

Promoting, Developing and Sustaining Good History Learning and Teaching

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History, in addition to developing students' knowledge and research skills, fulfils a social function, providing a framework for teaching young people about their place in the world. To avoid History is to block out the big social, political, and economic questions of the day. Ignorance, apathy and incompetence can remove essential checks on government, but a well-informed public helps to ensure that decisions are made in the interests of all.¹ It is the duty of teachers of History to enlighten, to actively engage a wide range of students with ideas, values and ethics.

There was a time when History was a stand-alone subject in Australian schools. From the 1980s, however, in most states of Australia it was incorporated into a broad field generally referred to as 'Studies of Society and Environment' or 'Humanities', and thus reduced to a strand of Social Science.² If Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's promise that History is to be one of the four core subjects in the Australian National Curriculum by 2011 is implemented,³ however, History may soon be given greater importance in Australian schools than ever before. To ensure that student interest is maintained and outcomes are achieved, this paper shows, effective History teaching requires teachers to possess not only strong content knowledge, but also the pedagogical knowledge needed to provide students with valuable intellectual skills, a sense of a fair and just society and the ability to appreciate and enjoy human achievements of the past along with their legacies for future generations.

Learning and Teaching History

The joy that children can find in History is often a combination of their general need to know with a very specific curiosity about a particular individual or sequence of events, but a large number of school-leavers regard school History as boring and prefer family and community stories, regarding these as more useful.⁴ The

teacher of History faces a paradox: interest in the subject among adults, but frequent disenchantment among school students. This is most often the result of the teacher's own attitude: when History is seen as a matter of content or a body of knowledge to be acquired, the unexciting tasks of memorisation and recall naturally predominate.

Each year at UNE, we begin History methods classes by asking pre-service teachers to recall how they were taught in school and what appeared to be their teachers' assumptions about the nature of History. Almost without exception, the picture emerges of a subject dominated by its content and the business of remembering it. Yet these same pre-service teachers are the first to acknowledge that the study of History is also about developing skills and values. Until such an approach is recognized as the basis of all History teaching,⁵ we will not be able to bridge the gulf between adult enthusiasm and youth indifference.

Through civics and citizenship, a key component of relevant syllabuses,⁶ History provides students with an opportunity to examine the political and legal systems of Australia and other countries and to evaluate their own experiences and values by gaining an insight into the experiences of peoples of another time.⁷ It is a form of collective memory that society needs, and, indeed, 'a society cannot escape its History'.⁸ In short, everyone makes use of historical knowledge; it may not be perfect, but without the efforts of the historian and the History teacher, there can be no social memory.⁹

Finally, those who visit historical buildings and museums, join archaeological societies or attend extra-mural classes do so in the hope of satisfying their curiosity about life in the past. The popularity of historical documentaries, for example, reveals that History attracts a wide audience, especially where human life is concerned. The more realistically the past is presented,

the more responsive people become, so as History teachers we must focus on the people of the past rather than on mere events and their dates. Great movements such as the French Revolution are often thought to consist of particular events belonging to a specific time. The extent to which revolutionary change occurred in France over a number of decades, however, cannot be conveyed by a bland recounting of events or by taking a traditional 'causes-course-results' approach. An investigation into how the Revolution changed life over a broad social spectrum, on the other hand, has the potential to make the study of this 'event' attractive to students.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge in History Teaching

Another question that we ask our pre-service History teachers at the beginning of their methods course is 'what sort of knowledge do you think teachers of History need to have?' Despite having just completed History practice teaching, they often have difficulty articulating the kinds of knowledge necessary for History teaching. Shulman's categorization of the knowledge base of teachers is a useful organizer for pre-service teachers.¹⁰ The categories include: subject matter knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners and learning, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of educational contexts and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values. The categories also provide a valuable checklist for History teachers when reflecting on instruction and evaluating their own professional growth.

Knowledge of both subject matter and associated pedagogical skills is essential for effective teaching. Accordingly, initial teacher education programs at NSW universities are obliged to include knowledge of subject matter, of pedagogy, students and the State curriculum.¹¹ While content knowledge is essential for teaching,¹² the effective teacher should then be able to accommodate it into curriculum knowledge, that is, knowledge of syllabuses and work programs for a particular subject area, of the particular topic, the level at which it is to be taught and the resources and materials to be used.¹³ In order to successfully transform subject matter for student

learning, teachers must also have considerable knowledge of their learners.¹⁴

Pedagogical content knowledge is the knowledge base necessary for teachers to achieve effective teaching of their subject area and thus meet the cognitive and emotional needs of students. It involves the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular content knowledge is organised, represented and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of students and presented for instruction.¹⁵ A study of high school physical education teachers has found that although they shared a common content knowledge, they differed in their perceptions of students' physical ability to deal with 'basic' or 'advanced' concepts and skills in volleyball,¹⁶ suggesting that because students are different in abilities, prior knowledge and learning styles, effective teachers should be able to teach a concept in '150 different ways'.¹⁷ Taylor and Young divide effective History teaching into three parts: knowing History, doing History and scaffolding learning.¹⁸ Effective teachers: assist students to understand the problematic nature of historical analysis and interpretation; understand that History has its own specific pedagogy that provides an authentic medium through which they transform subject matter for instruction and critically analyse curriculum materials; know that the selection and organization of historical content is critical to good teaching; tailor subject matter for instruction through students' eyes and incorporate cognitive and socio-cultural understandings of how young people learn about the past; and possess a wide repertoire of strategies and approaches for representing History.

Effective teachers present History as a constructivist/social activity that involves students in working with the raw materials that historians use and in drawing on the knowledge and understanding that historians bring to the history-making process. They understand that constructing the past is an associative, speculative and imaginative process that requires learners to connect and relate various pieces of evidence to build images of the past. Finally, effective teachers scaffold learning by recognising that building a context for historical inquiry is essential and that the outcomes of previous learning

provide both a context and a scaffold for all subsequent learning. They are aware that learning entails both building bridges between current understandings and new subject matter and challenging old ways of thinking with alternative propositions.

The process of developing pedagogical content knowledge is a challenging one for beginning teachers as they try to accommodate the varying theories of classroom practice.¹⁹ Beginning teachers are inclined to make incorrect judgements about students' misconceptions and have tended to view teaching as telling rather than representing content for student understanding.²⁰ This presents a problem, since we cannot expect beginning teachers to have the wealth of representations that experienced teachers may have accumulated after years of practice.²¹ Teacher education courses, nevertheless, should at least be able to equip pre-service teachers with the skills and understanding necessary to generate representations of subject matter knowledge in ways that utilize what students already know and believe.

School Students and the Learning of History

Because many students gain their knowledge from a variety of alternative sources, including media, museums, family experiences and memories, historical fiction, film and public celebrations, History teachers need to consider students' prior knowledge.

Students' own histories often run counter to official or standard treatments of the past, so when they enter the classroom they bring with them set of understandings and beliefs about the purposes and uses of History.²² The first requirement in teaching History is to span the gap between a student's experience and that of adults,²³ so we should use, wherever possible, a connecting link with the world of the students. The introduction of new terms which have a specifically historical meaning and which might be described as historical jargon can be challenging for the History learner. Historical terms such as 'revolution', 'bourgeoisie', 'feudalism' and 'balance of power' are often unfamiliar to students, so the teacher must take great care to provide a definition when the textbook fails to do so.²⁴ Such occasions should be regarded as opportunities for the teacher to facilitate

students' understanding of a topic. Regular reminders can prevent serious errors later on, especially if a connection is made between students' own interests and those of the History curriculum. Popular youth demand has led to an explosion in the availability of historical fiction in the form of novels, DVDs, movies and play stations. Teachers are effectively utilizing these media to teach History, and, as Reynolds notes, historical fiction helps students, at a safe distance, to explore the knowledge of others and to reflect upon similar situations in their own lives. Storytelling develops the historical imagination and allows students to explore the behaviours and values of others, helping them to develop a sense of themselves and the world around them.²⁵

Kevin Rudd's pronouncement in 2008 that History would make up one of the four core subjects in the National Curriculum by 2011 has no doubt heartened those in the History field.²⁶ By the same token, the drive to have History made a core component of the National Curriculum will mean that History methods courses within university schools of education need to be capable of producing more teachers of History to cater for a broadening clientele in schools. How will teachers of History motivate students, a number of whom will feel press-ganged into learning it, to enjoy History? We cannot expect all students to love learning our subject, but we can at least equip them with inquiry skills, active and informed citizenship values and a knowledge of History.

Endnotes:

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