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# Moving in liminal space: A case study of intercultural historical learning in Swedish secondary school

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the processes of learning when students are engaged in intercultural historical learning (IHL), specifically how spaces of learning were, or were not, opened by students' struggle to construct meaning. Since IHL is complex, involving both intrinsic disciplinary and extrinsic curricular goals, it is vital to understand this process in detail. The research questions address which aspects seem to activate intercultural learning, and which ones hinder or complicate it. The methodological approach employed was an instrumental, multisite case study where three teaching–learning sequences from two secondary classrooms were investigated. Here, the concepts of 'decentering' and 'perspective recognition', as aspects of IHL, were seen as threshold concepts. The threshold concepts framework – and specifically the idea of 'liminal space', a 'place of potential learning', the in-between moments in the learning process where students find themselves before 'getting it' – was applied as an analytical tool to uncover and describe specific moments in the selected teaching–learning sequences. Several liminal spaces were unpacked, and it transpired that 'troublesomeness' is an integral, potentially productive component when students navigate liminal space as a place for intercultural learning. 'Barriers' that obstructed learning, as well as possible 'entry points' where a student steps into a productive liminal space, were identified, as well as some major enabling breakthrough moments – 'junctures' – for IHL.

**Keywords:** history education, intercultural competence, multicultural education, case study, threshold concepts, secondary classroom

## Introduction

This article investigates the learning processes in two history classrooms where the idea of intercultural historical learning (IHL) was applied. History, as any other school subject, is in constant flux corresponding to societal change. Currently, experiences of migration and diversity make an integration of intercultural objectives into history education compelling. IHL is defined as the learning whereby students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for relating to, and interacting in, a multicultural society, developed specifically through the subject of history (Deardorff, 2006; Nordgren and Johansson, 2015). It should come as no surprise that IHL has blurry boundaries, as disciplinary knowledge is entangled with politics, contemporary events and debates on values (Carretero et al., 2012; Nordgren, 2017). Consequently, the transformation process from aims and policy into applied practice is intricate, with teachers having

to resolve what qualifies as an intercultural learning objective as opposed to just a historical one, and with students figuring out what kind of learning is expected from them (Harris and Bain, 2010; Johansson, 2012).

Accordingly, since IHL is complex, involving both intrinsic disciplinary and extrinsic curricular goals (Nordgren, 2017), it is a specific learning of history, where history is transformed as it takes on certain intercultural aspects. By the same logic, the processes of learning connected to IHL will have distinct qualities (Rathje, 2007). Therefore, investigating the IHL learning process is vital, to see what sets learning in motion and what blocks an intercultural understanding in the practice of the history classroom. The focus of the article is on this particular process, and, thus, what students ultimately learned was not investigated.

This study explored the processes of learning connected to IHL, specifically how spaces of learning were, or were not, opened by students' struggle to construct meaning. The aim was to identify such spaces of learning as theoretical examples. The method of the study for identifying learning opportunities was the use of carefully chosen cases from which to theorize (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In this process, two research questions were generated concerning the aspects that activate intercultural learning, or that hinder or complicate it:

- (1) When and how do spaces of learning opportunities appear in the learning process, and what opens the learning process for new understandings when students are engaged in acquiring intercultural knowledge, skills or attitudes?
- (2) What barriers do students face when encountering the specific learning contents, and what blocks them from navigating the learning process effectively?

The article starts with a literature review of the complexity of IHL, and considers some crucial conditions that might have an impact on students' intercultural understanding. Then, I unpack the theoretical positions and discuss how they informed the methodology of the study. The main section is the case studies, where I identified and analysed learning opportunities. Finally, I discuss the qualities of IHL made visible through students' learning processes.

## **Intercultural historical learning as content and learning**

Within the limitations of an empirical article, it is not possible to do justice to the extensive multicultural history education literature, but it is nonetheless necessary to mark some positions. In the light of migration-related diversity, calls have been made for European history education to acknowledge the histories of all its citizens (Faas, 2011; Palaiologou and Zembylas, 2018). Traditional approaches explaining the origin and progression of the European nation state provide challenges for an intercultural history education. For example, as Körber (2018: 276) asks, 'In teaching about colonial rule and the Crusades, how can immigrants, especially those with ancestors on the other side of these conflicts, accept and critically address the problematic past(s) of their new homes, making it part of their own history?' Similar concerns are articulated in places such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in terms of contested pasts, indigenous histories and biculturalism (Epstein and Peck, 2017), and in the US, where world history, global education and big history challenge nation-centred history (Girard and Harris, 2018).

However, research indicates that world history and big history courses tend to perpetuate Eurocentrism despite their aim not to (Conrad, 2019; Marino, 2011).

This can be explained by methodological nationalism, which structures social science thinking, even when topics are clearly trans-regional, thereby privileging certain (nation-centred) understandings, while obscuring others (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Teachers struggle to grasp what a qualified world history perspective might imply, a struggle which often results in incoherent learning tasks or reiteration of traditional perspectives (Girard and Harris, 2018; Harris and Bain, 2010).

Other studies have centred on students' backgrounds and lifeworlds: on the one hand, the way social identities affect how students construct different, even opposite, meanings from history education (Epstein, 2010; Perrotta, 2018) and, on the other hand, how standard historical narratives give less room for multiple, sometimes uncomfortable, interpretations that acknowledge minority students' lifeworlds and address injustices (Salinas et al., 2012; Santiago, 2017).

There is also related research within the extensive history education field of disciplinary knowledge. Second-order concepts are contrasted with first-order concepts, the 'stuff' of the discipline, and are understood as meta-concepts or thinking tools (Lee and Ashby, 2001; Seixas and Morton, 2013). As such, second-order concepts help to analytically describe what historical learning is when it comes to what procedures students need to obtain. In connection with intercultural learning, the importance of interpreting sources and understanding evidence has been discussed (Bain, 2006; Johansson, 2019), as well as significance (Savenije et al., 2014) and historical empathy and agency (Seixas, 1993, 2012).

Other researchers find a tension between history education with wider intercultural goals and history education with stricter disciplinary goals. They have claimed that intercultural history is shrouded in normative aims of bringing students into a shared community of values (López and Carretero, 2012). Thus, IHL challenges the disciplinary purpose of learning to reason historically, which has led to a debate among history educators. Some have contended that moral learning clutters historical learning, and they fear that historical narratives might be distorted (Kinloch, 2001; Wilschut, 2009). Others state that it is precisely this moral content that renders troubled pasts significant (Peterson, 2011), and that, for history to play a role in young people's lives, students' lifeworlds are inseparable parts of historical learning (Rüsen, 2017).

Whereas the debate has been constructed as a balance – too much or too little – of disciplinary or lifeworld perspectives, empirical studies have pointed to a more nuanced interpretation. When normative aims are articulated, whether fostering antiracism or caring for victims, they do tend to take over (Schweber, 2006), and it seems that students' historical understandings can be hampered by an identity focus (Savenije et al., 2014) and result in presentist interpretations (Reisman, 2015). However, other studies counter that affective engagement is indispensable in historical empathy, and that historical and moral consciousness intersect (Endacott and Brooks, 2013). Similarly, Bellino and Selman (2011), when giving students a morally charged enquiry, found that they could develop their historical and ethical reasoning simultaneously.

Yet, previous IHL research has said very little about the actual process of learning, and how students encounter learning opportunities and barriers during their engagement with intercultural learning. To address this lack, I constructed an analytical framework that combined a theoretical idea of intercultural historical learning with the idea of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003, 2005), and that conceptualized the learning process as a crossing of thresholds.

## Theoretical positions

### Intercultural historical learning

As discussed above, there are some known difficulties and opportunities involved with IHL, on the levels of both teaching content and the learning processes of students. One proposal for overcoming these deficits is a conceptual framework for IHL, developed by Nordgren and Johansson (2015). This conceptual framework addresses the interrelation between history and interculturality, and it systemizes the knowledge, skills and attitudes that the subject of history contributes to intercultural understanding. It brings historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2005) together with intercultural and postcolonial dimensions (Banks and Banks, 2010; Byram, 1997; Mignolo, 2009). The theory of historical consciousness understands history as a phenomenon and meaning-making practice, involving a broad understanding of history. The purpose of history in respect to education is fundamentally practical: to advance students' abilities to orient themselves in time and life, and to narrate meaningful stories about the past, themselves and society (Rüsen, 2005, 2017). The incorporation of postcolonial theory highlights asymmetries of power, addresses the problem of Eurocentrism beyond simply adding multiple stories, and demands that we rethink standard historical narratives to account for non-European geopolitical processes and experiences (Bhambra, 2016).

The conceptual framework is presented as a matrix (see Table 1), where each of nine intersections represents a critical aspect to consider for advancing IHL – in short: concerning historical content, to position processes of cultural encounters and migration at the centre of historical narratives, and to open a space for a diversity of voices and for students' own lifeworld experiences; concerning skills, to analyse narrative structures, to interpret sources, and to examine the dominant historical culture for inclusions, exclusions, or othering of historical actors; and, finally, concerning the use of history, to analyse historical and contemporary uses of history, and ultimately to use history to formulate considered positions for orientation in one's own present.

The conceptual framework purportedly functions analytically and prescriptively, as it captures some prominent components of IHL and provides principles for selecting possible learning objectives and contents. However, on this level, nothing has been said about the components in terms of learning, for example, about which components are the most relevant for a given situation, how they play out in classrooms, or the difficulties students encounter. Therefore, I turn now to threshold concepts, which I believe can provide tools to address this issue.

### Opening the space for learning

Threshold concepts, as developed by Meyer and Land (2003, 2005), are learning experiences in the form of disciplinary concepts, practices or activities with the power to move the learner towards previously inaccessible understandings. As such, threshold concepts may include skills or attitudes, and are not restricted to the learning of cognitive concepts. Threshold concepts are tied to the learning process and to what sets the learning in motion, and they are defined more by their function than by their content and structural qualities. Typically, threshold concepts are integrative, bringing different interrelated aspects together in students' understandings. They are troublesome to learn, counter-intuitive or unfamiliar (Perkins, 2006), and thus clash with prevailing mindsets. The resulting knowledge is transformative, with a strong reorganizing power, and the learning is irreversible, as there is no going back from crossing the threshold. Finally, threshold concepts are bounded and specific to the discipline. Without acquiring threshold concepts, the learner cannot progress, and

**Table 1: Matrix of conceptual framework for intercultural historical learning (Nordgren and Johansson, 2015: 8)**

	<b>A. Social and cultural processes</b>	<b>B. Representations from different cultures</b>	<b>C. Decentred perspectives</b>
1. To experience	<p>1A ... <b>history about cultural encounters</b> What historical content can contribute to knowledge about social and cultural processes?</p> <p>A content that considers cultural encounters and the impact of migration as central components of historical narratives.</p>	<p>1B ... <b>history as voices of diversity</b> What historical content can contribute to the ability to perceive representations from different cultures?</p> <p>A content that opens for a diversity of perspectives and voices from different cultures, and where the 'others' enter the historical narrative as agents with voices of their own.</p>	<p>1C ... <b>history as contemporary culture</b> What historical content can contribute to the ability to decentre and relativize one's own culture?</p> <p>A content that makes learners alert to their own historical cultures, cultures that create feelings of belonging and legitimise value judgements.</p>
2. To interpret	<p>2A ... <b>history as narrative structure?</b> How can the selected content be interpreted as meaningful historical narratives?</p> <p>By constructing and deconstructing narratives, through analytical concepts, such as culture, cause and consequence, continuity and change, modernity/coloniality.</p>	<p>2B ... <b>history as sources from different cultures</b> How can historical interpretations contribute to the understanding of representations from different cultures?</p> <p>By interpreting sources from different cultures, taking historical perspectives and analysing historical evidence.</p>	<p>2C ... <b>history as a cultural system</b> How can historical interpretations contribute to the ability to decentre the dominant culture?</p> <p>By examining the dominant historical culture for historical significance; considering whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in different canonical narratives.</p>
3. To orient	<p>3A ... <b>by considering narratives about uses of history</b> How can a use-of-history perspective contribute to knowledge about social and cultural processes?</p> <p>By integrating examples of how different social and cultural collectives use history.</p>	<p>3B ... <b>by analysing different uses of history</b> How can a use-of-history perspective contribute to the ability to explain and relate to representations from different cultures?</p> <p>By using concepts and models to analyse different uses of history within different cultures.</p>	<p>3C ... <b>by using history to relate to the multicultural present</b> How can a use-of-history perspective contribute to the ability to orient in the multicultural present?</p> <p>By practically applying historical knowledge in order to cognitively sort experiences and ethically relate to their own lives and society.</p>

it is this particular function, I believe, that makes threshold concepts a link between the discipline and the classroom. When we, as researchers or teachers, consider what specific learning endeavours really make a difference, the threshold concepts framework provides us with a double perspective that does not separate disciplinary content from the processes of teaching and learning. In this study, the threshold concepts framework became the toolkit with which to access the process of learning.

Despite its wide adoption, the threshold concepts framework has seldom been applied to analyses of classroom activities (Land et al., 2016). Instead, the main concern has been curriculum construction, suggesting what are the important threshold concepts of a discipline: often of the first-order concept kind – for example, evolution in biology; and sometimes of the second-order kind – for example, deconstruction in literature, and otherness in cultural studies. In history, slavery has been suggested, as well as historical empathy (McGowan, 2016). Methodologically, students and teachers have been interviewed about the outcome of learning after it has taken place. However, recently, researchers of the threshold concept framework have moved beyond solely identifying threshold concepts and have shown an interest in threshold concepts as learning processes and transformative journeys (Felten, 2016; Walker, 2013). This approach, which takes us into the classroom, is particularly suitable for a ‘messy’ learning goal such as IHL. It can be conceptualized as a web of interrelated thresholds (Kinchin, 2010), probably a mix of first- and second-order concepts, as well as everyday and emotional understandings. Through analysing students’ engagement with the IHL web, we may discern the specific (intrinsic and extrinsic) qualities of IHL as a complex learning goal.

Furthermore, the threshold concept framework can be employed to understand learning processes, particularly fruitfully through the concept of liminal space. Threshold concepts involve significant shifts in thinking and being (Cousin, 2006), and to acquire them, students need to enter and traverse so-called liminal spaces (Meyer and Land, 2006b). These are the spaces in which students find themselves before ‘getting it’, those in-between moments in the learning process that may be experienced as ‘stuckness’ (Ellsworth, 1997), but that also promise integration and changed understanding. Liminal space is a theoretical construct, but the notions of barriers, stuck places and breakthroughs are grounded in the practice of teachers and students. Everyone intuitively knows what it means to be stuck, or to finally ‘get it’. As such, it captures essential components in a learning process, and it can help to identify those openings where students struggle and learning is a potential outcome (whether it results in continued stuckness or in transformation).

## Research design and methods

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the nature of IHL as it plays out in practice. To explore this phenomenon, I employed a qualitative research methodology and conducted an instrumental, collective case study (Stake, 2008). It was instrumental in the way that the particular cases were selected and examined to facilitate the understanding of a conceptual phenomenon, and it was collective in the way that it involved two comprehensive cases. As is often done in case studies, my research design incorporated different methodological approaches. The study was embedded within a design-based and interventionist research project (DiSessa and Cobb, 2004; Van den Akker et al., 2006), which constituted the frame from where the cases were selected. Here, the fundamental principle was that educational research gains from regarding the shared effort among teachers, researchers and learners as key to understanding

difficulties and finding ways of mastering them, an approach that Cousin (2008: 261) describes as a 'transactional curriculum inquiry'. The case study was practice-oriented, focusing on what went on when students were actually in the 'black boxes'. In this, the teachers' perspectives were left out of the account to enable me to focus specifically on how liminal spaces emerged before students.

### **Sampling, setting and participants**

To obtain an in-depth understanding and a ground for theoretic conclusions, the selection of cases was crucial (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Welch et al., 2011). I used a purposive sampling technique (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015), as there was a need for information-rich cases with different angles to shed light on the purpose of the study, and it was necessary to ensure that the teaching–learning sequences actually dealt with IHL. The purposive sampling occurred in two phases. In the first phase, 12 teachers joined a project about history teaching in a multicultural society, which we had posted on a municipality's professional development website. In two Swedish cities, practising teachers and academic researchers met regularly in 'research circles' (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lundberg and Starrin, 2006). Although much of the work was collaborative, there was a division of labour. Teachers and researchers explored, read and discussed IHL together, but all teachers individually constructed a module in which the IHL goal was addressed. As researchers, we contributed readings, took part in discussions and provided the conceptual framework for IHL. However, we did not task teachers with implementing specific ideas, and we refrained from engaging in planning. The teachers made the final selections of learning objectives and lesson designs.

In the next phase, I selected two teaching–learning sequences – that is, two teachers, two classes – as my actual cases. Three sampling criteria were established to afford maximum opportunities for a joint analysis: first, that the sequences showed some similarities in intercultural content; second, that they still were sufficiently unique to generate a sample card of possibilities; and third, that the classes had an 'average', rather than deviating, composition of sociocultural aspects, such as parents' education and foreign background. The statistical service of the Swedish School Board (SALSA) confirmed this: both schools clustered around the national average concerning parental educational background, and the proportion of students with a foreign background was similar (20–30 per cent, which was average for cities, although higher than the national average). One class was Year 8 (age 15), and the other was Year 9 (age 16).

As part of the emergent design, I selected individuals and groups of students to follow more extensively. Primarily, this was a theoretical sample, as I, as the study emerged, chose those students and instances that I judged would best benefit the analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2015), but, to some degree, they were also selected to include a range of interest levels, performance standards, and ethnic and social backgrounds.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected primarily via classroom observations, a method that lends itself to the study of a bounded case at its natural location and provides a first-hand encounter with that world (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Since the purpose of the study was to obtain a holistic understanding of the learning process, it was important to secure as broad a picture as possible. For this, I supplemented observations with student individual and focus group interviews. However, these materials were secondary to the observations. In contrast to much liminal space research, which has relied heavily on



self-reporting (Land et al., 2016), I prioritized observations and group conversations (within the teaching–learning sequences) over written work and post-unit interviews, in order to focus on the processes of learning as they actually evolved, rather than the outcomes of learning. All lessons (14 in total) in the teaching–learning sequences, including accompanying interviews, were documented through field notes, audio recorded and transcribed. The primary units of analysis, therefore, were students’ speech, mostly whole-class and group conversations from classroom observations, but also, to a lesser extent, statements from interviews. The transcribed data were read, reread and coded using analytical categories derived from the threshold concepts framework.

## Data analysis

For the analysis, I developed liminal space as an analytical tool. I regard liminal space as a spatial and temporal concept, denoting a room for learning in which students move, which opens up to them during a specific period of the learning process, with a beginning and an ending. As such, it can be studied. However, to be analytically usable, it has to be broken down and associated with other concepts. For this purpose, I employed barriers (Meyer and Land, 2006a) for those circumstances that blocked out learning, entry points for identifying when a student stepped into the liminal state of in-betweenness, and, finally, junctures for those instances in liminal space where certain bits of learning seemed to facilitate a possible breakthrough. I also recognized that traversing the liminal space would not be straightforward, and I used the concept of oscillations for tracing students’ movements when they engaged with troublesome knowledge. Despite this analytical division, in practice, different components merged, and the students experienced liminal spaces as wholes, as so-called ‘in situ threshold representations’ (Meyer and Timmermans, 2016: 25).

Figure 1 shows how a *liminal space* can appear within a teaching–learning sequence. The figure shows three analytical categories attached to a liminal space. In the teaching–learning sequence, there may arise all sorts of *barriers* that hinder students from learning and stepping into liminal space. There may also be instances, often specific ‘bits of troublesomeness’, that move learners into the liminal space where

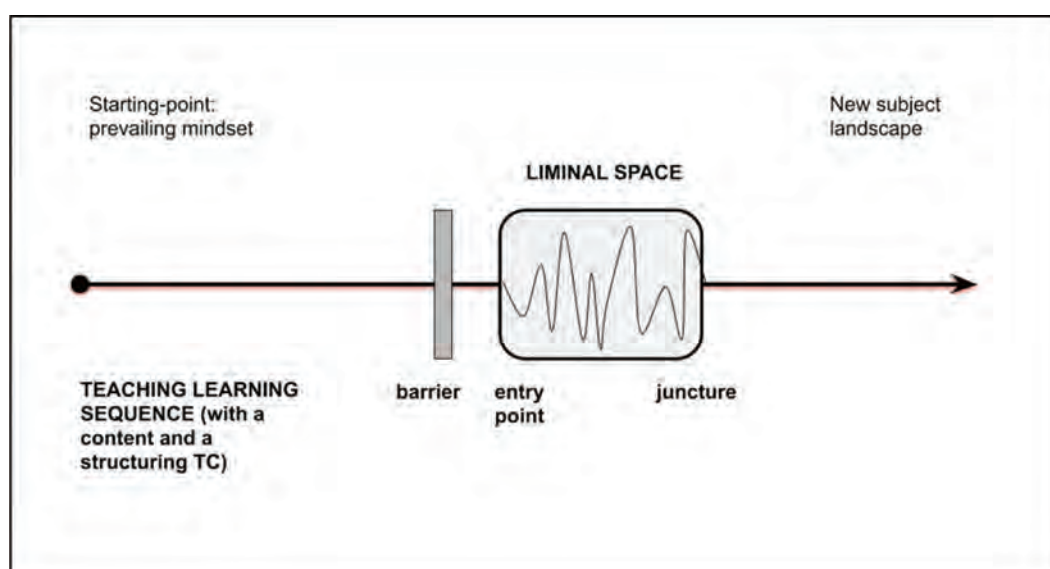


Figure 1: Teaching–learning sequence with liminal space (TC = threshold concept)

learning can take place. I regard these instances as *entry points*. Finally, and hopefully, after the uncertainties and oscillations inside the liminal space, *junctures* may appear where learners begin to break through and exit the uncertain liminal space. When students transit a liminal space, with all its oscillations, they leave behind prevailing mindsets and reach new subject landscapes.

Thus, the analytical task was to search for episodes that constituted possible liminal spaces. To start, I analysed each lesson series as a whole and evolving narrative, thus producing descriptive, detail-rich accounts. In this way, the threshold concept framework, with its process-oriented vocabulary, provided me with a way of recontextualizing teaching–learning sequences as narratives of students’ endeavours on an arduous journey, where the learning of IHL could be seen as crossings of thresholds. Next, I selected episodes of possible liminal spaces for further description. I attached three analytical categories to the liminal space and specifically searched for barriers (obstacles to understanding), entry points (ways into liminal space) and junctures (instances that could qualify as breakthroughs). For this identification, I used an intentionally broad combination of criteria. In some cases, students themselves explicitly expressed that they were stuck or, perhaps, almost about to grasp it. In other cases, teachers stated that they failed to make their students understand. However, most episodes were identified externally, when I inferred from the data that one or more students experienced difficulties and were struggling to make sense. In presenting my analysis of IHL in the classrooms, I have placed the episodes within the context of the evolving narrative, and allowed for longer descriptions and detailed quotations. As a result, a limited number of students are included.

## Intercultural historical learning in the classrooms

In the research circles, all teachers constructed their own individual lesson designs from the conceptual framework (see Table 1). Whereas the two teaching–learning sequences in the study differed concerning historical content and methods, they shared prominent characteristics. First, when faced with transforming IHL into teaching designs, both teachers settled on world history to actively avoid Eurocentrism. Students thus encountered educational content that had been selected to address the complexity of culture, place and nationalities. Second, the teachers constructed learning activities to move their students beyond simplifications and prevailing understandings of the past of multicultural society. They set out to make students acknowledge different perspectives, question one-sided narratives, and scrutinize their own historical beliefs. A third similarity was that this was indeed a challenging process, and students sometimes fought to understand what they were expected to learn.

Historical content, methods and concepts can all be found within the conceptual framework of intercultural historical learning (see Table 1). Each of the two classrooms demonstrates its own set of conceptual framework components, as well as weighting between them. In Table 2, the first row summarizes the historical content and first-order concepts that each teaching–learning sequence was about. The second row lists what the teachers chose to focus on in order to obtain the objective of intercultural learning, for example, in terms of what second-order concepts were taught and what activities were carried out. The third row indicates what specific concepts seemed to affect the learning processes the most in each classroom, namely *perspective recognition* and *decentring*. These concepts were not taught explicitly, but they emerged as essential analytical categories as they seemed to create specific learning opportunities. They function as threshold concepts that structure and drive a given teaching–learning sequence.

**Table 2: Overview of the teaching–learning sequences**

	<b>Classroom 1 (Year 8, age 15)</b>	<b>Classroom 2 (Year 9, age 16)</b>
Historical content (first-order concepts)	The transatlantic slave trade (with focus on the US, but also on Sweden and on slavery generally).	Colonialism and contemporary postcolonial use of history (Nigeria, Greenland, Sápmi).
Methods for achieving IHL (as described by teachers)	Historical empathy. Complex historical explanations. Historical orientation.	Deconstruction. Diversity of voices and sources. Contemporary art and field trip to museum.
Structuring threshold concepts (implicit second-order concepts)	Perspective recognition.	Decentring.

## Perspective recognition and decentring as threshold concepts

When recontextualizing the enacted teaching–learning sequences as narratives of crossing thresholds, I searched for potential concepts that seemed to open for transformative learning. I identified the interrelated notions of perspective recognition and decentring as the underlying structuring threshold concepts. Neither of the concepts was explicitly formulated as a learning objective by the teachers. However, in effect, they constituted the thresholds that students confronted, thereby structuring the learning process. Both are second-order concepts from the fields of intercultural learning (decentring) and historical learning (perspective recognition), and are described as such within the conceptual framework of IHL. Whereas it is a matter of course to treat them as second-order concepts from the perspective of the intended learning, I believe it is more fruitful to treat them as structuring threshold concepts when we shift focus to the learning process and the way the concepts function.

Perspective recognition and decentring are closely connected: both address the relationship between the learner and the historical other, and both entail ‘movements’ of the learner. However, I believe a case could be made for keeping them distinct. As concepts, they lead our attention in different directions. Perspective recognition is about discovering another person’s perspective through moving closer to someone who is separated from us by time and context, whereas decentring is about discovering one’s own perspectives, values and world views, through moving away from oneself into a distanced outlook.

Perspective recognition (Barton and Levstik, 2004) concerns temporal differences between now and then, and translates as the ability to recognize historical diversity and understand the historical other, in their different social, cultural and emotional contexts. As a learning objective, perspective recognition presents students with several challenges: to reconstruct the adequate historical context and to avoid letting one’s present-oriented perspective get in the way of understanding, as well as the conscious willingness to put a distant time and culture at the centre of one’s attention. Reminiscent of the discussion about disciplinary and lifeworld perspectives in history education, some researchers have underlined that perspective recognition should be learned as a contextualizing, historical reasoning skill (Huijgen et al., 2017; Lee and Ashby, 2001), whereas others claim that, as a dual-domain construct, it needs

both cognitive, critical reasoning and affective, caring sides (Endacott and Brooks, 2013). Taking the last position, I would argue that, for IHL to be advanced, students need to learn perspective recognition as an intertwined process of disciplinary and lifeworld aspects.

Decentring is a self-reflexive and critical stance. It entails dislodging and relocating oneself, 'to relativise one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, ... to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours' (Byram et al., 2001: 5). Apart from allowing lifeworld histories into the classroom, it also means decentring history as such and addressing the Eurocentrism of historiography (Chakrabarty, 2009). Davis (2011) identifies several strategies for decentring historical narratives, for example: to investigate the Western gaze and how it confines others to be characters in European plots; to privilege polarities in including both the voices of 'us' and 'others' as actors and reactors; and to describe the middle ground of hybridity and exchange. Davis concludes with a call for historians to always take decentred perspectives into account, asking the question, 'From where do I tell my story?' For IHL, this means students have to be made aware of their own vantage points, histories and values, that is, the position from where they interpret the world. It also includes uncovering dominant meta-narratives and the inclusion and exclusion mechanisms that determine whose history is told (Nordgren and Johansson, 2015). In addition to discovering one's own position, a decentred stance also entails avoiding the assumption that this position is the only possible and naturally correct one.

## Classroom 1: Struggling with moral content in liminal space

In the Grade 8 classroom, the historical content was the transatlantic slave trade. Students were invited into the past through harrowing paintings and perspective activities. They were prompted to construct complex explanations underpinned by historical context, and, in the end, the students got the opportunity to reflect on how their historical knowledge could be used for orientation in contemporary society. From an analytical point of view, it was the notion of perspective recognition that served as a threshold concept, in that it presented students with 'troublesomeness' and activated learning, moving students into what I regard as liminal spaces.

### Barriers

Halfway through the sequence, many students, despite more complex understandings, tended to reduce meaning to narratives of right and wrong. During group interviews, students perceived the lesson series as primarily about moral learning. They spoke of being 'reminded of the evils that we have overcome', that the curriculum emphasized 'bad things from the past so that pupils will realize that there has been progress and we have come far'. One student summarized: 'Now it's over, now we have human rights'. The default responses were emotions of dismay, pity and blame, and students took pains to express how they felt:

**Student H:** When we saw that horrible painting [of a slave being flogged], you don't know if he is dead or not. And all those other people, even women and children, that just don't care. I felt bad, I got so angry, and then we should analyse it, but I just felt awful about it and sad. And I feel it's so important that schools don't conceal all horrible things because it shows, you know, that people were capable of treating each other really badly.

Some students came to moral conclusions about contemporary matters, as in this example where a student speaking from a non-majority position addressed classmates:

**A:** One thing that I didn't know was that Sweden also traded with slaves. But I am not surprised. You Swedes were part of European colonialism, even if you like to pretend you were not. I think it is important to learn that Swedes are as bad as others.

**M:** What do you mean, others, were bad, in what way?

**A:** You know, slave traders, racists.

In this excerpt, students do not maintain the difference between past and present. The wrongdoings of the past rebound on today and entail moral responsibility. Later in the teaching-learning sequences, students equated learning about the slave trade to moral learning, and, as the teacher pointed out, they often failed to consider the structural factors they had spent so much time studying.

The question we need to ask is whether students' readiness to take moral positions constitutes an insurmountable barrier for achieving the disciplinary skill of perspective recognition. To shed light on this, I will now turn to an episode where students were explicitly asked to engage in historical perspectives. The students were quick to identify with those who had suffered, in this case, suffered brutally, as it concerned a slave flogging: 'I know I can't really ... but I do understand how she feels', and 'I can imagine the feeling of pain, it almost burns', sometimes with references to their own experiences of discrimination and bullying. Doing this, they positioned the historical individuals, the 'victims' with whom they empathized, outside their historical contexts and found common ground through the notion of shared humanity. At first, this activity was not perceived as troublesome learning; identifying with victims seemed to come easily, without upsetting or raising questions. Instead, the troublesomeness surfaced when the teacher took the closeness away, when he 'distanced' the past and challenged them to take the slave owners' perspectives instead of those of the slaves, as in the following episode, where the class encountered the US president Andrew Jackson. Note that in Swedish history, Andrew Jackson is not a prominent figure, so the students were unlikely to have heard of him before, and the teacher only used the topic as an example:

**Teacher:** This is Andrew Jackson, he was quite successful, he managed to become the president. He was also one of the early American proponents for democracy. Among other things, he fought for expanded suffrage, so that more people would be included and participate in decision making. He was also one of the wealthiest and richest slave owners. How can we explain this, that a man, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, could fight for democracy and at the same time be a rich slave owner?

**D:** Perhaps it wasn't that bad ... he did things so life would be better for the slaves, perhaps gave them more food.

**Teacher:** You mean that he used his moral values for something good?

**C:** I don't think so. It's not that strange. It's like in Greek democracy, ancient Athens. It was democratic, but just for some. I mean he could still believe in democracy because slaves didn't count.

**Teacher:** Right, they didn't include everyone. It was a restricted democracy, just like in Athens, so to speak.

**J:** Maybe he had learned to know his slaves ... as individuals, their lives and stuff. Maybe he got his ideas about democracy because of that.

**D:** Or he changed when he began to think about democracy and suffrage ... and treated his slaves better. I mean, even if they were oppressed in society, he could have changed and treated them better.

**Teacher:** I understand what you are saying, and I would want to believe that you are right. But we know that he did very little, or really nothing, to improve the lives of his slaves.

This episode demonstrates how two students, D and J, tried to solve a contradiction (good beliefs versus bad actions). They came up with various explanations for Jackson's contradictory behaviour. Even though another student, C, 'settled' the discussion and received confirmation of her interpretation from the teacher, D and J continued to argue their case. It clearly puzzled them, and this became further evident when D, some ten minutes later, after the teacher had switched to another topic, raised his hand, interrupted, and gave yet another explanation: 'Or maybe he wasn't into democracy, I mean really for it. Perhaps he just pretended to obtain support from ordinary people. He manipulated them.'

One way of describing this episode is that 'presentism' (students' present-based interpretations) interfered with historical thinking (Huijgen et al., 2017; Reisman, 2015). According to this line of reasoning, D and J saw the historical past through their own mindsets and contemporary value systems, which led them to conclude that a person cannot simultaneously hold democratic values and mistreat slaves. One of the two must be untrue. They started out by exonerating Andrew Jackson from being a 'bad' slave owner, suggesting he might have improved his slaves' lives, and then went on to reject him as a democrat instead, trying out the idea that he just pretended to be 'good'. Thus, historical actions (and the motives of the actors) were framed in contemporary and moral terms, which blocked a historical analysis recognizing the perspectives of people in the past. In other words, this barrier was the result of lifeworld perspectives outweighing disciplinary skills.

On the other hand, presentist thinking, drawing on lifeworld experiences, is a resource for students, and pitched against disciplinary thinking, it constitutes a bit of troublesomeness that students have to negotiate. In this respect, it is an entry point into liminal space. When challenged with historical distance, students in the classroom sensed the otherness of people in the past; they recognized that values, intentions and world views were different. Yet, despite this perceived otherness, they did not dismiss people of the past as stupid, ignorant or, for that matter, evil. The students were thoroughly willing to try out the possibility that past people, even the 'bad' ones, acted for sound and logical reasons. In doing so, the students often used their own value systems and experiences to devise possible explanations. Rather than seeing this as a presentism problem and a barrier, I argue that the entanglement of disciplinary analysis and lifeworld perspectives is part of a vital negotiating process that may open a liminal space for students.

## Junctures

To dwell in liminal space is troublesome, as demonstrated by D and J, but it may also lead to new understandings. In retrospective interviews, students sometimes spoke of specific clarifying moments, which I treated as indications of possible junctures, that is, beginnings of breakthroughs and exits out of liminal space. A longer excerpt from one such interview is reproduced in its entirety below. Three junctures were identified when students: (1) considered perspective recognition on a metacognitive level (as an awareness of the exacting effort to encompass a past person's otherness); (2) applied

historical knowledge and made explicit connections between past and contemporary society; and (3) brought their own experiences into making historical interpretations:

**Interviewer:** You said earlier [two weeks before] that the reasons for studying the transatlantic slave trade were to learn how far our societies have come since then. What more can you say now that you have finished the project?

**S:** Well, I think it's actually more than that. Lots of the things were about racism and people's attitudes, the way racism influenced the whole society and that there was no respect for human values. First, I thought why it is important for us to learn about it, about change and how important it was that some were braver and dared to oppose what everyone thought was right. Our society and their society are really different. So, you know, I really had the picture that we studied a problem of the past. But now, after we chose and presented our own examples, I think it is the opposite. I mean, some things didn't change at all. So much is the same, racism will always exist, and people will have to struggle for justice. And our societies are quite alike with the importance of trade, world economy, globalization and so on. So, in one way, it hasn't changed at all.

**Interviewer:** So, instead of being about the difference between then and now, as you said earlier 'how far we have come', it is more about the similarities, that much remains the same?

**S:** Well, yes, or no ... It is both.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else to be learned from studying the slave trade period for you, in twenty-first century Sweden? Or, what did you learn? Are there any moments from this lesson series that you remember better? Think for a while if you want to.

**M:** Just as S said, I remember choosing my own picture and the discussions we had. And, you know, T [teacher] must have thought so too, because he gave us more time so we could finish.

**C:** The one occasion when I actually had to think a lot and ... you know, I think I learned to think in another way and see things differently. It was when T drew this sketch on the whiteboard. That you need to examine the people with all the power as well, I mean, that you might even ... kind of ... have to identify with a bad and cruel person. Well, I really thought about that a lot. I spoke about it at dinner with my family, and, you know ...

**Interviewer:** Yes, I recall that you stayed on after class and thanked him [the teacher].

**C:** Now I am embarrassed ... but T was so personal, he told how he had changed his thinking and that seeing from different perspectives, even the horrible and cruel ones, was important. It seemed to mean something to him, and that was kind of cute. Not just cute, but also like a real insight.

**S:** I wasn't as affected as you, but I remember it, of course ... and I think it was important too.

**Interviewer:** In what way?

**S:** Well, that you have to look from different perspectives, and that it is easy to judge from the future when you look back but that things might have been different then ... if you just care enough to try to understand something for real.

**M:** So now you can understand slavery then? Can you?

**S:** No, that is not what I meant. Just that there are many people and many opinions, and many reasons and many world views, and you need to understand them all ... or, I mean, you can try to understand.

**Interviewer:** And this is important because ...?

**S:** I think it is the same as with the pictures, they showed that links and traces from the past are still ... There is a connection, kind of.

**M:** So, in history class, it is important that we get to analyse what happened in lots of different ways ... there are different perspectives, and it is not enough to just learn about one side.

In the excerpt, the students speak of two different lessons. One is the Andrew Jackson lesson, when the teacher discussed taking historical perspectives. The teacher got personal, and shared how he no longer only lets students take the perspectives of the victims, but how he had realized that understanding the historical contexts of people on the other side is just as important. Commenting on their teacher's insight, several students said they too realized that, even though identifying with people you do not like is hard and upsetting, it nonetheless is necessary and takes a conscious effort. The same juncture appeared for J and D (who previously struggled with reconciling differing world views and stayed within their liminal space) when a podcast used in the class introduced a Swedish amateur historian, Anne Agardh, who has confronted the slave trading background of an ancestor in her book, *Brink: den svenske slavkaptenen* ('Abraham Brink: The Swedish slave captain' (Agardh, 2012)). Hearing her grappling with understanding and contextualizing 'the crimes' made both J and D revisit their own troubles with the contradictory behaviour of people in the past. The other lesson to which the extract alludes is the culmination of the sequence during which the students were asked to select and present pictures to the class of a phenomenon from contemporary society that they understood better after learning about the transatlantic slave trade. Many students, not just C and S, said that was the moment when things came together. It would appear that the task of actually making connections between past and present, in which students had to apply historical knowledge and practice using history for orienting purposes, made a real difference.

Student M mentioned her experience of bringing a picture to class: 'This whole thing really made me think. I don't see myself like that, but I was really naive.' M chose an artistic photograph of two children, one black and one white. When presenting the picture in class, she oscillated between stating that diversity is 'innocent, beautiful, and something to be cherished' and suddenly realizing that these precise statements were problematic. Afterwards she reflected on this:

**M:** It wasn't until I sat there in the classroom with my picture that I had picked just to show the beauty in the fact that all humans are different, that I discovered that I couldn't talk like that. It was also because of what E [another student] had just said, that I had to rethink and really analyse how history has formed our perceptions and ideas, and that no matter what, I can't do anything about it. I felt so bad, I thought I would never stop talking and explaining myself.

On her own initiative, she brought an alternative picture to the interview to demonstrate her reinterpretation – a painting by the Swedish seventeenth-century painter, Ehrenstrahl, which also focuses on children with different skin colours. The painting, *Futile Effort*, shows six white children who try to scrub the black colour off the one



black child in the painting. From that, she concluded that skin colours could never be innocent to her again, and that they were charged with values from history.

Entering a new space from where the world looks different can evoke discomfort. Students A and E, having non-European backgrounds, described their investment in the teaching–learning sequence as being affected by their experiences of being outsiders and experiencing racism:

**A:** At one point, I just thought, it serves you [classmates] right, to find out that you have this slave trading, racist background. I know it is long ago, but still I was sort of happy when I realized the others didn't know. I gloated, sort of.

**E:** It makes me like sad ... sorrowful ... when you speak. In one way, I don't want to take part in any more history classes.

Both students had strong emotional reactions, and, at first, it might appear that the way their lifeworlds invaded the learning process blocked the opportunities of perspective recognition. However, in retrospect, Student E said he was glad he stayed, and Student A concluded that she had had a learning experience that mattered:

**A:** After a while, it became important to me, to actually understand what motivated them, the ordinary people that took part. I suddenly ... if I understand them, I can learn something that matters to me.

In this classroom, students were pushed into liminal spaces by bringing their lifeworlds into their interpretations – and, in turn, when their world views and beliefs became the objects of meta-reflection, critical junctures and new understandings were enabled. As discussed in the next case, decentring can be such a meta-reflexive tool.

## **Classroom 2: A blurry, liminal space**

In the Grade 9 classroom, the teaching–learning sequence was constructed around the practices of deconstruction and decentring. The historical content was colonialism and its aftermath (in Nigeria, Greenland and Sápmi), and the teacher set out to provoke the students out of a Eurocentric position from which, she perceived, they were prone to view the world. She introduced some contemporary postcolonial artists – Yinka Shonibare, Pia Arke and Katarina Pirak Sikku – whose productions comment on the discursive powers of history and the relation between identity and history. A first step in decentring is to discover the given historical cultural position, in this case, the imperative of a Western gaze (Davis, 2011). The class took a field trip to a place where this gaze would supposedly be visible – a museum – to investigate and deconstruct ethnographic collections from Nigeria and Greenland. The guiding idea was that these kinds of museums evolved in a time and place in which Western culture was the norm and had placed itself at the centre of the world (Mignolo, 2009).

### **In the absence of a coherent narrative**

The content was philosophically demanding and the learning was troublesome. The liminal space that opened up for the students had indistinct contours and seemed initially almost impossible to traverse, with too many uncertainties. Apart from being cognitively difficult, the historical content was disconnected. The narrative was brought together by a 'pasting' technique. Students received photographic prints of Yinka Shonibare's life-size fibreglass mannequins with Dutch wax-print costumes. In the fabrics, a postcolonial history of movements across continents converges. The patterns

and colours are easily identified by Western observers as authentically West African. However, they are made in a batik technique which originated in Indonesia, but which was commercialized and brought to Europe by Dutch traders, where the technique was used in Northern England for manufacturing fabrics for the West African market. Furthermore, Shonibare dresses his mannequins in Victorian upper-class costumes made from these fabrics in a critical commentary on class and race hierarchies. When faced with interpreting the sculptural pieces by Shonibare, students navigated the structures of Victorian England, European colonialism, Dutch trade, Indonesian batik work, and historical as well as contemporary racial and class discourses. They navigated these without much to hold on to. Having studied colonialism the previous year, they struggled to reconcile their basic knowledge of economic exploitation and political violence with the bright colours of the costumes. The wavering interpretations are reflected in this group's discussion:

**H:** I don't understand. Why are there no heads?

**F:** It's just weird art. Maybe violence, to show how imperialists killed and injured the native population.

**H:** When? When Nigeria became independent? The war when everyone, children, starved?

**B:** How do you know it's Nigeria? Did she [the teacher] say?

**H:** He [Shonibare] is from there. So, they beheaded women, not just men?

**F:** Or more like a country being beheaded.

The teacher circled around and stopped by the group to set some facts straight. She directed their attention to the costumes, asked what they made of the fabric, and encouraged the students when they mentioned Africa: 'Yes, when we see them, we certainly connect them with West Africa.' She also pointed out that the cut of the costumes was British. When the teacher left for another group, the discussion among Students H, F and B resumed, and soon they reinterpreted the meaning of the sculpture:

**B:** The colours are happy. The spectator is supposed to get a joyous feeling.

**F:** Yes, 'even if England oppressed us, it was in the past so let us just focus on the beautiful'. That was the then. England let them have their freedom.

**H:** The question is [points at the handout], what is the artist's message? Should I write 'peace and understanding'?

Two things spring to mind. First, the students groped for pieces of historical context (that they did not have) to make sense of the artwork. They actively used what little knowledge they had of Nigerian history to patch the story together. Second, without a coherent narrative, they resorted to filling in the background using their habitual sense-making structures. While, to some extent, showing awareness of the artist's painful historical experiences, the students ended up imposing an idea of harmony, forgiveness and, I would say, the moral lessons they believed was school history.

### The museum field trip

Up to that point, confusion on many key issues and the fallback position of moral meaning making prevented the students from progressing beyond their meaning frames. During the field trip to the museum, many students were indeed stuck, and they resorted to a strategy of 'mimicking'. In the threshold concepts framework, mimicry is described as an 'in-the-place of' learning phenomenon (Meyer and Land, 2003). Not understanding what knowledge and skills to develop, students had an incentive to settle for the appearance of understanding. I want to add,

however, that this was not 'faking it', but, instead, students using the alternatives available to them.

In the African galleries, the students focused on artefacts from Nigeria. On exiting, they said: 'it showed how important religion was to them', 'mostly spears and religious symbols', and 'many artefacts are so beautiful, like works of art'. They also commented on what they had learned. Student D referred to a previous classroom activity:

**D:** This exhibition is like the iceberg. We see the tip when we describe another country. We need facts to see below the surface, because this is the truth about people. Now I have a truer image of Africa, what they are really like. Nigerians.

Other students concurred: 'It challenged one's prejudice. The exhibition reduces people's prejudice. I think it is important.' Student E added: 'At first, I just thought violence and war, but there was also religion and philosophy. No matter how different people are, deep down we are the same.'

Back in the classroom, most groups struggled to summarize their learning, and several groups tried out the idea from the museum, that the main purpose was to learn more about Nigerians and Inuits through the ethnographic collections of spears, religious figurines, kayaks and snow goggles. Some of them concluded that they were now less prone to stereotyping others, and that the exhibitions 'can make people less racist'.

As a liminal space, the direction appeared blurry. Faced with so many uncertainties, the students' strategy became to actively construct a learning experience that they recognized. A substantial part of the teaching-learning sequence was the expression of pain and sorrow in the artistic works that the students encountered in class. However, in their quest for meaning and making sense of the learning experience, they incorporated conflict and postcolonial wounds into a feel-good understanding. During the visit, the teacher had tried to direct the students by pointing out when these artefacts were brought to Europe, opening a space for an understanding of the ethnographic collecting practice as part of colonialism, but few students made this connection. Discerning 'the Western gaze', a prerequisite for decentring, proved to be immensely difficult when the students visited the collections. The barriers, in the form of the moral learning discourse and a lack of historical context, confined the students to a stuck place.

## Junctures

If students are stuck, what are some possible ways out? One juncture manifested itself at the museum when one group encountered the Greenland galleries, full of traditional clothing, fishing gear and kayaks. The students I spoke to said that this collection was not as exciting as the African one. On the other hand, the collected artefacts made them thoughtful: 'I think it is weird, one room only with boats, another with snow goggles, so many. It's absurd.' The sheer number of goggles, row upon row, was overwhelming, and provoked this group to pose questions about who had put them there and why. When the practice of collecting emerged, something happened, and they began answering the handout questions about the history of the museum that they had not understood up to that point. They did not have access to all the answers, but they posed relevant historical questions and commented on the production of knowledge:

**O:** This selection, how is it possible?

**B:** The knowledge they got must have been skewed. Not just to us a hundred years later, but already to the collectors. They probably thought

they knew everything, the development of science and all. But their 'knowledge' was that Inuits equal snow goggles and furs. They produced it themselves, this false knowledge.

Nevertheless, despite these insights, when this group reconvened in class and were prompted to discuss what they had learned, they produced the same moralizing and universalizing understandings as the others:

**B:** I would say, the most important thing is to show respect for other cultures.

**O:** We need facts and information to understand each other better, and the museum shows what Inuits and Africans are really like. So that we don't judge from the exterior of another person.

Still, this juncture pointed to the integrative qualities of the right, timely historical content and reference points. When the students discovered the historical practice of collecting, they could reconnect to their knowledge of the colonial narrative, which gave meaning to their learning. The same thing happened in the written examination, when Sami artist Katarina Pirak Sikku was presented, together with a background narrative of Swedish colonialism in Sápmi. Several students connected this to the artists they had previously studied, and to the museum, thereby accessing a contextual historical narrative for making reinterpretations. The artist's explorative question, 'Can grief be inherited?', which the students linked to the historically troubled relationship between the Swedish nation state and the Sami, prompted new thoughts on the lingering impact of colonialism. The students re-evaluated the manifestations of postcolonial wounds, previously neutralized under a coating of feel-good harmony.

Other junctures occurred in the post-museum class discussions. While still groping for reference points in historical narratives, the students sometimes found them in their own lives. When asked to relate the artists to the collections, two students (in different groups) made similar connections. They used their own experiences of being defined by someone else (by Swedish majority culture, both students having non-Swedish backgrounds) as jumping-off points for decentring:

**P:** I would have been angry if I were an Inuit and visited there. It is just like stealing. She should have the right to decide where to put the *kamiks* [soft boots traditionally made of sealskin – in the artistic/documentary photograph, Pia Arke is wearing the *kamik* on her head]. What if someone that doesn't know anything would choose how to represent Thai people, just choosing you know, easy things, superficial things.

Student P's experiences were reflected in a move towards understanding the artist and, next, in a realization that the museum spoke for and defined the exhibited cultures in a way that those cultures would not have wished (uncivilized, unmodern, objectified). In another group, Student R brought up similar experiences:

**R:** It is the same for me, for the whole of my people [R had a non-majority background and, in the context of the group, it was clear that it was this experience to which he was referring]. If I met Pia [Arke] at the Greenland exhibition I would be ashamed ... for being ignorant, not seeing how the things are false.

**E:** When I look at it [a self-portrait of the artist] now, her gaze is accusing.

**G:** Or, maybe just sad, I think she is tired and sad, because the past, her past, it will always be part of her.

In both groups, the 'sharings' of Students P and R, without in any way equating contemporary and historical experiences, became a kind of experiential knowledge that other students could use as reference points to hold on to when decentring from their own vantage points and relating historically (as well as socially and psychologically) to other cultural perspectives. In the end, the artistic works had gained renewed power to trigger decentring.

## Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore IHL, specifically when and how opportunities for decentring and perspective recognition occurred in the teaching–learning sequences. Theorizing from two case studies, and applying the threshold concepts framework for description and analysis, I have generated specific learning opportunities for IHL. The concluding discussion presents practice-based interpretations of IHL qualities within a discourse of liminal spaces as opportunities for learning.

### The place of troublesomeness

The study suggested that learning can be portrayed as an arduous journey, where things are fluid and uncertain, but, at the same time, glimpses of new insights are within reach. It demonstrated that entering a liminal space, and ultimately passing through it, involves upsetting meaning frames and leaving structures of assumptions and previous experiences. In both classrooms, such meaning frames were easily observed, for example, as a dominant moral learning discourse. As orienting frames, they ordered new experiences into given patterns, and they therefore needed to be challenged for students to learn.

The results affirmed that including an adequate amount of troublesomeness, in the sense of thought-provoking learning challenges, is a balancing act (see Walker, 2013). Sometimes, too much uncertainty in liminal space prevented students from progressing beyond their meaning frames (Classroom 2). At other times, there was not enough troublesomeness to push students into a liminal space, such as when students found it 'too easy' to identify with victims (Classroom 1).

Still, this study suggests that specific 'bits of troublesomeness', be they disciplinary, lifeworld, skill or content perspectives, can be productive and can raise authentic questions and a need to learn, thereby functioning as entry points into liminal space. It is these bits of troublesomeness that open the liminal space and serve as entry points for students. The mechanism of distancing, introduced by the teacher, pushed students into troublesome learning (Classroom 1), as perspective recognition became challenging when confronted with the otherness of historical people. Students could not make sense of contradictory past behaviour within their contemporary meaning frames, and they struggled to resolve this conflict. The snow goggle collection (Classroom 2) was a similar distancing mechanism that cried out for understanding. Another bit of troublesomeness was cognitive dissonance, the feeling of discomfort that some experience when non-sensitive school knowledge is challenged by contemporary experiences (Cousin, 2006), for example, by seeing oneself as part of a racist societal discourse (Student M in Classroom 1), or being the target oneself (Student P in Classroom 2). An urge to overcome such dissonance propels students into, across and out of liminal space. Thus, troublesomeness is an integral, potentially productive component when students navigate liminal space as a place for intercultural learning.

## Movements in liminal space

In the teaching–learning sequences, liminal spaces were transformative to varying degrees. Sometimes, the barriers were substantial, as in the clash between presentist and disciplinary ways of understanding the actions of historical people (Classroom 1) and the disconnectedness of postcolonial history (Classroom 2). However, there were also potential breakthroughs – junctures where students were on the verge of constructing a new subject landscape. I will point to four of them, and to the way they are connected to IHL as expressed in the conceptual framework (Table 1) (Nordgren and Johansson, 2015).

One juncture occurred when historical content knowledge proved to be exactly what the students needed, as when the Sápmi–Sweden history created a reference point to interpret and decentre from (Classroom 2). A second juncture occurred when the students got the opportunity to practise using history (Classroom 1), which provided a structure for making explicit connections between past and present. Sometimes, these connections were more associative, but at other times, new knowledge and interpretations of the past helped to contextualize the present. At the third juncture, students used lifeworld experiences – their own or those of others – as real resources for interpreting. When charged with adopting decentring stances towards their own historical and cultural positions, most students fell short (Classroom 2), until the experiences of Students P and R became transformative for the entire group of students in each case for finding a decentred outlook. The fourth juncture emerged from a metacognitive approach. When the students started to reflect about perspective recognition and their historical interpretations, they experienced the conscious effort needed to realize their own responsibility for their learning and understanding of others.

To summarize, the main junctures for decentring and perspective recognition in the teaching–learning sequences were:

- (1) applying appropriate and well-timed historical content knowledge, where cultural encounters challenged the traditional historical narrative
- (2) practising using history, which provided an opportunity to sort historical experiences of diversity, and to connect them to the issues of the present
- (3) drawing from lifeworld experiences, which provided a place to decentre from
- (4) engaging in metacognition, which alerted students to their own historical and cultural attitudes.

## Intercultural historical learning as an integrated web of thresholds

If we understand better how students cope with liminal spaces, we can avoid second-guessing what are the crucial components in learning specific content, and we can have a better foundation for curriculum redesigns and teacher interventions. Junctures and breakthroughs do not just happen. They require conscious, mindful and subject-specific teaching.

In this study, the underlying structuring threshold concepts of decentring and perspective recognition, apart from being interconnected theoretically, were strengthened by each other in practice. Students found it hard to decentre without historical contextualization and meeting historical others at a distance (Classroom 2). On the other hand, decentring – the movement away from oneself – was a necessary action for being able to recognize the perspectives of others (as happened in Classroom 1). This indicates that decentring and perspective recognition are each

other's preconditions. The combined ultimate purpose is the historical and cultural contextualization of one's lifeworld, the past, and the present. Instead of interpreting the past in terms of good and evil, a place to which reprehensible actions are relegated, students who enter a new space of understanding might realize that they are as trapped in their historical contexts as the people of the past were in theirs, and that they potentially have the same power to change.

Finally, I want to reconnect to the balance between disciplinary and lifeworld perspectives, as discussed by Rösen (2017). This study supports the interpretation that both disciplinary and moral responses are valuable resources for students. Disciplinary perspectives need to tap into lifeworld narratives for making arbitrations between differing interpretations, but at the same time, when students bring individual, collective and cultural experiences into liminal space, they advance further. Sometimes, they run into dead ends, but ultimately, the answer is not to rid students of presentist or moral ideas, but to help them remain inside the liminal space of intercultural learning and actually grapple with their lifeworlds. From these struggles, shifts in understanding occur. This strengthens the claim that discovering, exploring and decentring one's lifeworld is an integral part of intercultural historical learning and advancing one's historical consciousness (Nordgren and Johansson, 2015). Allowing historical consciousness to set the boundaries for history studies suspends the tension between disciplinary and lifeworld perspectives and places intercultural learning at the centre.

## Notes on the contributor

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