

Home » Publications » History in British Education » History in British Education (first conference)

History teaching in Higher Education: breaking down the barriers to progression and dialogue

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This presentation represents the views of two overlapping constituencies - the history section of the [Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology](#) and the nine historians who are National Teaching Fellows (four of whom are members of the Subject Centre History Advisory Panel). Its purpose is to assist the history community to think creatively about how we might build upon recent successes in history education, with a view to enhancing student learning and attainment in our discipline and strengthening the presence of the subject in our schools and universities.

While the principal focus here is upon history in higher education, we would like to suggest that the time has come to move beyond piecemeal attention to any one sector. Instead, it is imperative that the whole of the history curriculum from age five to university graduation - and, indeed, beyond, for history attracts a large number of mature students - is considered in a more holistic fashion. At present, insufficient attention is paid to the need for connected thinking about issues of dialogue and progression and, as a result, there are discontinuities in terms of development in knowledge, understanding, methodology and skills as students move through the primary, secondary and tertiary stages of their history education.

1. Context: barriers to progression and dialogue

In both school and university history there has been considerable progress in recent years. For example, the praise by the [Office for Standards in Education \(Ofsted\)](#) for standards in schools, the excellent and imaginative teaching at Key Stage 3, and the rise in numbers taking GCSE history in 2004 in the face of stiff competition from other subjects testify to the considerable achievement of schools sector history. So, too, in higher education degree programmes the greater variety of teaching and assessment methods, increasing clarity of learning outcomes, attention to skills development, and the achievement of historians in receiving recognition at national level through the award of [National Teaching Fellowships](#) (history has probably enjoyed the most success of any single discipline in winning these awards) demonstrate that there is much to be celebrated.

These improvements in the history pedagogy in higher education have taken place in the context of greater dialogue about learning and teaching across the sector over the past 15 years. From the efforts of the [Computers in Teaching Initiative \(CTI\)](#) and the [Teaching and Learning Technology Programme \(TLTP\)](#) to raise the level of innovation and discussion about technology in history teaching in the 1980s and 90s, to the more general work of the [Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning \(FDTL\)](#) History 2000 programme in the later 1990s, and the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) (now Higher Education Academy) [Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology](#) since 2000, forums and networks have been created to provide opportunities for more and more serious dialogue on teaching. For example, the Subject Centre runs an annual national conference on teaching and learning in higher education history, organises nine regional networks discussing teaching matters, and offers seminars and workshops for history staff at all levels of experience in higher education. The history subject associations in higher education have also begun to give teaching more attention in recent years. The History at the Universities Defence Group (HUDG) (now UK History (HE)) was centrally involved in the widespread discussion within the profession about the history curriculum and the benchmarking process, and the [Royal Historical Society](#) has set up a Learning and Teaching Policy Committee. The Institute of Historical Research, too, is becoming more closely involved in generating discussion about curricular matters, and not just at postgraduate level.

However, progress also points up challenges. The first of these is the need to create a more harmonious relationship between teaching and research in our discipline. Clearly, discovery research is vital for the future of the discipline and has opened up new fields of enquiry that have refreshed our curriculum and enlivened student learning. One only has to think about the curricular advances resulting from research in social history in the 1960s and 70s and from cultural history in the 1980s and 90s to see the evidence of this. However, what concerns us is the effect on teaching of the ways in which research is currently managed and funded. We have seen in recent times, with the closure or threatened closure of a number of departments, just how the cut-throat competition for funding, the [Research Assessment Exercise \(RAE\)](#), can unbalance academic goals. It is particularly disturbing to see the effect that such intensive research competition has had on individual history tutors who commonly see themselves as both researchers and teachers, and are committed to both. There is a pressing need to make these key elements in our professional lives work together more harmoniously and productively. As it is, the imbalance in the system of rewards and recognition, among its other consequences, makes serious investigation of teaching and learning issues in our subject a markedly less attractive option.

Put starkly, the consequence is that there is not a scholarship of teaching and learning to match the scholarship of research. Teaching has too often remained in the hidden world of the classroom, a private transaction between students and their tutor, with even close departmental colleagues knowing little of what occurs (despite recent [QAA](#)-inspired developments in, for example, peer observation). There has been far too little attentiveness to how students learn or progress their learning in the subject, or acknowledgement of research findings available within the discipline. Good examples of this are the 'debates' over transferable skills in the early 1990s and over active learning in the mid 1990s, where assertion and prejudice were notably more prominent than rigorous, evidence-based argument. Despite, therefore, undoubted progress in recent years, there is room for more serious discussion and debate about pedagogic issues. Indeed, at a time when history teachers in higher education face multiple challenges, the need to discuss teaching in ways informed by up-to-date pedagogic scholarship has never been greater.

A second challenge is that while there has been a welcome rise in interest among our many subject associations and other bodies in teaching matters, there is a need for greater cross-sector collaboration to promote dialogue on teaching. What public dialogue there has been on the curriculum has tended to focus on core knowledge, notably on the 'Hitlerisation' of A level history. Faced with the pressure to meet increasingly stringent research targets, university lecturers now have little incentive to engage in dialogue with schoolteachers. Indeed, contact has probably diminished in recent years with lecturers no longer becoming as involved in examining for schools or other school-orientated work as they once were. Yet, university history departments have much to learn and to gain from dialogue with schools. They need as well to be much more aware of the demands of Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses and to learn from PGCE history teachers. There is a woeful lack of knowledge among historians in higher education about what happens at PGCE in the training of future teachers, and education departments and history departments at the same university rarely, if ever, talk to one another. The same can be said also of further education history teachers, who are delivering more higher education provision than ever before, and yet with whom we have little dialogue (and indeed those teaching history courses in continuing education). They have a great deal to say to us about teaching diverse classes, classes with little initial grasp of history and about e-learning. It is time for more serious cross-sector dialogue, more joined-up thinking on the history curriculum.

Third, there is a need for greater dialogue with other disciplines about pedagogy. History in higher education has too often remained isolated from pedagogic developments in other subject areas. For example, there is much to learn from Education, with its proven record of research into student learning, and from vocational courses which can tell us much about how to support and track the development of students as practising historians and about how we might develop, support and track students' history skills. We have not been immune from a 'not invented here' syndrome, and this needs to change - we need to become more attentive, and more accepting, of what is happening beyond our own disciplinary shores.

Fourth, there has also been very little debate about the 'skills' that a history education does or could develop and how these should be taught. There are skills gaps in the transition from A level to university and from university into employment, with the former significantly wider than the latter according to recent research. Once again, there is opportunity for greater dialogue between schools and universities to consider skills progression and the preparation of students for life and work alongside the more familiar preoccupation with questions of knowledge content, methodology and assessment. Although the [History Benchmark Statement](#) includes a list of desirable 'generic' skills, not much thought has been given to how these fit into a progressively structured curriculum. Are we clear about which skills history develops best? Are there skills which it could and should develop better but does not? Does the curriculum cultivate desirable skills in a progressive way? Do we know how best to assess them? How well informed are we about the employment prospects of students - to advise them and to convince them to continue with the subject? How, for example, do we build on the new vocational emphasis found in the hybrid GCSE and in the Tomlinson Report? (1) Do we need to be more informed about the virtues of our product and more proactive in selling it to students? And what are students' views on all these issues?

Widening participation makes it more incumbent upon educators to ensure that they cultivate the diverse capabilities of an increasingly diverse student body who are entering ever more diverse careers. The students themselves expect as much and they (or their parents) will have made a serious economic investment in the belief that it will open up career opportunities and meet their aspirations. We should be more concerned than we often appear to be to ensure that progression from education into work is as smooth as possible, and there are a number of things that can be done to assist this that do not conflict with, but rather are integral to, a sound education. A pedagogy that addresses the skills agenda does not have to be utilitarian - indeed, properly developed it is challenging, creating capable, reflective, critical and creative learners. Moreover, it can be realised without any major adjustments to the existing curriculum.

Fifth, more consideration needs to be given to the progression of history students into postgraduate study. At the moment, too little account is taken of the prior experience of students - of the ways in which postgraduate study might build pedagogically upon the undergraduate experience, especially in terms of students' conceptual understanding.

Finally, greater attention needs to be paid to the progression of teaching methods to ensure effective long-term development in learning in the subject. At present the quality of the learning experience of students is immensely variable, not just between, but often also within, particular stages in their education. The imaginative teaching approaches at Key Stage 3 and the more conventional, assessment-driven approaches at GCSE and A level have been praised and condemned in almost equal proportions. Teachers are very much aware of this problem but are constrained by the effects of the current assessment regime. There is need for greater dialogue on the responsibilities that schools have for preparing students for further study. A survey by Barbara Hibbert in *Teaching History* suggests that there is still too much passive, results-fixated teaching at A level that leaves students ill-prepared for university. (2) But universities are equally responsible. There is little common ground in higher education on how to assimilate students into university - every history department offers something different to incoming students. There is a need for greater consistency and agreement on how best to ease the transition. University history departments will gain directly from this by keeping students who might otherwise drop out or transfer to other subjects. Moreover, there is all too often an unthinking reliance on traditional assumptions about teaching and curriculum development. There is a need for greater reflection and discussion about how best to teach history in ways that motivate and enthuse today's undergraduates and postgraduates. Let us turn now to how these challenges can be addressed.

2. Surmounting the barriers

The most pressing need is for increased dialogue between all the sectors involved in teaching history from the age of five upwards. We have much to learn from one another. Without wanting to be prescriptive or pre-emptive, the following are pointers to ways forward.

First, we would suggest that there is a need for better co-ordination of cross-sector co-operation. The several bodies representing different, though overlapping, parts of the history community - History at the Universities Defence Group, Institute of Historical Research, [Subject Centre](#), [Royal Historical Society](#), [Historical Association](#), [Schools History Project](#) etc. - have an interest in the curriculum and how it is taught. There is a need for them to come together to present a more unified and influential voice. The experience of the [Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education](#) and the Subject Centre suggests that the scholarship of teaching and learning will not be given the serious attention it merits unless and until it receives greater support from, and joint effort on the part of, the history community as a whole. Today represents a promising starting point.

It is our belief that a single body (a Standing Committee on History Teaching and Learning, perhaps) drawn from representatives of the various subject associations could take responsibility for ensuring that there is more effective understanding and dialogue regarding teaching issues. Properly resourced, it could undertake a holistic review of the history curriculum which addresses the current misgivings about content, skills, methodology and assessment, with the ambition of producing a less fragmented, more progressive experience for students. This would entail a thorough investigation of the relationship between the school and university curricula to ensure that there is continuity and progression as students pass through the system and go on to postgraduate study or to find employment. The relationship with the PGCE should form part of this remit to ensure that future history teachers are properly prepared for educating the next generation (to ensure a 'virtuous circle'). A decision to establish such a working group would, in our view, mark a major step forward.

Second, we believe that there is a need for far greater grassroots contact between teachers and lecturers. There is currently, we have suggested, a great deal of ignorance among lecturers about what is being done in schools and, because of the generally healthy state of student recruitment in universities and the countervailing demands of the RAE, there is, apparently, little willingness to engage with this issue. While some thematic networks have operated across the sectors, for example the [Women's History Network](#), we would recommend that university history departments work to improve contact and collaboration with local schools by inviting teachers to regularised meetings to discuss issues of common concern and to share good practice. It is often difficult for schoolteachers to find the time and resources to participate in such events. Evidence suggests, however, that regional meetings can be effective. An example is the annual Continuing Professional Development day in the East Midlands when all the history teachers across half a dozen or so Local Education Authorities get together, and university teachers might be invited to attend these. The regional networks of the [Subject Centre](#) for university teachers are also one possible vehicle for organising local, cross-sector activities that would not be too demanding in terms of time or cost. Some of these have already reached into further education. The various history subject associations, for example, might seriously consider pooling their resources to promote, say, a one-day forum hosted by a university from each of the Subject Centre regional networks. They might also provide funding for regional, cross-sector, collaborative projects to promote more connected thinking about learning and teaching development in the subject.

Third, we would recommend the creation of an online resource for teachers at all levels. A website that publicised good practice and gave help and guidance to new teachers would be invaluable. Graduate teaching assistants in particular deserve better support than they are currently receiving. They undertake a great deal of teaching, not least at first-year level, when there are the problems of transition alluded to earlier. Yet, in all too many cases, they have had little preparation for the task.

Fourth, we would advocate the organisation of an annual cross-sector learning and teaching conference. The [Subject Centre](#) and the [Historical Association](#) have brought lecturers and teachers together in this way on an occasional basis but such contact and collaboration need to be given a more permanent existence. One possibility would be for the Subject Centre to invite teachers every year to one day of its annual conference and for the [Schools History Project](#) and the Historical Association to reciprocate at their annual and regional conferences.

Finally, we believe that there is a pressing need for greater co-operation by all the subject associations and bodies interested in teaching development to create avenues for systematic discussion and dissemination of teaching innovations in higher education and to elevate the status of subject pedagogic research and practice. This might include the lobbying of key history journals to include articles on pedagogy, lobbying the [Arts and Humanities Research Council](#) (AHRC) to include discipline-focused pedagogic research in its remit, to give it credibility and provide the sort of funding levels necessary to make it attractive, and lobbying to give subject pedagogical research genuine (as opposed to nodding) recognition in the [RAE](#). Together, just as we did in relation to benchmarking, we might begin to work on conceptions of scholarship which allow greater harmonisation of teaching and research, and even play a part in persuading university managements (perhaps through the wider role envisaged for the new [Higher Education Academy](#)) that high quality teaching is rewarded equally with research excellence. There is a real need for excellent history teachers to receive the recognition and reward that they deserve, and for teaching to receive esteem commensurate with that currently accorded to research. To be successful any such initiative requires the formal support of our senior subject associations.

This is, of course, an enormous agenda and it may struggle to achieve consensus. It will involve consideration of all aspects of the history curriculum and progression through it from age five to graduation and beyond, rather than dealing with discrete parts as has happened in the past, and it will build upon the ongoing debates on the 14-19 curriculum initiated by the Tomlinson review and the [Historical Association's](#) consultation exercise. It will also entail active co-operation between all subject bodies interested in the development of history teaching in the interests of history as a whole - a recognition that, if history is to prosper, we all, no matter what sector we are from, need to work together. It is a challenging, perhaps daunting, prospect - but it is time that the history community came together to face it.

Notes

1. The resulting White Paper was published after the conference on 23 Feb. 2005, and can be viewed at www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/index.cfm?sid=10&pid=140&ctype=TEXT&ptype=Single [accessed 21 July 2005]. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. B. Hibbert, "It's a lot harder than politics" ... students' experience of history at advanced level', *Teaching History*, 109 (2002), 39-43. [Back to \(2\)](#).

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