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. Anybody 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. 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.

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