weakens students' needs for comparison, questioning, and synthesis, and dilutes their understanding of historical openness and uncertainty [1].

3.2. The problem design is superficial and lacks in-depth thinking

At present, the problem design in many history classrooms still remains at the surface level of factual memory and one-way verification in textbooks. The questions raised by teachers mostly revolve around explicit information such as the time, place, characters, and causal chain of events, aiming to confirm whether students “understand” and “remember” them, while there is very little exploration of deep issues such as the social structure, ideological concepts, narrative positions, and historical debates behind the events. Due to the lack of depth in exploration, students often only need to extract keywords from the material and piece together answers to obtain positive feedback, without the need for multiple interpretations and complex logic of historical facts, and it is also difficult to experience the thinking tension in historical research. Although some teachers attempted to ask open-ended questions, due to the lack of gradient design and vague evaluation dimensions, they were ultimately reduced by students to the reproduction of “correct viewpoints”; Critical questioning becomes a formality, and classroom discussions can easily form a situation of superficial harmony but lack substantive confrontation. Over time, students' interest in text reading, evidence weighing, logical inference, and value reflection is weakened, critical thinking skills are difficult to truly grow, and teachers find it difficult to gain inspiration for research-based teaching from interaction, forming a negative cycle [2].

3.3. Formal classroom discussions lack substantive confrontation

In history classes, discussion sessions often remain at the surface level, with teachers throwing questions according to pre-set scripts and students taking turns answering based on teaching aids. The voices are heard repeatedly but there is a lack of collision of viewpoints. In order to consider progress and assessment, teachers tend to simply summarize their speeches and quickly provide so-called standard answers, without questioning students' arguments and rarely guiding students to question each other. Students, due to their long-term habit of “safe output,” are more willing to repeat textbook conclusions or popular online statements, rather than taking the risk of presenting unique perspectives. Class discussions have been weakened into question displays, and the potential tension of critical inquiry has been dissolved in time constraints and evaluation orientation. In addition, the classroom environment lacks tolerance for dissent, and a small number of students who present challenging viewpoints often retract their sharpness due to concerns about being denied or labeled, resulting in discussions becoming polite and supportive. The surface harmony formed as a result conceals the inertia of thinking, and students lack opportunities to clarify historical facts and test evidence through refutation. The perspective and value judgment abilities that history should stimulate are constrained within a formulaic interactive framework [3].

3.4. Historical analysis is superficial and lacks role involvement

In most classrooms, students' historical analysis often stays at the level of event listing and conclusion memorization, seemingly grasping the context, but actually lacking the experience of being in the situation. The teacher directly provides a causal framework and value judgments, and students complete the “analysis” based on their own situation, ignoring the complex situation and tension of multiple positions of historical subjects in a specific time and space, which makes it difficult to stimulate substitute thinking on different options. Over time, students have become accustomed

to being detached from historical events, labeling and drawing conclusions from a high perspective, but rarely asking the parties involved why they made decisions due to insufficient information, emotional entanglements, and conflicts of interest, let alone attempting to examine historical materials from a first person perspective. The absence of characters weakens empathy and understanding, and criticism tends to focus on surface errors in the text rather than delving deeper into concepts, structures, and power relationships. In addition, classroom time is tight, and teachers tend to use standard answers to ensure progress. Open role-playing and dialectical stance are marginalized, and students cannot appreciate the ambiguity of historical truth. The growth of critical thinking becomes mere empty talk. Over time, the depth and warmth of classroom thinking are diluted, and students develop a stronger sense of distance from history [4].

4. The Core Practical Path of Cultivating Critical Thinking in History Teaching

4.1. Create diverse historical contexts and provide a basis for comparative analysis

To create a diverse historical context in the classroom, the first step is to break through the limitations of a single textbook narrative. Teachers should guide students to simultaneously come into contact with heterogeneous materials such as official chronicles, personal notes, foreign travelogues, archaeological images, etc., allowing them to distinguish multiple aspects of the same event based on differences in content, position, time, and author identity. Through comparison, questioning, and cross validation, students can realize that historical materials are not ready-made truths, but “testimonies” that need to be constantly examined, thus forming a critical thinking framework centered on evidence and problem oriented. Taking Zhang Qian’s journey to the Western Regions as an example, teachers can juxtapose the grand narrative of Zhang Qian’s image in the “Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Dawan”, excerpts from the oral accounts of envoys recorded in the “Book of Han”, and scattered place name lists unearthed from Dunhuang, allowing students to discuss the differences in narrative order, emotional evaluation, and geographical cognition between the two books, and ask whether these differences are due to the author’s intention or missing materials; For example, when exploring the Black Death in 14th century Europe, teachers can distribute church sermons, city council epidemic prevention regulations, and letters from business travelers, allowing students to compare the tension between religious interpretations, official policies, and personal experiences, and then question the causal relationship between the exaggeration or reduction of death numbers and social order imbalances. Through the juxtaposition and intersection of such multi-source materials, students gradually master the analytical path of “seeking differences first, then seeking similarities, and finally modeling”, and their critical thinking ability steadily grows through continuous questioning and dialogue [5].

4.2. Design a step-by-step problem chain to guide in-depth exploration layer by layer

The core of a hierarchical problem chain is to break down grand historical issues into small, interrelated questions that progress from shallow to deep, so that students rely on the previous level’s thinking results for each answer, while generating new doubts and continuously driving exploration. The teacher first asks descriptive

questions to help students clarify the temporal and spatial context; Continuing with explanatory questions, it is required to analyze the narrative differences and causal logic in diverse historical materials; Moving on to evaluative questions, forcing students to make judgments on the strength of evidence for different viewpoints; Ultimately, it ends with reflective questions, guiding them to examine their own positions and limitations of understanding. Each level of problem not only forms its own unit, but also lays the foundation for the next level. Students naturally generate critical thinking in the process of constantly revising hypotheses and improving arguments. Taking the example of “Emperor Wu of Han implementing the Edict of Tu'en”, the teacher first asks “What are the main provisions of the Edict of Tu'en” and guides the reference to the “Book of Han” and “Zizhi Tongjian”; Further questioning the root causes of the intensified consolidation of feudal lords in the early Western Han Dynasty, prompting a comparison of different interpretations of land consolidation and clan enfeoffment; Subsequently, the question was asked whether the Edict of Tu'en fundamentally weakened the feudal states, and students were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy based on historical facts and academic research; Finally, the reflective question of “If you were a central decision maker, would you adopt the same measures and why?” was raised, prompting students to self-examine the distribution of power, national governance, and their costs. Through the cycle of evidence comparison, viewpoint confrontation, and introspection, students gradually learn to ask deep questions, identify implicit value judgments, and respond to complex historical phenomena with an open and rigorous attitude, thus achieving effective cultivation of critical thinking [6].

4.3. Organize structured debate sessions and train the ability to argue and refute arguments

In the cultivation chain of critical thinking, structured debate is the most effective link to focus on training students' ability to argue and refute. Teachers need to first select topics with multiple explanatory spaces from textbooks and historical research, clarify the positions of both sides, and provide basic information such as timelines, characters, and policies. Students are required to complete argumentation, evidence screening, logical construction, and counter questioning plans in groups. During classroom implementation, the four stage procedure of “statement inquiry refutation summary” should be strictly followed. Teachers should record in real time the loopholes, evidence flaws, and logical fallacies in their arguments. After the debate, the whole class should be guided to reflect on the effectiveness and value orientation of the arguments, so that students can experience the historical thinking cycle of “proposal inspection correction” through continuous evidence collision and viewpoint confrontation. Taking the example of whether the benefits of Emperor Wu of Han's implementation of salt and iron official management outweigh the harms or harms outweigh the benefits, the affirmative side needs to sort out the evidence of consolidating centralization, increasing fiscal revenue, and resisting the strong, and quote the words of Sang Hongyang in “Salt and Iron Theory”; On the other hand, they listed materials such as the suppression of folk economic vitality, widespread local complaints, and the heavy burden of taxation recorded in the Book of Han's “Food and Commodity Chronicles”. During the questioning session, students kept asking key points such as “whether official operation will inevitably lead to a decrease in efficiency” and “how to measure short-term and long-term benefits”; In the refutation stage, they also cited different scholars' research on the financial structure of the Han Dynasty to expose each others arguments and loopholes. Through the complete

process, students not only learn to construct evidence chains between historical materials, but also realize the debatability of conclusions, thus completing the internal generation of critical thinking. This debate mode is easy to promote and can inspire students to explore deeper causal connections and value implications behind historical facts, making the classroom a real academic training ground.

4.4. Conduct analysis of historical figures, immerse themselves in situational understanding and decision-making

The key to implementing the strategy of “historical character analysis” in history classrooms is to guide students to break away from simple judgments of success or failure, and enter specific historical periods to examine the institutional environment, interest patterns, and values that characters face. Teachers should first select historical materials and future research that differ from each other, helping students capture the image differences of the same person in different discourses; Secondly, design situational tasks such as “If you were an imperial censor” and “If you were a local official”, allowing students to re evaluate their choices within the existing historical framework. Through the process of role-playing, evidence comparison, and viewpoint defense, students can exercise their abilities in data induction, logical reasoning, and position transformation. Taking the reform of Wang Anshi in the Northern Song Dynasty as an example, the classroom is divided into two groups: the reformists need to explain the necessity of the exemption law and the Qingmiao law to alleviate the difficulties of the people based on the “Shilu” and “Linchuan Collection”, while the conservatives question the potential hidden dangers that the new law may bring to finance and people’s hearts by citing the “Biography of Sima Guang” and “Records of the Wushui River” in the “History of the Song Dynasty”. After the debate, students are required to write a “report on the court meeting”, providing a compromise or final suggestion in a limited word count official document, and marking the sources of the historical materials cited by each. Students have found that when their position changes from an observer to a decision-maker, they have a deeper understanding of the complexity of balancing “enriching the country and strengthening the military” with “promoting virtue and benefiting the people”, and can also realize the limitations of single historical materials and single line narratives. Through such immersive analytical activities, critical thinking no longer stays at criticizing the correctness of conclusions, but runs through the entire process of data collection, viewpoint collision, and selection and balancing.

5. Conclusions

In summary, critical thinking ability is not an abstract dogma, but an active quality that is gradually awakened, honed, and ultimately internalized in vivid historical contexts. The discipline of history possesses both humanistic and social attributes, providing a natural fertile ground for critical exploration. Only by breaking through the single narrative of textbooks, actively introducing multiple sources of historical materials, hierarchical issues, and structured debates, can teachers enable students to rediscover history through the collision of evidence, the confrontation of viewpoints, and emotional recognition, so that critical thinking no longer stays at slogans. Practice has proven that when students have the courage to question, analyze, and construct explanations, they not only receive methodological guidance academically, but also gain rationality and tolerance in their outlook on life. The future classroom needs to form a joint force in terms of curriculum objectives, evaluation mechanisms, and

resource allocation, so that critical thinking cultivation can move from accidental to daily generation, and better serve the deep development of students.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Shi, H.C. Practice and Reflection on Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Ability in High School History Teaching. *History Teaching Issues*, 2021, 000(003), 166-169,46. DOI: 10.3969/j.issn.1006-5636.2021.03.026.
- [2] Zhao, F.C. A Preliminary Analysis of Strategies for Cultivating Critical Thinking in High School History Teaching. *Gaokao*, 2023, 1, 134-136.
- [3] Zhu, J.J. Research on the Cultivation Path of Critical Thinking in Middle School History Curriculum. *Educational Science Research*, 2020, 5, 4.
- [4] Yan, L.M.; Xie, P.L. Exploration of Multiple Paths for Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking in Middle School History Teaching. *Teaching Monthly (Middle School Edition) (Teaching Reference)*, 2024, 7, 99-103.
- [5] Wu, P.J. Practice and Reflection on Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Ability in High School History Teaching. 2025, 1, 391-393.
- [6] Yang, F. The cultivation of students' critical thinking in history teaching - taking the teaching of the compulsory course "Xinhai Revolution" in the People's Education Press "History" as an example. *Teaching Monthly: Middle School Edition (Teaching Reference)*, 2016, 1, 5.



© 2025 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)