

Home » Publications » History in British Education » History in Schools and Higher Education: Issues of Common Concern (second conference)

Worlds in collision: university tutor and student perspectives on the transition to degree level history

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Entering university constitutes a fundamental watershed in students' lives. Their experience of this transition powerfully influences their perceptions of what is required to be successful, and how they will relate to the discipline, the department and the institution. It affects their motivation and their approach to studying. For a growing number it decides whether they stay or drop out.

What I want to do is very briefly to sum up some recent writing on the transition to university history, focusing upon common university tutor and student perceptions in the hope that this might help us address this important issue for us all.

1. University tutor representations of students in transition

In university teachers' narratives there is a strong current of disquiet. Personal reflections, interview data and responses to questionnaires, for example the annual surveys of university history departments published in *History Today* from 1994, all speak of a mounting anxiety about the skills, knowledge and understanding that students bring to university study.

The dominant threads in this narrative are as follows. Many new undergraduate students:

- tend to be more confident collecting information than constructing their own arguments
- lack depth of reading in the subject, tending to rely on A level textbooks or teachers' notes
- possess a largely superficial, if any, grasp of historiography or the reflexive sense of the discipline
- are not too confident in some key skills for university study such as critical reading, researching in the library and essay writing outside exams
- lack a firm grasp of grammar, spelling etc
- lack numeracy and foreign language skills
- display an increasingly instrumental approach to studying - a narrow focus on exams and grades

Of course there is also recognition that this is not true of all students, and more positive comments are particularly made about students' IT skills (e.g. the ability to use internet resources or PowerPoint), their interest in visual aspects of learning and their familiarity with primary sources compared to earlier generations of students.

Whatever the 'reality' of this portrayal, it reveals the frustrations of university teachers of history in the face of the massification of higher education, and an increasingly large and diverse student population. It also reveals a widespread lack of awareness of the situation A level teachers find themselves in: the pressures to cover ground quickly and with the exam always in mind, to satisfy student demands (and those of the so-called 'best' universities) for high grades, to perform well in league tables. Very rarely also is there mention of the innovative practices shown by some school teachers of history as revealed in the columns of *Teaching History* (a publication rarely read by academic historians).

Perhaps what this narrative speaks of most, though, is the gap between school and university teachers of our subject, and I will come back to this later.

2. Student representations of the experience of transition

We know a good deal about this from recent research across a wide range of institutions - from Tony Webster's questionnaire survey of over 400 AS and A2 students in Lancashire; from David Nicholls's sample of 115 A level students from six schools across the range and almost 200 undergraduates in five higher education institutions; from my own questionnaire-based research at Nottingham with several hundred history students in their first week at university; from Barbara Hibbert's semi-structured interview research with school and university students; from James Clark's interview studies with students at Oxford University. And, of course, there are studies going back to the 1980s and early 1990s examining A level from a student perspective.

Although there are some differences of emphasis in these studies, they offer a fairly consistent picture of how students represent their experience of studying, and I want to share a few findings from this research.

A love of the subject:

Despite university tutors' complaints of lack of intrinsic motivation, a surprisingly number of students describe studying history in highly emotional terms. A 'love' of the subject, 'a passion' for history is often regarded as vital to motivation and effective learning, and is also seen as one of the key characteristics of a 'good' history teacher whether at school or university.

Ratings of skills:

When students enter university history programmes they commonly express most confidence in taking and organising notes from lectures, writing essays from their notes, reading and working independently. They express least confidence in IT skills (especially creating, using databases and spreadsheets) and in numeracy, with oral and presentation skills also receiving fairly low scores and not well-liked. In general, however, when they arrive in higher education many history students consider themselves fairly confident in their ability to perform key history tasks and frequently express a desire to explore new areas and expand the range of their knowledge. This contrasts markedly with university tutors' perceptions of their skills and ambition.

Perspectives on historical thinking:

The sophistication of student conceptions of their subject varies considerably, but the research suggests that many tend towards a view that the purpose of studying history is to get to the 'truth' through collecting and assembling the 'facts'. As one put it: 'using brute facts to gain knowledge of the events of the

past'. Barbara Hibbert notes of the first year undergraduate students she interviewed that they

fitted the pattern of liking less those courses which were explicitly historiographical, often seeing them as having little to do with 'real' history or the reasons why they had chosen to study the subject at university.

Not surprisingly, therefore, beginning students routinely report that in reading they are looking especially for 'facts' to use in their essays, with far fewer saying that they look for interpretations or the position of the author.

The role of teachers:

Teachers seem to hold a pre-eminent position in history students' conceptions of learning. They are regarded as the most important influence on their development and the key resource for ensuring future success. Unsurprisingly, therefore, when expectations of a close relationship with tutors are not met (as they often are not at university where tutors often emphasise independence) the sense of disappointment can be powerfully de-motivating. On teachers, the following quotation from a student beginning year one is fairly typical.

I think that a good history teacher has an extensive knowledge, an obvious passion for the subject and the ability to communicate this enthusiasm. They must be able to explain things clearly, and be willing to help or reassure students.

This emphasis on the importance of the teacher is, of course, double-edged. On the one hand it demonstrates the potential influence a tutor can have in motivating their students. On the other it supports the view of teacher as 'expert' - the source (and provider) of information.

Teaching methods and assessment:

The belief in the 'tutor as expert' may account for the popularity of lectures amongst first year history students. In Barbara Hibbert's study many of her undergraduate interviewees had been used to the teacher being their main source of information, and expected the lecture to perform the same role at university. Similarly in Webster's survey of AS and A2 a surprising 48 per cent of the AS students surveyed and 28 percent of the A2 students felt that lectures should provide all information on a topic.

Seminars:

If lectures are expected to provide 'the knowledge', many students do see seminars as important for learning but there remains a strong belief that to be effective history seminars must impart information, and thus be controlled by the tutor. As one first year student at Oxford put it: 'a good seminar is like a lecture ... you can pick up facts, take lots of notes'. There is often only limited conception of the role students will be expected to play in class beyond 'listening' and, even, 'being dictated to'.

Assessment:

While assessment is at the forefront of students' minds both at school and university, at school the essay is often perceived by them as being focused upon gaining success in a final examination. Thus effort is directed to getting the formula right to satisfy the detailed mark schemes of examining boards. In the first year at university the focus tends to be more upon confronting historical controversy and grading schemes are often not so finely differentiated, while feedback is less concerned with how to prepare for the exam than how to improve historical thinking skills. This can be unsettling for new undergraduates.

3. Some conclusions

There is often a disjunction between tutor and student perceptions of the motivation, skills and abilities that students bring to university. Consequently, university tutors can all too easily fall into stereotyped 'student bashing', while students, many of them expressing confidence and looking forward to the experience of university study, can be disillusioned by what they see as the 'sink or swim' mentality that seems to prevail.

When they enter higher education students bring with them some embedded conceptions about their subject and learning in it. For a significant number, the purpose of studying history is to get to the 'truth' through collecting the 'facts', and deploying these in an examination. This creates problems in year one university curricula, which routinely demand more complex engagement with history as a contested discourse.

Whilst learning activities are broadly similar at school and university, tutor and student constructions of what these activities signify can diverge. For example, critical reading often holds different meanings for students and history tutors. Even the meaning and purpose of seminars, essay writing, assessment and feedback are not uncommonly construed differently. For some non-traditional students, indeed, the whole 'academic' language can appear alien.

Whilst history students at both school and university see the teacher as their most important resource, new undergraduates often see the tutor as the 'expert' who can (and perhaps should) give them 'the information'. By contrast university history teachers emphasise the need for student autonomy and independent judgement.

Transition does not begin, or indeed end, at the point when students arrive at university, and we need greater opportunities for school, college and university history teachers to work together - to share knowledge and experiences and the best ways of working to ensure students are prepared before they get to university, and properly supported when they arrive there. Unfortunately, in recent years the gap between school and university teachers appears to have widened, not least due to the pressures of the Research Assessment Exercise in universities and time pressures in schools. Too few academic historians are now involved in A level examining or in writing A level texts that reflect the complexities of recent research. There is an important role here for the national subject associations in both sectors, and for the Institute of Historical Research, in sponsoring collaborative research and writing projects.

In addition, university teachers (less constrained than school teachers by external assessment regimes and league table pressures), need to construct year one curricula in ways that are sensitive to student progression and prior learning. They need to scaffold their methods whilst also challenging students to think in new ways about a subject that becomes ever more demanding conceptually. If more formal skills programmes need to be devised, these need to be embedded firmly in the study of the subject which is students' prime motivation for choosing their course. Early, supportive feedback is also important, especially in the light of the expansion of non-traditional and part-time students who may lack academic confidence. The tutorial support system also needs careful rethinking to encourage greater reflection on learning.

Finally, and more fundamentally, more serious reflection on teaching and learning is required. University history teachers need to equip themselves with more informed and rigorous approaches to history pedagogy. Making available digests of the findings of scholarly work on history pedagogy to university and school history teachers is one possible means of supporting busy teachers in both sectors in this, and this might be a fruitful area for collaboration between the [Historical Association](#) and the [Higher Education Subject Centre](#) and IHR. These resources could be online. And, though often more experienced in pedagogic thinking, school history teachers might reflect on their own role in the transition to university. For example, what is the relationship between

needing to get students into university at all costs and preparing them for historical study when they arrive there? And how familiar are they themselves with recent developments in university teaching and learning in history?

Finding ways to ensure the effective transition to university history is a challenging task, and in an age of massification and top-up fees it is becoming ever more so. It requires attention to pedagogic and policy issues on many levels of the educational system, but, working together, university and school history teachers, reflecting carefully on their own and student perceptions and assumptions and using the available research evidence in this area, can play an important role in finding imaginative ways to address an issue of concern to teachers in both sectors.

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