

## Residual knowledge

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This conference is focused on the issues of common concern in teaching history in schools and higher education. One fundamental question seems to underpin much of our discussion. That question is: what enduring dispositions are we trying to create in our students?

It seems to me that, as teachers, when we plan lessons and seminars we have in mind the kind of individuals we are trying to nurture and develop. What knowledge do we want to stick? What skills are we teaching? How do we want history to change our students? How, exactly, does history educate them?

I want to consider three 'dispositions' which seem to me to be particularly important in learning history both in schools and in universities. They are the three 'Cs'. They are learners who make a deep connection with the past, learners with highly tuned critical faculties and learners who are individually and collectively creative.

### Helping our learners to connect with the past

I will begin with the idea of connectedness. Last summer term, I visited one of my trainee teachers in school. The trainee teacher, Ruth, was on her final teaching practice at a school in Somerset. Ruth was in her mid 40s, a warm and lively person with an infectious enthusiasm for history and great skill in the classroom. She sailed through the standards for qualified teacher status. However, this was a mixed ability Year 8 group on Friday afternoon, and the lesson started with Jethro Tull's seed drill. The children were in the middle of a sequence of lessons on the agrarian revolution. In the lesson I observed, they discussed some plans of villages before and after the agrarian revolution and thought about the impact of technology on farming practices. For the last twenty minutes of the lesson they worked individually, annotating their village plans and writing paragraphs to explain the changes. Most pupils got on with the task, but lightened their load with conversations about football, soaps and fashion. After the lesson Ruth and I sat down with a cup of tea. Before I could begin to ask her what she thought had gone well she said, 'They were bored weren't they? You were bored, weren't you?'. Rather taken aback, I replied, 'Yes, were you?'. 'Oh yes', said Ruth. And we collapsed into laughter.

Ruth's response was brilliant. She knew right away that her lack of subject knowledge, lay at the heart of the problem. She had never studied the agrarian revolution and got little inspiration from the department's scheme of work. After struggling to plan this lesson late one night, her mind was going around in circles and she had simply resorted to the uninspiring approach in the pupils' textbook. The lesson flopped. Pupils went through the motions of learning, but did not connect with the subject matter. After school that Friday, Ruth and I planned the rest of the lesson sequence. We thought hard about ways to make the agrarian revolution mean something to teenagers and decided to focus on the impact of enclosure on people's lives. We planned an on-going role-play in which pupils would become village big-wigs, enclosure commissioners and landless labourers. This would enable pupils to understand the different perspectives of people in the past, and to engage with deeper issues of technology, profit, land and power. Ruth emailed me a couple of weeks later saying that her Year 8 group were now 'fired-up' by the agrarian revolution.

Now, why am I telling you this story? It seems to me to get to the heart of how we connect learners to the past. Historical knowledge matters. The time when we tried to defend our subject's power only in terms of its skills is long past. As teachers, curriculum constructors, examiners and resource-producers we have an enormous responsibility to select appropriate content and to teach it in meaningful ways. Martin Roberts pointed out at a recent *Ofsted* conference that the history of Arsenal Football Club is not as significant as the history of the Holocaust. Martin is right: content matters. At each stage in a learner's historical education we need to be able to guarantee an entitlement to history that generates a passion for people and that develops an understanding of human issues that resonate today. In the schools I work with in Somerset nearly all history departments teach about the Black Death to Year 7. Some teachers engage pupils with bursting buboes and strange medieval cures. But in other schools this is just the starting point for a deeper exploration of the medieval mind, of the way in which societies respond to disease and of how minorities suffer when a society feels under threat. Most subjects in history provide opportunities to develop deep and meaningful learning in this way. Challenging our students to enter the different mindset of people living in the past, helping them to see how things change because of human action, getting them to care about what happened in the past and helping them to make a connection between the past and their own lives - these should be among our top priorities as history educators. They are, after all, what makes history such a personally empowering subject.

In order to ensure that we foster this connectedness in our learners we need, I think, to embrace more readily diversity in our school and university courses: chronological diversity, geographical diversity, thematic diversity. These, I would argue, should be an entitlement at each stage of history education. It is only through a commitment to diversity that we can make history truly inclusive. It is disgraceful that some students experience an unremitting diet of twentieth-century history from Year 9 onwards, that exciting research in social and cultural history has not yet impacted on A level specifications, that development studies are such a rarity in our university history departments, that many of our black and Asian youngsters find it hard to connect to the history that they learn in school. Only when we ensure that learners at each stage are exposed to different periods of history, to local national and wider world history, and to a balance of social, cultural, economic and political history will we be providing a proper entitlement in our subject.

Our challenge, of course, is to provide diversity *with coherence*. Charles Clarke's concern, when he was secretary of state for education, that pupils in secondary schools do not develop a sufficient *framework knowledge* of the past was a valid one. The issue is complex, not least because 'framework knowledge' is a slippery concept. However, the pages of *Teaching History* are full of practitioner-led, creative approaches to planning (particularly at Key Stage 3) which develop panoramic, as well as in-depth views of the past. In the best school history departments, pupils finish their Key Stage 3 studies with a well-developed sense of period, with an understanding of the key turning points in human history and with a deep knowledge of historical events, situations and periods. In this context, the Conservative Party's commissioning of Andrew Roberts to draw up a list of key facts about British history that all children should know before they leave school is both daft and dangerous. Of course, it is important for learners to develop an outline and in-depth knowledge of British history, but it seems to me that nothing is more guaranteed to *disconnect* our young people from history than a highly prescriptive, uncritical and disparate list of key facts. We are, after all, educating young people not entering them for a pub quiz.

### A critical frame of mind

me turn now to the second of my enduring dispositions: *a critical frame of mind*. The substantive knowledge of people, events and periods of history that we share with our students in schools and universities is a tool for sharpening their critical thinking and for developing their powers of argument. An understanding of the structures and processes of our discipline trains people to ask significant questions, to appraise situations objectively and to argue a case powerfully. Above all, history teaches us to be wary of casting our views in stone. What could be more important for participating in a democratic and pluralist society?

As teachers, we begin to develop our learners' enquiring minds and critical faculties when we fire their curiosity and engage them in the process of historical enquiry. In recent years, a focus on historical enquiry (particularly in the Key Stage 3 history curriculum) has helped to develop rigorous, challenging and enjoyable sequences of lessons for our young learners. Teachers' use of the enquiry question as a planning device for knitting together sequences of lessons focused on an interesting historical issue has helped kids see the point of their learning in history. It has been pivotal in developing a healthy balance of substantive knowledge, conceptual understanding and source analysis in 11-14 history. But we have only just begun! In our primary schools, the lack of continuing professional development in teaching foundation subjects means that planning for historical enquiry is in its infancy. At GCSE and A level, as the [Historical Association's](#) 14-19 report makes clear, the opportunities for students to engage in the process of historical enquiry are severely restricted. Instead their engagement with historical sources is limited to source-based papers typically built around a small number of tiny extracts and a set of predictable, formulaic and relatively meaningless questions. I am on shakier ground when it comes to commenting on undergraduate history, but from the point of view of a teacher trainer, I am dismayed at the number of history graduates who are book-bound, whose understanding of visual sources is severely limited, who have done little work in the historic environment and who have spent no time in an archive. Many of my trainees from more traditional universities have said that history only came alive for them when they studied their special subject. If that is the case, why aren't all undergraduate modules special subjects?

Ensuring that students' work with historical sources is rich, varied, meaningful and properly contextualised should be a priority for history educators. So too should our commitment to developing learners' understanding of different interpretations of history. I saw a wonderful example of this understanding recently in a Key Stage 1 classroom. These six year olds had been leaning about Victorian children's working lives and were reading a story called *Orphan Mary*. Mary became a factory apprentice in a northern mill. She had a Key Stage 1 accident when her finger got trapped in a loom, but the story ended happily when she was adopted into the factory owner's family. Some of these six year olds were outraged by this story. One little girl declared, 'That's not how it really was', and we had a good discussion about the story of *Orphan Mary* as an interpretation of history. An entitlement to learn about how history is constructed lies at the heart of the history national curriculum. Children as young as 11 or 12 examine real scholarly debates and are taught to decode and deconstruct Hollywood movies, museums, anniversary celebrations, websites and even school textbooks. Building on the work of Tony McAleavy in the early 1990s, secondary history teachers have developed students' understanding of interpretations of history in exciting and creative ways. But this work at Key Stage 3 has simply leap-frogged over 14-19, and even undergraduate history. At GCSE and A level, current assessment structures strangle students' understanding of historical interpretations. Only rarely do university courses move beyond historical scholarship and historiography in order to open students' minds to the range of ways in which history is used and abused in contemporary society. If we are really serious about developing a critical frame of mind, we need to think deeply about progression in learners' understanding of historical interpretations, and to define an entitlement in this at each stage of history education.

## Creativity

Finally, and briefly, I want to turn to third of my 'C's: creativity. As part of my work for the [Imperial War Museum's](#) 'Their Past Your Future Project', I had the privilege of visiting the Warsaw Rising Museum in Poland. This recently-opened museum, located in Warsaw's former tram power plant, is one of the most dynamic and well-designed small museums in Europe. It tells the story of the 63 days of the Warsaw Rising during August and September 1944 when the Polish people attempted to regain their country. A striking feature of the museum is a vast wall consisting of 63 blocks of steel and rising through each floor of the building. This is literally the 'heart' of the museum for, incredibly, as you move towards the structure, you realise that the whole wall is beating in time with the human heart. You notice too that the wall is covered in bullet holes, and when you place your ear against these you hear the sounds of the rising from deep within the wall itself: machine-gun fire, family prayers, children singing, shouted Nazi orders. This wall, and indeed the whole museum, reminds us that the process of turning the past into history is a fundamentally creative act.

Creativity in history is expressed in a myriad of ways. Trying to understand how people existed, acted and thought in past cultures is, in itself, a creative process. The ability to see a situation from a perspective that is not 'present-minded' is an essential ingredient of the historian's creativity. So too are the abilities to ask original questions, to make sense of disparate and fragmentary evidence, and to construct convincing and persuasive arguments. For historians, the driving force for creativity is often the lecture, the journal article and the book, but it's encouraging to discover that draft revised criteria for the Research Assessment Exercise will allow historians to submit television programmes as part of their evidence of research. Creative historical communication takes a range of forms. Compared to many other academics, historians write wonderfully well, but how good are historians at communicating to a range of different audiences? How successfully do we combine text and image? How well do we work individually or in teams to write stimulating and accessible websites, to plan community history events, to debate, to create exhibitions, to make films? Whether our learners are six or sixty, they enjoy the satisfaction of creative communication. As history teachers I think we need to embrace a wider range of creative forms and to make these an entitlement for all our learners.

## Connected, critical, creative

As history educators we surely want all our students to care about what happened in the past, to feel delighted or angry at the way in which history is presented, and to find meaningful connections between the past and their own lives. We care passionately about developing our students' critical faculties. We recognise that researching and communicating history is essentially a creative process. These dispositions are well rooted in our subject, but I would argue that in each one there is potential for growth in terms of the ways in which history is planned and taught in our schools and universities.

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