

La mirada del experto



WHY DO WE TEACH HISTORY? 40 YEARS OF IDEAS

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I began teaching history in 1975 in a school for students aged 11 to 18 in the north of England. Later I worked training teachers and I have run many courses for history teachers in all parts of England. I have also written a great many textbooks for use in schools and even taught history to university students. I am now, to my surprise, aged 64 and no longer teaching but communicating with teachers through my website and at conferences and still writing books for use in schools. The invitation to write this article has allowed me to describe and explain how my ideas about why we teach history have changed over those 40 years – I hope these thoughts help you reflect on your own aims in teaching history even if you do not agree with my ideas!

WHY DID I BECOME A HISTORY TEACHER?

When I started training to be a teacher I did not have a clear idea why I wanted to be a history teacher. Looking back this is understandable as none of my teachers at school or university had ever discussed or explained why they thought history was worth studying. It was just assumed that we studied history because we enjoyed it and people who did not enjoy history studied other subjects.

Therefore, I see now that my reasons for becoming a history teacher were to do with my own interests and had nothing

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to do with the students I was going to teach. I chose history teaching because history had felt like my home since I had been seven or eight years of age. Going into history lessons as a student felt comfortable and natural whereas going into Maths or Science lessons had been like walking into danger!

My sense of history as my home has never changed but, of course, as soon as I walked into a classroom as a teacher I had to stop thinking about myself and start thinking about my students. The problem was that some of those students kept asking 'why do we have to do history?' Those were the students who did not enjoy history or did not think it was relevant to their lives – 'history is all over, sir, it's all in the past, nothing to do with what I will do in the future.' I had never asked that question myself because I'd always enjoyed history but those students deserved an answer – so I had to find one!

It took time to begin to find an answer, partly because, like everyone who begins teaching, I had a great many other things to do – learn all the history I had to teach, learn the names of my students, learn how to keep children busy and well-behaved, plus all the hours marking their work and preparing lessons. Fortunately I did learn to do those things effectively and I did decide that teaching had been the right choice – and I found an answer to 'why do we have to study history?' even though, as you will read, that answer had limitations and I now think it was only part of my answer to the question.

HISTORICAL SKILLS AND CONCEPTS CAN BE USEFUL!

My first answer was that history is worth studying and teaching because historical skills and concepts can be useful to students in their everyday lives. I confess I did not develop this answer myself! The major development in history teaching during the 1970s in England was to focus explicitly on skills and concepts alongside learning about the events of history.

With hindsight it's clear that this development had potential strengths but was not as successful as we all hoped at the time. However it remains an important and potentially useful idea so I will take time to explain both the idea and why it has not succeeded as well as we hoped.

So what are those skills and concepts and how can they link to students' lives? Here is a very brief summary:

Evidence – the sources that tell us about the past and most importantly how we evaluate their usefulness for answering our questions. To study and write history we have to think about the reliability of sources, for example, and decide how trustworthy they are. The limitations of the evidence usually mean that we cannot be completely certain about what happened in the past. For students this can be related to today – how reliable are media accounts of events, for example, as they may not be telling us the whole truth. It is important as citizens to realise that what we are often told by the media or politicians about the events happening around us may not be reliable, objective or complete.

Cause and consequence – explaining why things happened in the past and that they rarely happen because of one single reason but because of the complex interplay of a range of reasons. Similarly consequences are complex and frequently cannot be predicted. We are also often uncertain about the exact balance of reasons why events took place. This can help students appreciate the complexity of the world around them instead of expecting to find or accepting simple answers to complicated questions and issues today.

Change and continuity – understanding the patterns of change and continuity over time, that the pace of change differs, that regression in topics such as standards of living is possible, that progress is not inevitable. Understanding such ideas is important in a world where progress seems inevitable and change seems to be happening faster and faster.

Empathy – understanding the ideals, thinking and attitudes of people in the past is vital for understanding their motives and actions. That awareness of complex motives and of similarities and differences between people in the past and ourselves today can then help students understand the motives and actions of other people in their own world. In particular it can help students see that what may not be a rational action to them may be rational and justifiable to someone else, either in the past or today.

Interpretations – understanding that there can be several versions or accounts of what happened in the past and that historians reach differing conclusions and interpret the past in varied ways. This can help students cope with conflicting views amongst the people around them.

The thread running through those last paragraphs is a broad answer to a slightly different question 'What is History?'. Many people think of history

as a list of events and dates, an account of the past which is definite and uncomplicated. However our knowledge of history is far from definite – any good historical account contains of words such as ‘probable’, ‘possible’ and ‘perhaps’. My definition of history is that we are seeking to define what we do and do not know for certain, what we can and cannot find out. As a result our accounts and explanations of past events have to identify how far we can be certain about what happened.

Relating this to students’ needs there should be discussion and explanation of this idea of uncertainty at the heart of teaching history in schools. Students need to gain experience of writing accounts of the past which discuss ‘how far can we be certain about’. Time also needs to be taken to make those explicit links to today and to students’ experiences of the world around them so that the relevance of these historical skills and concepts is clear to students. We cannot expect them to make the links for themselves because they lack the experience (though not the intelligence) to do so.

THE DANGERS OF ASSESSMENT AND OTHER PROBLEMS

One reason why the rationale discussed above was attractive in the 1970s was that it offered new ideas which could answer that question from disgruntled students ‘why do we have to study history, sir?’ It meant linking the past to the present explicitly and, for example, asking students to read sources from the past and think about their usefulness and reliability for answering questions. Most importantly it required students to think for themselves and come up with their own answers, not just write down what they were told by their teachers.

This was an attractive idea because many students of my generation felt that we loved studying history despite how we were taught, not because of how we were taught. Before the 1970s, history teaching had centred around giving students a single account of the past in which there were few uncertainties and no differing versions. When I was at school my teachers stood at the front and dictated notes for us to write down, lesson after lesson, year after year. I never saw or used a historical source as evidence until I went to university so for me and many other young teachers this opening up of the methodology of studying history was exciting and we thought it would excite our students.

In addition I had not studied any twentieth century history at school at all – the most recent event we had looked at was the outbreak of World War One,

fifty years earlier. Therefore the idea of starting with a contemporary issue such as conflict in Palestine and then exploring the history of the region to explain why there was conflict and why it was so hard to bring to an end was a very exciting one, demonstrating clearly how knowledge of history helps us understand the present.

However two problems developed which made our aims very hard to achieve – the impact of assessment and the time available for teaching. We certainly did not anticipate (those unpredictable consequences again!) the impact of assessment on this approach to teaching. Assessing students has become an ever more dominant part of education in England since the 1970s as governments have interfered more and more in education generally and in what happens in classrooms. Schools are ranked in league tables like football teams, depending on their examination performances so teaching has had to be directed at passing exams above all things. In a sense this is right as we want students to be highly qualified but too often everything except preparing for exams has been squeezed out of teaching.

The worst part of this was that government advisers invented a system (used in every school subject) which dividing understandings of key aspects of each subject into 10 levels. Between the ages of 5 and 14 students were expected to progress upwards in their understandings from level 1 to level 10. As a result each aspect of studying history – using sources, explaining causation etc – was split into 10 levels, a highly artificial activity which led to teaching about skills and concepts in isolation, away from any broader understanding of how history is studied.

To use a sporting analogy – imagine playing tennis and being taught all the strokes. You learn how to play a forehand, a backhand, a forehand volley, a smash, a lob and so on – but nobody ever tells you that these can be used in a game when you and your opponent play to see who wins the game, then the set, then the match. Or imagine knowing all the parts of a car but never realising that this box on four wheels could be driven and can take you to other places! That's what happened as a result of assessment dominating teaching – students spent all their time working on the pieces without ever knowing what it is that the pieces contribute to.

The types of assessment being used also made it very difficult to explore how our knowledge of the past helps to explain current events. For this to work most effectively teachers need the freedom to devise their own exams in their

own schools so they could adapt what they were doing to international events at the time. However governments have insisted that students should have only examinations set by external organizations long before the time of the examinations which makes it impossible to link strongly to current events.

The second problem – of not having enough time – was perhaps more predictable. There is so much history to be studied that we can never cover as many topics as we would like to. More importantly in this context, there was no time in lessons to make the explicit links between skills and concepts and their value for understanding the world today. We were so busy teaching students about how to use sources and how to explain the causes of events so that they did well in examinations that we did not have time to link skills in assessing the reliability of evidence to how we assess the reliability of media reports or to use our work on the causes of past events to explain why, for example, the issue of migration is so complicated today. Without the time to make those links students were still asking ‘what’s history got to do with us?’

A BROADER DEFINITION OF THE VALUE OF UNDERSTANDING HOW WE STUDY THE PAST

I still believe that it is important to show students how historical skills and understandings help them in their own lives but in the 1970s and 1980s we plunged into this in far too much detail and lost the overall picture. We did want students to develop an understanding of how historians work but spent so much time on the individual skills that students could not see what these skills added up to.

Therefore I now think that it is vital to define more broadly what ‘doing history’ entails and to make this a constant focus in teaching. Here is my very simple definition – deliberately simple so that it can be understood by the students themselves.

When we begin to study a historical topic we have little or no knowledge. We may have a few pieces of information or a vague understanding of the topic, perhaps from a film or television programme. Our aim as historians or as students is then, by the end of the study (which may be a few lessons, a course lasting a year or even a PhD), to become a great deal more knowledgeable and to have a far deeper understanding of the topic, for example being able to describe and explain what happened and why, what the consequences were, the significance of events etc.

Put even more simply, in studying history we aim to move from knowing a little to knowing a lot more. That may sound far too simple a definition but I now believe it is a vital starting point. One reason it is so important is that it provides the necessary context for seeing why we need to use evidence, understand causation etc. Another is that it provides the essential framework for helping students to develop independence in studying. We cannot expect them to be independent when they are very young, aged 5 or 8, but we do expect them to be independent in their studying by the time they attend universities. Independent learning is a crucial aim in teaching – it not only prepares students for further study but it enhances their confidence. They realise that they can study effectively for themselves and then their confidence spirals upwards and improves their motivation to do well.

However students cannot move from being taught in a very guided way to being independent if they do not have an explicit understanding of how to go about learning effectively. They need to be taught how to chart their path from knowing very little about a topic to knowing a great deal. This means they have to learn how to undertake historical study through the process of historical enquiry. It is by pursuing an enquiry that we move from knowing nothing or next to nothing to having a satisfying knowledge and understanding of a topic.

ENQUIRY – HOW WE STUDY INDEPENDENTLY

So what is the process of enquiry? My pragmatic definition is along the lines of:

question – we begin with a question of questions about a topic, perhaps arising from what we know already or from a small amount of information or evidence provided by the teacher

hypothesis – we use that initial evidence to suggest a possible answer, a hypothesis, to the question. This helps identify any existing preconceptions in our minds and gets us thinking about what kind of answer is needed to the specific question being asked.

use of evidence to test the hypothesis – we look at more evidence to build up a more detailed answer or to challenge that first hypothesis. This evidence may come in two forms – it can be source material from the time being studied or it may be the writings of historians.

reformulation of the hypothesis – after we have spent some time studying the evidence we rethink our hypothesis. In school this may now be our answer if we have no more time for this topic and have to move onto another topic but

historians will continue this process, rethinking their answers to a question, often over an entire career.

(If you wish to explore this with classroom examples see <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/index.htm>)

This short description could be debated and occasionally teachers at courses have asserted that this pattern is 'wrong' in some way or begins with the 'wrong' item. However being too precise in the classroom can often get in the way of a useful idea. I agree that there are variations on this theme but what is really important is that this provides students with a map for carrying out their own independent studies, one they can explicitly describe, apply and continue to apply as their History studies continue– and which helps them tackle their History more effectively and more confidently.

This approach is also important because it provides continuity across History courses, from primary to university level. Students often find History difficult because they constantly feel they're starting again with every new topic. Every new topic appears to be different because it features new names, dates, places etc. This 'camouflage' prevents students realising that they can use the methodology they have learned before to help them with a new topic. What they need to learn is that the names and events may be different but they can be confident about learning effectively because they can use the methodology they have been practising in previous history classes.

Enquiry and independence are also important because they help answer that question my first students kept asking - 'why do we have to study history?' Completing a successful enquiry requires students to think and plan their way through a problem, ask questions, undertake research, make judgments based on evidence and communicate their conclusions effectively. It may involve working individually but may also involve teamwork. This is an approach, a set of skills, which is highly relevant to many areas of work. If we are to help students understand the value of studying History it is essential to make clear the process of enquiry and its transferability to the world outside the classroom.

And finally in this section, I think it is vital that students know how to progress independently from knowing a little to knowing a lot about a topic to improve their self-respect. One major reason for educational failure is lack of confidence. Students are more likely to succeed educationally if they are confident and part of that confidence comes from understanding how to study effectively so they do not panic when they are asked new questions to

begin a new topic. Confident students look back at past work and re-use the methodology of enquiry they have used before successfully.

SUMMING UP SO FAR

As teachers we have to be able to explain to students why studying the past is worthwhile, why it has a value greater than entertainment. At the same time we have to be practical – there is no point in having idealistic aims that cannot be communicated to students or cannot be fitted into the amount of time we have for teaching. This explains why I have, over the years, reviewed my initial thoughts about why we teach history. I now believe that it is important that students develop a sense of how the methodology of studying the past can help them in everyday life but that we should focus on the general methodology of enquiry, of how we plan our route from knowing a little to knowing a lot rather than trying to explore the minutiae of evidence, causation, change etc in too much detail. Developing an understanding of these concepts and how we use them in history is still important but we should not let them take over and obscure that bigger picture of learning to study history independently. ‘Independence’ is the word I’d like to use to finish this section because if our students have truly become independent in their ability to learn effectively then we, as teachers, have done a good job!

However I think there is more to teaching history than methodology. History is, above all, a study of people and, as I have grown older, it’s in the study of people that I find the greatest justification for the study of history.

DEVELOPING RESPECT FOR PEOPLE – THEN AND NOW

Nowadays I think that the most important reason to teach history is to build students’ respect for people in the past and, as a result, for other people in the present. After all, history is the only school subject that studies the experiences of real, individual people. Over the last few years I have written and devised many resources and looking back the major aim has been to build that respect for people in the past by looking at the difficulty and complexity of the situations they faced and then helping students understand how hard people usually tried to tackle that complexity and how much they achieved.

All historians, whether they are researchers in universities or children in schools, need to treat people in the past with respect in order to understand past events. If we think of those people as stupid and less intelligent than ourselves we will over-simplify our explanations of their actions. To take the

example of the civil wars in England in the 1400s we have to explain why war broke out initially and then why there were further outbreaks of war. If we see the people of the time as unsophisticated and even stupid then we will explain the wars in terms of simple personal ambition and brutality and assume that people were always eager to fight. If, however, we respect these people and study their literature, their ideals about government and look closely at the time-scale of their actions we can see that they tried for a long time to avoid war and that conflict only began when people felt there was no other option.

Respecting people of the past is also important because this can help build students' respect for other people today, whether in their own society or in other parts of the world. Forty years ago I spent a year teaching in Aswan in Egypt. I was the only English person in 200 miles so I had to speak my very simple Arabic (and I did so very badly!) but the local people were extremely kind and hospitable, making me very welcome. I could not have been treated better. That experience convinced me that nationality and flags are just badges that obscure our common humanity. People are the same all over the world – just as we today have far more in common with our ancestors in the past than students often think.

HOW DO WE TEACH HISTORY?

That focus on respect links to how we teach our students. I will come to teaching history itself in a moment but as a young teacher I realised that much of my work had nothing to do with History at all. When I was teaching I had to have time for individual students, to listen to their problems and questions, when I didn't really have that time because I had many other things to do. I had to treat each student with respect, kindness and an awareness of their individuality, to treat 11 year-olds with as much respect as an 18 year-old or the head-teacher of the school. In essence I had to be a model for my students, showing them by example how to treat other people properly as human beings – which I now think is the most important part of teaching of all.

As teachers we also have a duty to enthuse and motivate our students about the history we are studying. If we are not interested how can we expect our students to be interested? Therefore we have to be passionate about history and how it is studied. This includes enthusing about why being uncertain about what happened in the past or why it happened is the best part of history! Many students expect history to have 'right answers' and they become frustrated or anxious if they are not certain about what happened – we have to demonstrate through our enthusiasm that the challenge of explaining

what we can or cannot be certain about is an enjoyable challenge and it is 'real' history.

Happily we get better at this as we gain experience and also learn more about the history we are teaching. One of the nicest things ever said about my teaching was the student who said 'When he talks about people in the Wars of the Roses he sounds as if they're his friends and he met them last week, not that he's read about them in books.'

That ability to help students see the people in the past as they once were, as real, living, breathing people may not be the most intellectual aspect of being a history teacher but I do wonder if it's the most precious gift a history teacher can have?

I could write many more pages about teaching methods but I won't – if you want to read about this you will find plenty of examples on my website www.thinkinghistory.co.uk. One regular point made there is the value of asking students to 'think from the inside' of situations, by which I mean taking decisions which faced individuals in the past. By placing yourself in the position of an individual you have to look at the range of options facing him or her and decide which is the best or, often, the least worst option to take. As a result students are more likely to understand and respect the choices made in the past. In addition they are much more likely to remember the history they have studied. Memory appears to be closely linked to emotional involvement in studying – if we have enjoyed and become engrossed in our work it stays in our memories far longer. Nobody learns effectively when they are bored.

One final point that is vital for effective teaching – when we plan our teaching we have to think carefully about how students learn or fail to learn about the topic we're going to teach. If we think about any topic we can work out what students find difficult and it is our job to structure our teaching or create activities to tackle those problems of learning.

Therefore I see teaching as being a problem-solving activity, helping students overcome their learning problems. When we teach history most effectively we identify what we want students to learn, then we identify why they may struggle to learn it and then we plan our lessons to solve those problems.

KNOWLEDGE

Clearly students benefit from developing the ability to use knowledge to support arguments and history provides an excellent education in the huge differences between an argument supported by evidence and an opinion which is unsupported by evidence. Choosing the best evidence to support an argument is another skill fostered effectively in history lessons.

However I have said nothing about what historical knowledge students should study and why knowledge is important. We do want students to become knowledgeable about the past because it provides us, as individuals, with a perspective which helps us place events today in context, to see what is truly similar or different between events today and those in the past. However a discussion of what knowledge students should or can acquire would require another article and perhaps several! I do think that acquiring knowledge should be intertwined with learning how to study history as described above – knowledge and learning how to study history are not separate aims but mutually linked aims. My one specific suggestion here is that it is important to study the achievements of some other cultures as well as our own or how else are we to develop respect for the people of other nations and cultures?

CONCLUSIONS

Why teach history? As I have discovered over the last forty years there is not one single answer to that question and our ideas change as we become more experienced as teachers and mature as people. You must always have a desire to help young people, to help them grow as people and intellectually. You must always want to share your enthusiasm for the study of history and to explain why this can be helpful to everyone in their lives today. Above all, I think history has a unique role to play in helping us understand our fellow human beings, both in the past and today. And it can be, when all goes well, great fun. I have never scored a goal in a Cup Final or won a Grand Slam tournament at Wimbledon but when a lesson goes really well and children are excited and enthusiastic about history I know just what those sporting triumphs must feel like.

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