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History in schools and Higher Education: a Northern Ireland perspective

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I have been asked to offer a Northern Ireland perspective. I am not sure how far there is such a thing in this case. Northern Ireland has its own AS and A level board, the [Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment](#) (CCEA). But large numbers of students in its schools choose instead to sit for other UK boards. So nothing I say here should be taken as pointing at the procedures of any particular examining body. Where Northern Ireland is distinctive is in retaining selection at 11, and it is certainly possible that the academic ethos of its highly selective grammar schools helps to exacerbate some of the problems I shall be discussing.

If I ask my departmental colleagues what worries them most about the history our students have studied before coming to university, the most common answer is: an overdue concentration on what one such colleague used to call 'men with moustaches' - the mid-twentieth-century dictators. However this criticism, taken in isolation, seems to me misplaced. The syllabi set out by the different examining boards provide plenty of options for concentrating on other periods, while still retaining some degree of coherence in the overall programme of study. If in practice there is an undue concentration on Nazi Germany, Bolshevik Russia and the origins of the Second World War, that is a symptom of a wider problem: a system that rewards technique, games playing and the effective deployment of effort over a real engagement with, or understanding of, historical developments and problems.

A concern with examination technique is not of course new, or necessarily undesirable: university academics are as ready as anyone else to complain when students fail to answer the question asked, or to use their time effectively. But, in the case of Years 12 and 13, the impression is that recent developments, in particular modularisation and the introduction of separate AS and A level examinations, have encouraged, or perhaps imposed, a degree of teaching to the test that undermines the whole purpose of the syllabus concerned. For example, one course on offer invites students to attempt a synoptic overview of nationalism and unionism in nineteenth-century Ireland, intending a parallel study of the two ideologies and movements. Schools, notoriously, choose to study one or the other. They drill their students intensively for the one question that will allow them to discuss their chosen ideology in isolation, because this seems to them a safer bet than to pursue a real understanding of the interaction of two movements whose very existence depended on one another. In the same way most will study either the domestic policy of Fascist Italy, or the foreign policy, but not both together.

At a more general level, take the history examiner's favourite strategy of asking candidates to assess the importance of one out of several reasons for a major event. It is a type of question that, in theory, involves the basic skills of distinguishing separate influences at work, assessing their relative weight, and evaluating alternative hypotheses. But these challenges can be largely evaded. Students are drilled in a basic template, listing all the possible causes of, for example, the collapse of Weimar democracy. When, on the day, they are asked what part the Great Depression played in that collapse, their instructions are clear cut: give a side and a half to the Great Depression, and half a side to each of the other possible explanations, because the examiner will want to see those mentioned also. An A-grade answer will still require skill. But the skill is that of expanding and compressing pre-prepared material, rather than of real historical analysis. More insidious still is the use of quotation. In a certain section of one exam, it is known that thirteen marks are set aside for quotation. So students are issued with long lists of pre-selected quotes, with attributions, and told that they must include thirteen of these in any answer they write. By now there is a knock on effect: at university we are starting to get first year essays peppered with quotations, some of them not relevant at all, others stating a fairly obvious point in commonplace language, but all carefully set out with quotation marks and the name of the historian concerned.

How have we come to this position? The first point to emphasise is that there is no point in blaming the examination boards. Anyone who has seen at first hand the procedures involved in AS and A level marking should be aware that those responsible are subject to impossible pressures. They have to deal with big numbers of scripts, using a large body of examiners, whose expertise in the subjects under examination, and whose general approach to issues of teaching and examining, will inevitably vary. Any body in that position will find itself forced to seek ways of standardising the assessment procedure, by means of guidelines and check lists, of the kind that unavoidably encourage a degree of rigidity. Second, there is the new emphasis on accountability. Once again, this is not necessarily a bad thing. No one wants to go back to a society in which professional elites could pursue their own inclinations without challenge. But a climate of instinctive litigiousness, reflecting a general disinclination to accept any unwelcome verdict, imposes further restraints. A marker who knows that any script may have to be handed back to the candidate, and ever squiggle and tick justified, will inevitably play safe, and stick closely to whatever mark schemes and guidelines are available. Some universities, critical of the service they get from A levels, have begun to talk petulantly about setting their own entrance exams. It will be interesting to see how they cope with the demands for transparency, and the appeals and challenges, that will inevitably follow if they do so.

Nor is there any point in blaming the teachers. They, like the rest of us, are forced to operate within a public service dominated by performance indicators, targets, and similar attempts to quantify the not always strictly quantifiable. If they respond with a degree of gamesmanship, they are hardly alone. We have all read of the enormous creativity lavished in recent years on hospitals' and GPs' waiting lists. Equally it seems to have been in the Metropolitan Police that a maxim originated that in a perfect world, over every junior minister's bed would hang the words: what gets counted, get done. As for universities, the late [Noel Annan](#), in his final book, identified the 1990s, the era of Teaching Quality Assessment and the Research Assessment Exercise, as the decade in which academics became, by habit and profession, liars on a heroic scale. None of us, in other words, are in a position to throw stones.

What then can be done? There is clearly no quick fix. We are dealing with problems created partly by the sheer scale of the operation, and partly by a wider political climate obsessed with audit, accountability, and 'evidence based' decisions. Greater reliance on coursework would get us away from the rigidities of an exam-based system. But there is already considerable scepticism about the scope for plagiarism and parental or other intervention in this part of the assessment system. School-based assessment would also be less rigid, but would carry even less conviction with the public. So perhaps the most that can be hoped for is that, as in other aspects of our working lives, we operate the system that has been imposed on us, but try to mitigate its worst effects. Our exam boards are not going to escape from the requirement to justify their decisions in adversarial forums, and it is useless to criticise them for adopting the procedures they require for that purpose. Teachers are not going to escape the pressure of league tables and qualification fixed parents. But it should be possible to identify gamesmanship of the kind I have outlined as a major obstacle to educational achievement, and to make it a priority to reduce the scope for its practice. Whether it is possible to go beyond that, and to have history taught in schools in a way that develops a real interest in the past, in all its inviting diversity, is another matter. For that we might need a wholly different education system. But to liberate teachers from the enslaving option of teaching to the test would at least free them to make the attempt.

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