

## DISCUSSION 2.0

**Alan Bliss**

Over the course of the last three years, I have *found* Web 2.0.

That is, I have begun to use wikis as part of my Year 8 History course. These wikis do not just take the form of simply carrying data, documents etc. to store for student use. That is part of their function, but it is not the primary use. Their main use is to encourage greater student involvement in responding to key questions. Focus questions are put to students and they are invited to post a comment on the wiki. Students are also encouraged to respond to other students' comments, offering additional reasons to either support a position or to refute a suggestion.

*Why?*

There are a number of reasons for developing wikis as a means of encouraging student thinking.

- Every class has students who are reluctant to take part in discussion. I was hoping that the wiki would enable *silent* students to find their voice and so deepen their understanding and engagement with topics.
- David Perkins has written of the importance of giving time to thinking. Within the demands of the classroom and the fifty minute lesson (and even in relatively self-disciplined classes), contributions often seem to be rushed and, if not exactly devoid of deep thinking, often lack due consideration. Through this non-classroom involvement, at least there is the possibility of more time being given to thinking.
- Even within a classroom designed to encourage direct interactions between students, natural discussion remains difficult. The wiki allowed students to take issue with other students' responses at their leisure, and I was hoping that this would broaden student perspective, allow for more logical thinking and lead to a deeper understanding.
- With responses written and so made public, i.e. visible, I was able to see where misunderstandings were arising (and occasionally gaining too much traction). I could intervene to avoid unnecessary time being wasted on fruitless (or just plain wrong) directions.
- I was also hoping that students who were struggling with the concepts might begin to develop understanding through being able to regularly read the on-line discussions. Whilst not every posting would enable that (and in some cases may have led to misunderstandings), taking

the time to read the postings might provide some insight. My occasional postings filled the interventionist role– trying to head students off if they chose unproductive pathways and so trying to avoid further confusing students.

So, whilst there were a number of reasons why I had initiated the use of a wiki, one reason became more important as students began posting comments...

### **Does the wiki facilitate discussion and so enhance understanding?**

#### *Context*

In Year 8 we undertake an inter-disciplinary unit focussing on the question *Can Santorini be Atlantis?* One of the key issues in previous years has been students' apparent inability (or unwillingness) to assimilate the information from all three disciplines to reach a successful conclusion. The principal focus for this wiki was to encourage students to overcome this problem. Students were able to make contributions to the wiki for most of the term-length unit and so, I hoped, express their ideas as they developed.

#### *Student involvement in the wiki*

Having been given access to the wiki, students were given a brief tutorial on how to post. This was necessary because it is not just about making a one-off comment. There is a facility to indicate that you wish to reply to another posting. This enables authentic lines of discussion between students, rather than postings which may or may not connect to what has been posted previously.

Stimulus material was provided to bring students back constantly to the focus question - that is, what are the connections between the disciplines involved, and how would they help to answer the question at the centre of the unit?

Earlier opportunities to be involved in wiki discussions had proven only partially successful. Some students had engaged quickly and repeatedly, others had not bothered at all. Yet I was convinced that this type of discussion and opportunity to air opinions and perspectives (as well as to be challenged) was important enough that I was no longer prepared to make it optional. The idea of students being made accountable was foremost in my thinking. Therefore, I made wiki postings the basis for the Term Three Interim Report Homework assessment (a High, Medium or Low evaluation), purely on the basis of frequency of one's involvement, not on the quality of their thinking. After all, this was an opportunity to test thinking and ideas in a non-

assessable space. That did not mean that all students did decide to be involved. Several students across the three classes did not take up the opportunity, apparently prepared to accept a Low rating.

### *Gathering Data*

The wiki was available to students from the beginning of the Atlantis unit, from the first introductory lesson until the completion of the unit - all of Term Three. Each class had its own wiki page for comment, although they were able to (and some did) post on class pages not their own.

### *Method*

In order to facilitate the process of determining how the wiki was facilitating discussion, I settled on the following:

- Track the postings which involved discussion of one class across the term-length unit
- Analyse some of the discussion postings to see what they showed.

### *Data*

I have selected two discussions. To clarify – these are occasions when students were responding to each other through the “reply” button. Sometimes, the responses occur several days later. So, by *discussion*, I do not necessarily mean interactions which took place within a few minutes of each other. Perhaps, it is better to define it as a sequence of consciously connected thinking.

In the discussions which follow, I have included all postings within the discussion and made a brief comment about most of them (my comment in italics). At the conclusion of each I summarise what the discussion appears to be showing and at the end of both I discuss what the analysis seems to be showing, especially with regard to the focus question of this inquiry.

## **Discussion A**

### **James said**

at 6:23 pm on Jul 18, 2012

This is just a theory that I have about how there were no bodies found but from the paintings on the wall, the locals and their enemy shared boats to escape:

So the enemy arrive on the island by boat (because that was obviously the

only way to get there) and both parties fight. All of a sudden, the poisonous gas is emitted and either all of them or most of them would have died. Then, as a result, they realise if they don't work together, they would all die. So they all get in the boats and try to escape. Then the massive waves would have killed them. So the bodies aren't found because they burned to nothing or because they became fish-food.

That's just what I think. Any comments?

*In this speculation, Jason takes two pieces of evidence he saw in the introductory DVD and is trying to construct a scenario explaining why it is that there are no bodies found on Santorini.*

### **ollie said**

at 7:12 pm on Jul 19, 2012

yea but jason if you look at the results of Mount Vesuvius eruption were all those people were caught in the blast. they were instantly caught in their day to day lives. even though that it is one instance. why wouldn't it of occurred in this instance.

*Here Ollie is making connections from other knowledge to counter Jason's speculation.*

### **Alan John Bliss said**

at 7:47 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Like the way that you have connected other information you are aware of to demonstrate a point.....

*In order to encourage that kind of thinking, I am making Ollie's thinking explicit.*

### **Alan John Bliss said**

at 6:32 pm on Jul 18, 2012

A theory has to be based on some evidence though....where did the stuff about the "enemy" and fighting come from?

*This is a response to Jason's original scenario. I am pushing Jason to focus on whether his speculation is supported by any evidence.*

**James said**

at 6:39 pm on Jul 18, 2012

Well I remember that in the video it said that they found helmets that weren't worn by them so they said it was another party (I didn't catch their name in the video)

*And Jason has become more specific about how his scenario was built.....recalling another aspect of the evidence offered in the DVD.*

**Alan John Bliss said**

at 6:51 pm on Jul 18, 2012

Like the way that you have made connections. It was apparently the Myceneans-style helmets (boar tusk). They lived in southern Greece. But I don't think that there is any suggestion that the paintings show evidence of any sort of fighting between the people on Santorini and the4 Myceneans. In any case, how does this tie in with Atlantis?

*Again, I am encouraging a specific type of thinking (making connections) and naming that thinking behaviour as well. I have also considered that if not checked at this point, Jason's "fighting" idea might be built on by others.*

**Nicholas said**

at 4:46 pm on Jul 19, 2012

But is it possible for them to make a painting about their fights when they are all dead? :)

*A day later than the conversations currently occurring. And a voice of logic steps in to try to also kill off that line of speculation.*

**James said**

at 8:42 pm on Jul 18, 2012

The fighting part was just a suggestion Dean, John and I came up with. I forgot to add that I didn't think that Santorini could have been Atlantis.If

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Atlantis was a 'super-civilization' you wouldn't expect the paintings of a lady picking crops because if it were more advanced, they would have some tool or other equipment to help. It ties in because from the second hand evidence found, it doesn't describe the city that Plato has described in his books.

*Early thinking on James' part about the nature of Atlantis as a civilisation and perhaps why the paintings don't indicate an advanced civilisation. More interestingly, James has transferred the thinking from a previous history unit in allocating the paintings as second hand evidence.*

### **Alan John Bliss said**

at 8:45 pm on Jul 18, 2012

Again, is it second hand evidence? What do you mean by "it" doesn't describe... What is "it?"

*My concern here is about the allocation of evidence as second hand (it is actually first hand). At the same time, it is exciting that James has made the transfer from previous learning.*

### **James said**

at 8:30 pm on Jul 19, 2012

I think it is because I know that first hand would mean being there, knowing someone who was there or something similar so it can't be that.

Circumstantial would mean that it isn't strong evidence and second hand means that it was either discovered a while after it was lost or something similar. Of all those three, to me second hand seems to fit better. The 'it' I'm referring to is the paintings on the wall and that they don't fit in with what Plato said. Although, I'm not 100% sure about this as we're still very early on in this Atlantis subject so I probably would have a different view when we're more into this. As I've seen from all the comments posted, it seems better to keep an open mind.

*Put on the spot, James is showing that he doesn't quite have a grip on the categorisation of evidence but is prepared to reason about his decision. He does engage in a disclaimer but it is equally impressive that he has learnt that*

*there are alternative views possible and so it is wise to reserve judgement and maintain an open mind.*

### **Michael said**

at 4:36 pm on Jul 21, 2012

Maybe the paintings weren't meant to fit in with what plato said.

*Interesting use of language here. Michael speculates through the word "maybe". A tentative buy in.*

### **Alan John Bliss said**

at 8:32 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Indeed it is...and that applies to everything, anywhere and anytime..."better to keep an open mind."

*Here I take the opportunity to stress the importance of being open-minded. Not only do I view that as critical dispositional behaviour to be encouraged, it also provides an opportunity here to say to all readers that they need to be prepared to have to re-think their views at various times within the unit to frame their final thinking.*

### **Analysis**

In this discussion, the value of the wiki as a discussion opportunity is clear. Presuming that James would have had this thought in class anyway, I wonder if he would have had the nerve to propose his initial speculation. My suspicion is that he would not have, given that he is only a very occasional contributor in classroom discussions. Students are calling each other to account already, making alternative suggestions (eg Ollie) and so giving an opportunity for James to refine and clarify his suggestion. I seem to grab the opportunity to try to point student thinking toward the development of History disciplinary thinking...in this sequence, clarifying the categories of evidence and stressing the need for open-mindedness.

### **Discussion B**

### **Nicholas said**

at 4:43 pm on Jul 19, 2012

My thoughts are that Santorini is possibly Atlantis, but, based on the "evidence" we have found I think Santorini could just be another Greek civilisation of sorts. The supposed "Atlantis" is just speculated to be Santorini by its shape (as far as I know...) Surely investigators wouldn't just base the fact that Santorini is Atlantis by its shape, as Plato described. It is easily possible for other archipelagos or other collections of islands to be Atlantis, (if Atlantis were to exist in the first place) And as it looks, to me, it is easily possible for the over 2000 years it has been there (was it?) the island could've and probably would've changed shapes over that time, especially with the natural disasters that were described. I think the islands of Santorini could've been all joined together at one time. Like one land mass, island, in the ocean. Over time, after the earthquake and volcanoes etc., this could've destroyed some of the land and water could've seeped into the cracks, creating the islands. If this is true, Santorini is not Atlantis because it would be one land mass at the time and that wouldn't match Plato's description his time.

*Interesting here is the language being used by Nicholas. He is rightly tentative in his offering ("as far as I know," "And as it looks to me," "if this is true") but develops a theory anyway. Most pleasingly, he is bringing in evidence from other disciplines that he has learnt, especially Science.*

### **Alan John Bliss said**

at 7:43 pm on Jul 19, 2012

So if they haven't based their conclusions just on shape, what else might be looking at/for to assist them in drawing their conclusions?

*I am trying to push Nicholas to consider what other sorts of evidence might be useful for historians in this case.*

### **Nicholas said**

at 8:05 pm on Jul 19, 2012

people? more remains of civilisation? records? hmmm



**James said**

at 8:35 pm on Jul 19, 2012

We would need more hard evidence that is able to be linked to other pieces of evidence and to either Plato or facts about Santorini. I'm just wondering if there is an Annal or something similar like in the 'Arthur' project....

*Despite James' earlier categorisation of evidence as second hand, here he reverts to previous thinking and mentions "hard" evidence. Presumably he means something physical beyond just Plato's writing. Pleasingly he has connected again to the previous Arthur unit.*

**Michael said**

at 8:53 pm on Jul 22, 2012

The problem is though that Plato was the earliest person to mention Atlantis and anything after that would be based on his story.

*Michael intervenes here to clarify what they have been told in class.*

**Miguel said**

at 6:07 pm on Jul 19, 2012

I'm starting to think that Santorini isn't Atlantis, even though I thought it might be at first. This would have to be because of mainly what you said, Nick, because it all makes sense and could very well be accurate, like the shape of the island could've changed based on anything, such as natural disasters. Although, I still could be persuaded another way, because we are still at a very early stage in this quest for truth. There could be many pieces of knowledge out there that could change my mind.

*A buy in through acknowledging another student but then building on the thinking.*

**Alan John Bliss said**

at 7:45 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Spot on, Miguel. We are VERY early in the quest, so let's all try and stay open-minded...

*Another opportunity taken.....*

**Harry said**

at 5:45 pm on Jul 19, 2012

If your right, Nick then Santorini is not Atlantis, also wasn't Atlantis meant to have 3 Concentric Circles around it?

*Rather more definite in his language here ("not Atlantis") than most students have been so far.*

**ben said**

at 7:33 pm on Jul 19, 2012,

no im pretty sure that was a theory/myth of what atlantis was supposed to look like, but it is highly unlikely

**Alan John Bliss said**

at 7:45 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Well stated, Ben. That image was a version of what it might look like, not necessarily accurate...

**Nicholas said**

at 8:14 pm on Jul 19, 2012

thats why history is so annoying, we like never actually know for sure. We have to find evidence. Which can sometimes be very hard to find. Half the time we are just guessing that the evidence is actually relevant evidence to our investigation

*A very exciting moment here. This is an opportunity to explore in depth the critical nature of evidence for the historian in his work.*

**Alan John Bliss said**

at 8:30 pm on Jul 19, 2012

And I'm impressed that you realise fully that to get anywhere in History we must deal with the EVIDENCE!!!!!!

**Alan John Bliss said**

at 8:28 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Well, not quite. Don't we have to consider all the evidence and in so doing see where it takes us? Only then can we decide what is relevant and what isn't? Interesting too why you find History annoying...long way from when you arrived at Wad in Year 7 and thought that History was just about dates and events, eh!!!!

*This posting preceded the short one just above (check out the times). Once again, I push hard towards deepening student thinking about History "ways of knowing." This is now becoming a pattern.*

**Nicholas said**

at 9:10 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Lol :) , I didn't mean history was annoying like that but I mean that it can be frustrating for investigators that have their whole life depending on finding evidence etc, and with hard ones like these, they might never find evidence that will actually convince people. That's generally why when you watch documentaries etc. on TV the historians never say they aren't really sure (well to be honest they never really say any sort of definitive answer) but they are always trying to support their new-found evidence, even though there could be so many explanations or something like that, the narrators usually have to contradict their theories. So yeah evidence is a big deal. i get it :) And like what Miguel said, we are still very early in the 'evidence-examining' process. So, as my knowledge of even Atlantis as a story is still lacking knowledge I can't quite get very far, yet.....(can we watch the disney atlantis movie?)

*A remarkable insight from a Year 8 student into connecting the way that documentaries are structured, and the language that is used in them, with drawing conclusions in History. Also a clear understanding that there is much more to be found out before any logical conclusion about the key question can be made.*

**William said**

at 9:29 pm on Jul 19, 2012

Just joining in here a bit, Looking at other people's interpretations doesn't

necessarily help you. As Dr. Bliss said, we are still early in the evidence examination process, and it is good to keep an open mind. So, watching other people rave about what they think Atlantis is or isn't probably won't help us at this point. It may however be useful at a later date when we have examined the evidence and evaluated it fully.

*A student from another class who has also demonstrated a clear understanding of the limitations of speculation when all available evidence is not yet on the table.*

### **Mark said**

at 10:17 pm on Jul 25, 2012

Agreed. It would help if you tried to figure out how your class work and prac work links to the Atlantis legend. For example, how might the Light Intensity v Distance prac (I assume you have done this) link?

*With the wiki meant to be encouraging students to use what they have learnt from each of the three subjects to develop their thinking, a timely reminder from another teacher.*

### **Nicholas said**

at 10:20 pm on Jul 19, 2012

hi will :) I think our page is better though, we have more than 4 people that are contributing :) Anyway, I think we all know that we don't know what Atlantis is. We are just giving random ideas, speculation even, on what we think. I think this relates to what historians are even doing now. Even though they don't have that much evidence they are just putting out ideas. Speculation. As people are choosing Santorini as the place of Atlantis, based on pure speculation, guessing that it is the place that Plato has described.

*Whilst this sounds negative, I suspect that this would encourage Nicholas to be listening for the evidence that is going to enable him to develop theories based on firmer thinking and interpretation.*

### **Analysis**

It seems that students are coming to grips with the difficulties of working with Plato in relatively sophisticated ways; that is, in ways which reflect the problems for historians in interpreting evidence and drawing conclusions. It has again become apparent to me that my comments tend to steer away from issues of content (or I simply choose not to comment). Rather comments seem to focus student thinking about issues which reflect ways of *knowing* in History. There are a number of students who have taken part in this rather long discussion sequence, which is pleasing.

## Overall Analysis

Both in 2011 and this year I have been pleased with the wiki. A significant number of students have posted, and we see responses which ask for clarification, encourage greater depth of detail and at times demand a greater complexity of thinking. A number of students who have frequently made postings in 2012 tend not to contribute in classroom discussions. So it seems that for some students at least, the wiki has facilitated discussion.

My postings have also revealed an aspect of which I had not been consciously aware. I tend not to intervene over matters involving subject content itself. Rather, I take opportunities to post when an issue occurs involving History disciplinary thinking. Now that I have noticed this, it enhances for me the value of this method of enabling discussion. Students have an opportunity and time to reflect on the nature of disciplinary thinking and then to respond. Responses may not always be of a high quality, but for Year 8 students perhaps this is a personalised way into the discipline.

My focus question from the beginning of this exploration of practice is *Does the wiki facilitate discussion and so enhance understanding?* As I have suggested above, I think that it does facilitate discussion for at least some students. But *enhance understanding?* Understanding of what exactly? I have argued just now that there may be some students who understand better History as a discipline.

But that was not the original intention – that was to ask students to bring together their knowledge from all three disciplines involved in this multi-disciplinary unit and to provide them with a way to express their thinking. To give them an opportunity to build towards the final performance of understanding. In this aspect, the wiki has disappointed both in 2011 and

also this year. In content terms, there is little attempt to engage with the subject material from all three disciplines. That may reflect the usual compartmentalised thinking...students directing their wiki postings to the subject of History because it was the History teacher who set it up and responds most often on the wiki. This idea gains support from the postings of a different class. The latter group discusses most often on their wiki the Science part of the unit. The teacher who encouraged involvement by that class is their Science teacher.

### *Next Steps*

Enough students take part in the wiki to suggest that it is well worth continuing. Giving students the opportunity to articulate their thinking when they have the time to think and to engage in refinement of their opinions is, in my view, important. Maybe the *social media* aspect also connects to the world of the 2012 student.

Having said that wiki involvement was significant, a related issue is that of those students who do *not* take up the opportunity to take part in the wiki. As I said earlier, the lack of involvement even leads to a "Low" rating for Homework on the Interim Report. Whilst I could speculate on the reasons for that, a more productive step in future might be to conduct brief interviews with a number of students from each class to try to establish just why they are reluctant to engage.

Finally, and as explained above, the actual focus of the wiki was for students to bring their knowledge from all three subjects to develop their capacity to appropriately respond to the key question. So, the next step needs to try to overcome the reluctance of students to be able to manage just that!

*Alan Bliss has been teaching for 30 years, the last 20 at Melbourne Grammar School in the Years 7 & 8 campus (Wadhurst). Since 2003, Alan has focussed on developing reflective practice. The work of Ron Ritchhart has been a particular focus, exploring how dispositional thinking and thinking routines as described in Intellectual Character What it is, Why it matters and How to get it (Ritchhart R, 2002, Jossey Bass) can deepen student thinking and understanding. More recently, he has also been drawn to the ideas of Dylan William and others in developing Formative Assessment/Assessment for Learning in his classroom practices.*