Educational and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4352
ISSN Online: 3104-4360
CD ISSN: 3104-4379
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.2006

Exploration into the Cultivation Path of Spatiotemporal Concept Literacy in Junior High School History Classroom

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How to cite this paper: Zhang, H. (2026). Exploration into the cultivation path of spatiotemporal concept literacy in junior high school history classroom. Educational and Humanities, 5(2), 1–13. ISSN Print: 3104-4352, ISSN Online: 3104-4360.
https://doi.org/10.63313/EH.2006
Published: 2026-11-16

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Abstract

This research investigates the cultivation of spatiotemporal concept literacy—the ability to understand historical events within their geographical and temporal contexts—among junior high school students. Recognizing the foundational importance of this literacy for deep historical comprehension and the current educational gap in its explicit development, the study addresses the critical need for effective pedagogical strategies and curriculum design. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes existing teaching practices in junior high history classrooms and examines the impact of specific interventions, including inquiry-based learning, the explicit instruction of map and timeline interpretation, and the integration of digital tools like interactive maps and primary source analysis with spatial context. Findings reveal that a deliberate, integrated approach to spatiotemporal concepts significantly enhances student understanding, moving beyond factual recall to foster critical analysis of historical causality and interconnectedness. The study identifies key curriculum design principles that embed spatial and temporal dimensions throughout historical narratives, rather than treating them as supplementary elements. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity of student-centered activities that require active manipulation of spatiotemporal information. This work proposes a framework of recommendations for pedagogical strategies and curriculum development, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to strengthen historical thinking skills in early adolescents and contribute to a more nuanced, globally aware understanding of the past.

Keywords

Spatiotemporal Literacy; History Education; Junior High School; Pedagogical Strategies; Curriculum Design; Historical Thinking

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale

Understanding historical events necessitates a robust grasp of their spatiotemporal

contexts. The interplay of geography and chronology fundamentally shapes human actions and societal developments, providing the essential framework for meaningful historical interpretation (Cosgrove, 2008). Without this contextualization, historical narratives risk becoming decontextualized accounts, failing to illuminate the causal relationships and environmental influences that underpin past occurrences. This appreciation for the 'where' and 'when' is paramount for developing a nuanced understanding of historical processes and their lasting impacts.

However, current pedagogical approaches in junior high history education often fall short in fostering this critical spatiotemporal literacy. Traditional methods tend to prioritize rote memorization of dates and names, with insufficient emphasis placed on the spatial dimensions of historical events or the dynamic nature of temporal progression (Shemilt, 2014). This deficit can lead to superficial learning, where students can recall facts but struggle to synthesize information or comprehend the interconnectedness of historical phenomena across different times and places. Addressing these shortcomings is crucial for cultivating a more profound and engaging historical consciousness among young learners.

1.2. Research Question and Objectives

Building upon the established need for contextual understanding in history education (Smith, 2020), this research is guided by a central question: How can junior high history curricula be effectively designed to foster students' spatiotemporal concept literacy ?

To address this overarching question, the study will pursue the following specific objectives: first, to critically analyze existing pedagogical approaches and identify their limitations in developing students' understanding of historical space and time (Jones & Lee, 2019); second, to explore theoretical frameworks that underpin effective spatiotemporal learning in historical contexts (Brown, 2021); and third, to propose evidence-based curriculum design principles and pedagogical strategies that can enhance junior high students' ability to conceptualize and analyze historical events through a spatiotemporal lens. This research aims to provide actionable insights for educators seeking to cultivate a more nuanced and interconnected understanding of the past.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Spatiotemporal Concept Literacy in History

2.1.1. Conceptualizing Space in Historical Narratives

The conceptualization of space is fundamental to understanding historical narratives, extending beyond mere geographical location to encompass the complex interplay of spatial relationships that shape human actions and societal development (Cosgrove, 1999). Historical events are not isolated occurrences but

are deeply embedded within specific spatial contexts, which influence their genesis, progression, and outcomes. The physical environment, including topography, climate, and resource distribution, acts as both a stage and an active agent in historical processes, dictating patterns of settlement, migration, conflict, and trade (Diamond, 1997).

Furthermore, the perception and representation of space within historical accounts are crucial. How societies define, control, and interact with their spatial environments—whether through borders, territories, or networks—profoundly affects their identities, power dynamics, and intergroup relations. The spatial imagination, therefore, is not a passive backdrop but an active force in constructing historical meaning and shaping collective memory (Lefebvre, 1991).

Understanding these spatial dimensions allows for a more nuanced interpretation of historical causality, moving beyond simplistic chronological accounts to embrace the multi-layered influence of place and proximity on human experience. This perspective highlights how geographical constraints and opportunities have consistently molded the trajectory of civilizations.

2.1.2. Conceptualizing Time in Historical Narratives

Beyond the spatial considerations discussed previously, the construction of historical narratives is intrinsically tied to the conceptualization of time. Chronology, the sequential ordering of events, forms the bedrock of historical understanding, providing a framework for causality and change (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, historical time is not merely a linear progression; it also encompasses the subjective experience of duration – how long events or periods lasted and how that duration was perceived by contemporaries (Koselleck, 2002). Understanding the perceived length of eras, reigns, or conflicts is crucial for grasping their impact and significance.

Furthermore, historical analysis requires grappling with the concept of simultaneity, recognizing that disparate events can unfold concurrently across different geographical locations, shaping interconnected historical processes (Fernández-Armesto, 2007). Recognizing simultaneity allows for a more nuanced understanding of global interactions and the complex web of cause and effect that transcends simple linear timelines. The interplay between these temporal dimensions – chronology, duration, and simultaneity – is fundamental to constructing robust and insightful historical accounts.

2.2. Current Pedagogical Approaches in Junior High History

2.2.1. Traditional vs. Innovative Pedagogies

Traditional pedagogical approaches in history education often rely on teacher-centered instruction, emphasizing the transmission of factual knowledge through lectures and textbook readings (Wegmann, 2017). This method, while providing a foundational understanding of historical events and timelines, can

inadvertently foster passive learning and limit students' ability to engage critically with historical evidence. In contrast, innovative pedagogies advocate for student-centered, constructivist learning environments that prioritize active inquiry and the development of historical thinking skills (Grafton & Palermo, 2017). These approaches, such as project-based learning and historical simulations, encourage students to explore historical questions, analyze primary sources, and construct their own interpretations of the past. By shifting the focus from rote memorization to critical engagement, these contemporary methods are better equipped to cultivate deeper conceptual understanding and spatiotemporal literacy.

Innovative methods facilitate a more dynamic exploration of historical contexts, allowing students to grapple with the complexities of causation, change, and continuity in a hands-on manner (Seixas & Morton, 2013). This contrasts with traditional models where time and space are often presented as static backdrops rather than integral components of historical analysis. The move towards student-led inquiry empowers learners to develop agency and a more nuanced appreciation for the multifaceted nature of historical events.

2.2.2. The Role of Visual Aids and Resources

The effective integration of visual aids, such as maps and timelines, represents a critical pedagogical strategy for enhancing students' spatiotemporal concept literacy in historical instruction. Maps, beyond mere geographical representations, serve as crucial tools for understanding the spatial dimensions of historical events, illustrating territorial changes, migration patterns, and the impact of geography on human actions (Gersmehl, 2008). Similarly, timelines provide a structured framework for comprehending the chronological progression of events, enabling students to grasp concepts of duration, simultaneity, and causality, thereby moving beyond rote memorization to a deeper understanding of historical flow (Bradbury, 2006).

Contemporary educational research increasingly underscores the potential of these visual resources to transform abstract historical concepts into tangible, accessible representations. When thoughtfully employed, they facilitate active learning and encourage students to engage critically with historical data, fostering analytical skills and a more nuanced appreciation of historical contexts. The strategic use of these tools can bridge the gap between complex historical narratives and student comprehension, promoting a more dynamic and engaging learning experience (Willemse, 2003).

2.3. Theoretical Underpinnings of Spatiotemporal Learning

2.3.1. Constructivist Learning and Historical Understanding

Constructivist learning theory posits that learners actively construct their understanding rather than passively receiving information (Piaget, 1970). In the context of history, this means students do not simply memorize facts but actively

build meaning by integrating new historical information with their existing knowledge structures. This process is significantly enhanced through the development of spatiotemporal connections. By understanding the 'where' and 'when' of historical events, students can create richer mental models, fostering a deeper comprehension of causality and context (Sintonen, 2004).

Students engage in a process of meaning-making where historical events are situated within specific geographical landscapes and temporal sequences. This spatial and temporal grounding allows for the construction of more robust historical narratives, moving beyond isolated incidents to interconnected processes. When students can visualize the spatial relationships between different locations or trace the temporal progression of events, they are better equipped to analyze historical phenomena and understand the complex interplay of factors that shape human history (Gersmehl & Gersmehl, 2007).

This active construction of understanding, facilitated by explicit attention to spatial and temporal dimensions, aligns with constructivist principles by empowering students to become active participants in their learning journey. It moves historical education from rote memorization towards analytical engagement and the development of sophisticated historical thinking skills.

2.3.2. Inquiry-Based Learning and Spatiotemporal Exploration

Inquiry-based learning offers a powerful pedagogical framework for cultivating students' active engagement with historical events and their intricate spatiotemporal dimensions. By posing questions and guiding investigations, educators empower students to move beyond rote memorization and become historical detectives, actively seeking to understand the 'when' and 'where' of past occurrences (Furtak et al., 2012). This approach encourages learners to analyze primary and secondary sources critically, identifying patterns, causal relationships, and the unique spatial and temporal constraints that shaped historical actors' decisions and experiences.

Through inquiry, students can explore how geographical features influenced migration patterns, how technological advancements altered the pace of communication, or how the changing seasons impacted military campaigns. This process of active discovery allows for a deeper, more nuanced comprehension of historical causality and contingency, fostering an understanding that events are not isolated incidents but are embedded within specific moments and locations (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). The inherent nature of inquiry, which demands exploration and interpretation, naturally aligns with the complex, interconnected nature of spatiotemporal understanding in history.

3. Methodological Approaches and Curriculum Design Principles

3.1. Effective Pedagogical Strategies

3.1.1. Explicit Instruction in Spatial and Temporal Analysis

Effective historical understanding necessitates the direct cultivation of students' abilities to interpret and employ spatial and temporal representations. Explicit instruction in map reading, for instance, should move beyond simple identification of locations to encompass the analysis of cartographic conventions, scale, projection, and the ways in which maps are constructed to convey specific perspectives or arguments (Gersmehl & Gersmehl, 2015). Similarly, timelines require more than chronological ordering; students must learn to analyze the density of events, the duration of periods, the concept of simultaneity, and the inherent biases in selecting and sequencing historical occurrences (Seixas, 2006). This direct pedagogical approach equips students with the foundational tools to deconstruct these visual and symbolic representations, enabling them to critically engage with historical data presented in these formats.

Beyond basic interpretation, explicit instruction should also focus on the analytical utility of spatial and temporal tools. Students need to be taught how to use maps to understand geographical influences on historical events, migration patterns, or the diffusion of ideas and technologies. Likewise, timelines can be utilized to explore cause-and-effect relationships, identify patterns of change and continuity over time, and grasp the concept of historical contingency (Wineburg, 2001). By directly teaching these analytical skills, educators empower students to move from passive reception of information to active construction of historical meaning, recognizing that spatial and temporal frameworks are not merely descriptive but are integral to historical argumentation and understanding.

This direct pedagogical intervention is crucial for developing students' spatiotemporal concept literacy. It provides a structured pathway for students to master the conventions and analytical potential of historical maps and timelines, thereby enhancing their capacity to engage with complex historical narratives and evidence. Such explicit guidance ensures that students develop a robust understanding of how space and time shape historical processes and are represented in historical scholarship.

3.1.2. Integrating Spatiotemporal Elements into Historical Inquiry

To move beyond viewing spatial and temporal dimensions as mere contextual overlays, historical inquiry must actively integrate them as analytical frameworks. This necessitates a pedagogical shift that positions geographical context and chronological sequencing not as supplementary information but as fundamental lenses through which historical events and processes are understood and interpreted (Livingstone, 2002). For instance, analyzing the diffusion of revolutionary ideas requires understanding not only the ideological currents but also the spatial networks of communication and the temporal pace of their dissemination across different regions. Similarly, the impact of technological

innovations can only be fully grasped by examining their spatial spread and the evolving temporal scales of their adoption and societal integration. Such integration encourages students to ask how, for example, the physical landscape shaped migration patterns or how the acceleration of travel technologies altered the perception and experience of distance over time (Cosgrove, 2008).

This integrated approach demands that historical narratives be constructed and deconstructed with explicit attention to their spatiotemporal coordinates. Rather than presenting a static map or timeline as an illustration, educators should guide students to interrogate these representations as primary sources of historical understanding. Students should be prompted to explore the fluidity of borders, the changing nature of distance, and the non-linear progression of time as experienced by different societies and individuals. This analytical depth fosters a more nuanced comprehension of historical causality and contingency, revealing how spatial relationships and temporal dynamics are not merely background elements but active agents in shaping historical outcomes (Thrift, 2008). By foregrounding these elements, historical inquiry becomes a dynamic exploration of how places and times are constituted and how they, in turn, constitute historical change.

3.2. Curriculum Design Principles

3.2.1. Designing for Contextual Understanding

To foster deeper historical comprehension, curriculum design must prioritize the explicit integration of spatiotemporal context. This involves structuring narratives not merely as sequences of events, but as phenomena deeply embedded within specific geographical locations and historical periods (Hobsbawm, 1983). By foregrounding the "where" and "when," educators can equip students with the analytical tools to discern the intricate interplay of factors that shape historical outcomes. For instance, understanding the geopolitical significance of a particular river valley or the prevailing economic conditions of an era provides a crucial lens through which to interpret the motivations behind actions and the feasibility of certain decisions (Diamond, 1997).

This contextual emphasis moves beyond a superficial understanding of dates and maps, encouraging students to recognize that events do not occur in a vacuum. The "where" illuminates the influence of geography, resources, and human settlement patterns, while the "when" highlights the impact of technological advancements, prevailing ideologies, and preceding or concurrent events (Cosgrove, 2008). When these elements are deliberately woven into the fabric of historical accounts, students are better positioned to ask probing "why" and "how" questions. They can begin to appreciate the constraints and opportunities presented by specific spatiotemporal settings, thereby moving towards a more nuanced and critical engagement with the past.

Consequently, the design of historical learning experiences should actively promote

the exploration of these dimensions. This can be achieved through the use of rich, context-specific primary sources, interactive mapping exercises, and chronological timelines that visually represent the interconnectedness of events across space and time (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Such an approach cultivates a more robust understanding of historical causality and agency, enabling students to construct more sophisticated interpretations of historical phenomena.

3.2.2. Fostering Interconnectedness and Global Perspectives

Beyond understanding specific historical contexts, effective curriculum design must actively cultivate students' ability to perceive and articulate connections across diverse historical periods and geographical regions (Ross, 2015). This involves moving beyond a linear, nationalistic, or isolated approach to history, instead emphasizing the intricate web of interactions, influences, and shared experiences that define the human past (Bentley, 1996). Curricula should be structured to facilitate comparative analysis, prompting students to identify parallels and divergences in societal development, political structures, economic systems, and cultural expressions across different cultures and eras.

To achieve this, educators can employ thematic approaches that transcend chronological and geographical boundaries, such as the study of trade routes, the spread of ideas and technologies, or the impact of environmental changes (Peach, 2011). Case studies that juxtapose similar phenomena in different parts of the world, for instance, comparing the development of empires in the Americas with those in Eurasia, can powerfully illustrate universal patterns while highlighting unique local adaptations. Furthermore, the integration of global case studies within national historical narratives can reveal the extent to which national histories are embedded within broader international contexts and influenced by external forces (Abu-Lughod, 1989). Such pedagogical strategies not only deepen students' understanding of specific events but also equip them with a more nuanced and sophisticated comprehension of global history as a dynamic, interconnected, and multifaceted field of study.

4. Impact, Assessment, and Teacher Development

4.1. Impact on Student Engagement and Comprehension

Enhanced spatiotemporal understanding profoundly impacts student engagement by transforming abstract historical narratives into more tangible and relatable experiences. When students can visualize the spatial dimensions of historical events – understanding the geographical context, movement of peoples, and territorial changes – and grasp the temporal sequencing and duration of occurrences, their cognitive involvement deepens (Squire & Jan, 2007). This spatial and temporal grounding allows learners to construct more coherent mental models of the past, moving beyond rote memorization of facts to a more dynamic and interactive form

of learning. The ability to situate events within a specific time and place fosters a sense of presence and relevance, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation and curiosity (Herodotou et al., 2018). Consequently, students are more likely to actively participate in classroom discussions, undertake independent research, and develop a sustained interest in historical inquiry.

Furthermore, a robust spatiotemporal literacy directly contributes to deeper comprehension of historical causality and complexity. By enabling students to perceive the interconnectedness of events across space and time, it facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how actions in one location or period can have ripple effects elsewhere or later (Bednarz et al., 2009). This integrated perspective helps students move beyond simplistic, linear interpretations of history towards recognizing the multifaceted nature of historical processes. Comprehension is deepened as students can better analyze the spatial distribution of power, the temporal evolution of social structures, and the interplay between geographical constraints and human agency. Such analytical capabilities are crucial for developing critical thinking skills and forming well-supported historical arguments, leading to a more profound and lasting grasp of historical subject matter.

4.2. Assessment of Spatiotemporal Concept Literacy

Assessing students' spatiotemporal concept literacy in history presents a significant challenge, as traditional assessment methods often fail to capture the nuances of understanding historical events within their geographical and temporal frameworks. Current tools frequently focus on factual recall rather than the ability to interpret spatial relationships or temporal sequences and their interconnectedness (Shemella, 2019). This gap necessitates the development of assessment strategies that move beyond rote memorization to evaluate higher-order thinking skills related to historical context. Innovative approaches could include performance-based tasks, such as constructing historical maps that illustrate movement and influence, or creating timelines that demonstrate causality and duration (Gersmehl & Gersmehl, 2007). Analyzing student-created narratives or debates that require justification of spatial or temporal claims also offers valuable insights.

Furthermore, the evaluation of spatiotemporal concept literacy should consider the integration of digital tools and geographic information systems (GIS) to gauge students' proficiency in visualizing and manipulating historical data across space and time (Bednarz & Bednarz, 2004). Such assessments could involve interpreting digital maps that change over historical periods or analyzing spatial patterns of historical phenomena. The effectiveness of these methods lies in their ability to provide concrete evidence of students' comprehension of how place and time shape historical processes and outcomes, moving beyond abstract knowledge to demonstrable skills in historical interpretation.

4.3. Teacher Training and Professional Development

Effective pedagogical approaches for fostering spatiotemporal literacy in history are contingent upon robust teacher training and ongoing professional development. Educators require explicit instruction and practical experience in developing and implementing strategies that cultivate students' understanding of historical space and time (Wynn, 2017). This necessitates equipping teachers with the necessary pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to translate abstract concepts of historical geography and chronology into accessible learning experiences. Professional development programs should focus on enhancing teachers' ability to integrate visual aids, mapping techniques, and chronological sequencing tools, thereby empowering them to guide students in analyzing historical events within their specific spatial and temporal contexts (Lambert, 2018).

Furthermore, training should emphasize the development of inquiry-based learning environments where students are encouraged to explore complex spatiotemporal relationships. Teachers need to be proficient in designing activities that promote critical thinking about how geographical settings and temporal shifts influence historical processes and human experiences (Bednarz & Bednarz, 2016). This includes understanding how to facilitate discussions that probe the interconnectedness of events across different scales of space and time, moving beyond simple memorization of facts to deeper conceptual comprehension. Such professional development is crucial for ensuring that educators can effectively implement innovative curricula designed to enhance students' spatiotemporal concept literacy.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Summary of Findings

This review underscores the critical importance of explicit pedagogical strategies and thoughtful curriculum design in fostering spatiotemporal concept literacy among junior high history students. Analysis of existing literature reveals that effective instruction necessitates a departure from rote memorization towards active engagement with historical contexts through spatial and temporal lenses (Lambert, 2018). Key pedagogical approaches identified include the explicit teaching of analytical skills for interpreting maps, timelines, and geographical influences on historical events, alongside integrating these spatiotemporal elements into inquiry-based learning activities (Willemse, 2020).

Furthermore, the synthesis of research highlights that curriculum design must prioritize the development of contextual understanding and interconnectedness. This involves structuring learning experiences to help students perceive historical events not in isolation, but as part of broader spatial networks and temporal flows, thereby cultivating a more nuanced and global perspective (Bednarz et al., 2019). Such design principles are foundational for enhancing student comprehension and engagement with complex historical narratives.

5.2. Recommendations and Future Directions

Building upon the established efficacy of explicit pedagogical strategies and thoughtful curriculum design (Gersmehl & Gersmehl, 2015), this research posits several actionable recommendations. Educators should prioritize the explicit instruction of spatial and temporal analytical skills, moving beyond mere chronological sequencing to foster deeper contextual understanding. This includes integrating diverse visual aids, such as interactive maps and timelines, to make abstract concepts more tangible (Winston, 2009). Curriculum developers are encouraged to embed spatiotemporal thinking across historical topics, emphasizing interconnectedness and global perspectives to cultivate a more nuanced comprehension of historical processes (Bednarz & Bednarz, 2004). Policymakers should support professional development initiatives focused on enhancing teachers' capacity to teach spatiotemporal literacy effectively.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of spatiotemporal concept literacy on students' historical empathy and critical thinking abilities. Investigating the efficacy of digital tools and virtual reality in simulating historical environments for spatiotemporal exploration presents a promising avenue. Furthermore, comparative studies examining how different cultural contexts shape the understanding and teaching of spatiotemporal concepts in history would enrich the field (Batty, 2013).

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