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Historical Association Curriculum Project - implications for the future

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([Historical Association 14-19 Curriculum Project](#))

The last time I came to London for a conference about history teaching was on 7 July 2005, the day of the London bombings. The tragic events of that day very much influenced all that we were talking about, and gave our discussions a particular relevance. That relevance is always there: even today, it is under the surface every time we talk about assessment, textbooks and curricula. On that day, we talked about how important our subject was to understand whatever was going on out there because, at the time, we did not know exactly what had happened. Now knowing the details of the bombing, and more about who planted the bombs, perhaps our thinking about the relationship between our subject and an event like that needs to go a little deeper. We talked about how history can help us understand such events, but I wonder if, given that the people who planted the bombs had come through our own education system, we ought to be asking to what extent our history teaching had contributed to it - not to an understanding of it, but to actually making it happen.

Is there some way in which what we do has contributed to the anger and the alienation from our own society and values - and even our own schools - that we were seeing that day? This is a question which did not just surface with the London bombings: the Salman Rushdie controversy in the early 1990s raised issues about freedom of speech and about religion and society, and how these are dealt with in a free and open society. These issues are, of course, not just relevant to society or to citizenship education, but very specifically to history. As a subject, history can only flourish in a climate of free speech; indeed, it is almost a measure of freedom of speech. Historians deal with matters of religion and of deeply held political views - these are our meat and drink, our bread and butter. To some extent, when teachers in other subjects are facing controversial, difficult or sensitive issues, history teachers look a little bemused and say: 'We're always dealing with those; they're something we're very familiar with.' We say that our history and history teaching helps to inculcate aspects and attitudes of freedom of speech - but I wonder if, in fact, we need to examine the extent to which we really do that.

I am not saying that people plant bombs because of their history lessons, although there are examples where there is a direct relevance. Nor am I trying to make a blanket point, and still less a glib one. But I wonder if, in fact, the history that we are teaching, as the [Historical Association](#) report on history 14-19 mentions, which concentrates on exams can create a curriculum which is repetitive and formulaic. Have we paid the price of creating not only a generation of children - and teachers - who find history exams boring, but of actually adding to the issue of alienation in much more general and deeper terms?

If you think I am being alarmist or over-dramatic, look at it from the other angle: whenever we are asked what the point is of studying history (as we are continually), we reply: 'you learn about conflicts; you learn about things like the holocaust; and you hope that by learning about them, such things will never happen again.' In other words we see our subject as having a role in creating a more peaceful and humane society. If that is right there is, of course, another side: what happens if in some way - and I am using the word provocatively - we fail? What happens if the history we serve up is not reaching our high ideals, and we are not helping to create a more peaceful world, but are, in fact, contributing to a more dangerous world?

The Historical Association's Curriculum Development Report came out in spring 2005, and received a lot of publicity. At an occasion like this, particularly given that this conference is called 'Issues of Concern', we are in a little bit of a difficult position. We all want to emphasise the positives, and it is absolutely right that we do so. For example, I was delighted by [Jacqueline Anthony's](#) presentation about the work of the [Specialist Schools Trust](#). In our report we underlined that the strong potential for teaching and learning that history has. But we also wanted to point out that there is a lot that is wrong - not so much with teaching, nor, indeed, with the exam results, but specifically with the quality of the exams and examining, and therefore, inevitably, with the quality of what pupils are being asked to prepare in the classroom to lead up to exams.

We found evidence of poor question setting and, in particular, the dull, formulaic, repetitive questions which crop up year after year. We saw evidence of source extracts which are so far removed from historical source materials as really to be of highly questionable worth at all. The most obvious examples were extracts from GCSE textbooks - and often pretty small extracts, perhaps a sentence or two - being presented as historical sources, which they are not. In other words, at GCSE, and particularly at AS level, we are producing pupils who can pass the exams. They can often get a very high level, but they are not necessarily being assessed - and certainly not being systematically assessed - in any realistic or rigorous way as historians.

Reactions to the report have been varied, as we always expected they would be. The report was warmly welcomed by the [Department for Education and Skills](#) (DfES) and by the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#) (QCA) and, indeed, by many teachers. Examiners and Exam Boards have been more defensive and more critical of the report and the way in which we went about it. They have, for example, criticised our selection of examples from exam papers and said that we did not take on board the thinking behind the exam questions, commenting that we made insufficient allowance for the use of stimulus materials in questions where we pointed out the shortcomings of the historical material. So the report has opened a debate about examining techniques, which means that, in a sense, it has already fulfilled part of its brief. Above all, the Exam Boards have pointed out, rightly enough, that they too are under outside pressures, a point which will be later discussed by [Duncan Fraser](#) of Edexcel.

It is difficult, but important, to avoid a simple blame culture. But there is a political issue here: who does control the history curriculum? In fact there is something of a daisy chain of people who control the learning of any individual student. Obviously there is the teacher - but teachers are constrained by what is on the exam specification, by resources and of course, to some extent, by the pupils' preferences where they have got a choice. Publishers follow the market, which effectively means the teachers, but the teachers follow the Boards. The Boards say they follow the teachers and, in any case, they have got QCA breathing down their necks. QCA points out, rightly enough, that its scope for action is limited because it can only approve specifications, it does not actually write them; writing the specifications is the task of the Boards. A very good example here is the pilot hybrid GCSE where, unusually, the initiative came from QCA. But QCA could not write its own course. It had to come up with an idea, and then tout it round the Boards to find one willing to take it on. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to pinpoint those who can effect change; if things are wrong, who can put them right?

I suppose it is down to everyone to play their part. For example, if you think that the curriculum is narrow then there are certain things that can happen at school level. It means looking again at the selection of topics, and there is some evidence of this happening; it means thinking in terms of the pupils not in terms of stock cupboards - in other words, not teaching something just because you have books on it, but deciding whether the selection of courses and topics on offer to pupils is still relevant to them; it means talking with pupils. Our pupil questionnaires showed that the pupils' range of preferred topics was much wider than the range of topics that they had to study, and they were interested and keen to introduce topics from, for example, the ancient world and

the medieval world at GCSE and A level - something that I am pleased to say that the hybrids are beginning to do.

Speaking briefly from my own experience as head of history in a large sixth form college, we introduced as a sort of experiment a link between the familiar dictators period of the twentieth century and the Ancient Romans. The course took off so quickly and so completely, and we had more people doing that course than all the other courses combined. When we talked to the students who took it, what attracted them in equal numbers was the jackboots, of course, but also the Romans.

What can the Boards do? The Boards provide menus of options rather than courses of study, the menu being linked to the idea of choice. In our report we addressed the issue of prescription. Prescription is difficult to talk about because people do not like the sound of it; they get defensive, start using negative words like 'impose' and 'dictate', believing that they are 'standing up for freedom of choice'. This is an erroneous view: prescription is not a tool of tyranny. Prescription is, to put it one way, an article of faith. If you believe that something is really important then prescribing it is not doing something underhand; prescribing emphasises its importance. That is positive and constructive prescription. It may well be that if we want a broader curriculum with more diversity, we are going to have to look differently at the issue of prescription.

QCA is going to consider some of the issues that we raised in the report about assessment criteria: improving the diversity of coverage and the assessment of narrative, looking at the construction of narrative as an important historical skill, finding a better way of building interpretations into historical work, and examining the proper place and role of source work. Above all QCA must ensure consistency all the way through, from 14 to 19.

We need to consider the role that universities and schools, through the subject associations - the [Historical Association](#), the [Royal Historical Society](#), the [Institute of Historical Research](#), the [Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology](#) - can take in creating a body to look at curriculum development as a continuum through schools into university. It should not take a meeting like this to get us talking to each other; the system needs to be integrated, with a proper forum which is fully engaged in dialogue concerning curriculum development. Such a project would need funding, it would need a base, but it could achieve in a much more concrete form the sort of cooperation and dialogue that today's conference is designed to promote.

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