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Where are we and where are we going? A reflection on current issues in the history curriculum

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At the recent Historical Association (HA) conference there were many excellent talks on the curriculum. In many ways this is an exciting time to be a history teacher given the wealth of discussion and excellent thinking about curriculum that is happening within the history education community (in part prompted by the debates around the 2014 History National Curriculum, especially the proposals that appeared in 2013).[1]

There has been a revival in the notion of teachers as 'curriculum-makers'. For me, this term masks what really happens in the process of creating a curriculum – it implies a sense of 'doing', presenting curriculum-making as an essentially practical task. I believe instead that we should talk about teachers as 'critical curriculum thinkers', as curriculum construction is a deeply intellectual process, which has strong practical outcomes in terms of what teachers do, but more importantly what young people are allowed to learn and why they should learn some things rather than others.

As part of this critical curriculum thinking, I wish to outline where I think we currently are, identify some of the challenges and questions facing history teachers, before moving onto thoughts about the possible direction(s) we could take in the history education community, in particular with a focus on how we ensure history young people see history as meaningful.

Where are we?

There are numerous *Teaching History* articles that show many departments are engaging deeply with curriculum thinking, yet there are many challenges facing teachers. Insights gained through my research identifies four particular challenges about the history curriculum and teachers' decision-making. A fifth point has arisen from personal reflection influenced by a range of articles by history-teacher researchers, discussions I have had, and the practice I have observed in my role as a teacher educator:

- Inertia in curriculum content selection
- Rationale that underpins curriculum construction
- Growing impact of the newly introduced GCSE
- The prevalence of accountability measures in a performative education culture
- The emphasis on second-order concepts

Inertia in curriculum content selection

Surprisingly, little is known about what history is actually taught in schools. The most recent HA survey provides some insight and suggests that many schools are taking steps to teach a curriculum that goes beyond the 'pale, male and stale' caricature that seems to have persisted for many years. The survey shows that several schools are attempting to bring in topics such as migration and the British Empire more to the fore (Figures 2 and 3). It also seems that schools tend to cover the more recent time period – the survey shows that the twentieth century is the most popular for teaching about migration, while the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were most common when teaching about the British Empire. Although these developments are to be welcomed, there are still concerns that there may be inertia is some parts of the curriculum.

In an admittedly small-scale study based in ten departments, the content selection at Key Stage 3 (KS3) appeared to reflect an accepted 'canon' of topics and approaches, particularly covering the period up to the seventeenth century.[2] For example, when teaching the medieval period history

1066 and the Norman Conquest, the feudal system, the Domesday Book, castles, the murder of Becket, Magna Carta, the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt, were common, presenting an episodic journey through this period. When teaching about the sixteenth century, the English Reformation, Bloody Mary and Elizabeth (typically her portraits, religious settlement and the Armada) dominated, while the seventeenth century centred on the English Civil War and Cromwell as 'hero or villain'. Anecdotal experience of history curricula also reinforces the notion of inertia in parts of the curriculum. Linked to this issue are questions about history teachers' rationale for what they choose to teach.

Rationale for curriculum construction

History teachers often have a range of valid and perfectly sound reasons for the importance of the subject – this was evident in the responses to the HA survey garnering views on the 2013 history curriculum proposals, which contained numerous passionate and articulate ideas about the subject (Figure 4). However, there are times when there seems to be a mismatch between the rationale presented for studying the past and the actual selection of topics. Creating a curriculum is always going to be a balancing act because there will never be enough time to cover all that we may consider significant and worthy of study. But we have to question whether we have the right balance; for example, should we devote more time to teaching medieval castles than the Holocaust?

The issue seems to be about teachers' reasons for selecting specific topics or content in meeting their overall rationale – often logistical issues (such as resource availability) trump any educational rationale. This is important as a failure to understand why a topic is being studied is one of the reasons why many young people fail to fully appreciate the value of studying the past.[3]

Impact of GCSE

The concerns mentioned above are part of a wider context. In particular, the introduction of the new History GCSE is distorting what happens at KS3. The 2018 HA survey shows many history departments feel compelled to adopt GCSE style assessment criteria and approaches at KS3 (Figure 5) and select content to make it easier for students to study the GCSE specification (Figure 6). This can narrow a student's experience of the past. Revisiting content and repeatedly 'practising' exam questions is often seen as the route to exam success, rather than building the types of conceptual and disciplinary understanding that underpins strong examination outcomes.

The range of GCSE topics also seem to offer little scope for teaching a more diverse past. departments choose also seems quite restricted. According to one response from the 2021 HA survey:

> *The Edexcel (Pearson) GCSE consistently wipes out any opportunity to explore diverse histories. This is particularly evident in the American West unit where the Civil War is a sidenote and the experience of African Americans is reduced to the Exoduster movement. The Medicine in Britain unit also fails to address women of note in medicine, and any contribution by a person of colour. This is compounded by the sheer amount of content that is taught, meaning there is no time to explore stories not on the specification. We are considering switching to OCR SHP B where there seems to be more scope for exploring diversity, and potentially less content to be explored, freeing up time to delve into more diverse stories.*

There seems little incentive for teachers to go beyond the requirements of the exam specification and exam paper, so current exam specifications can limit teachers' ambitions for the subject.

A performative culture

This focus on exam results is closely tied to the growth of what is termed the 'performativity culture', where teachers are held accountable through a narrow range of measures, most notably examination outcomes. The unsurprising consequence of this is that schools and teachers put a great deal of energy into obtaining good exam results, as this is what is currently valued by governments and some sections of society.[4] In such a system, how something is taught becomes more important than what is taught or why it is taught – teachers are regarded as experts in pedagogy rather than anything else, because this is seen as the means to develop students' ability to understand topics in a way that will enable them to be successful in the exams.

History teaching and second-order concepts

One of the most influential ideas to influence my teaching and work as a history-teacher educator is the notion of showing students that the past is a construct and that there are specific disciplinary ways of thinking, which can be understood as second-order concepts. This approach largely emerged from the Schools Council History Project in 1972 and gained wider traction through various iterations of the National Curriculum and GCSE specifications, as well as in the pages of *Teaching History*. Although I feel students need to understand how history works as a discipline, I wonder whether we have the balance right, and whether an over emphasis on some forms of second-order concepts can make history too 'dry' and overlook the fact that the past is about people's lived experiences.

Again, we know very little about what schools actually teach in terms of second-order concepts. But the small studies that do exist suggest there is a greater emphasis on certain second-order concepts, such as causation, and less emphasis on evidential work[5]. Arguably, this stems from the influence of E.H. Carr's *What is History?* and some of the early teaching emphasis in the first years of the National Curriculum and the work conducted by history teachers to support students' causal reasoning.[6] This is not to downplay the importance of developing this form of reasoning, but as Carroll has recently argued, a focus on 'why' tends to ignore the role of the historian and the different ways in which they work and different conceptions of causal reasoning, for example in '*The Sleepwalkers* by Christopher Clark you would find a very different model of causation to the one Carr prescribed' [7].

Another possible issue with the dominance of second-order concepts is the impact it had on understanding progression in history. Earlier versions of the National Curriculum with their Attainment Target(s) and associated levels meant that progression was often seen as getting better at so-called 'skills'; a lot of time and effort was spent on supporting students to get better at causal reasoning or explaining change and continuity. This can create quite a narrow definition of progression, as it would be entirely possible to 'get better' at history through studying a seemingly disconnected, random array of events. This seems to underplay the importance of substantive knowledge and substantive concepts in thinking about progression in history, and young people's ability to make connections across time and place.

Collectively these issues can present students with a skewed understanding of the nature and purpose of history. Content can seem irrelevant, the reason for studying history can appear obtuse, the emphasis on examinations and outcomes can stifle the joy of the subject, while an over-emphasis on some forms of second-order concepts can distract us from properly thinking about progression, and together this can take us away from the fact that the past is about people and their lived experiences.

Where could we go?

The importance of getting students to see history as useful and valuable in their everyday lives is an area that also appears to be underdeveloped in the way we teach history. In 2005, working on a project with Terry Haydn, we found students in KS3 had little clear idea why they studied the topics they did – one student memorably told us 'they don't let you know', as if the point of history was a secret that teachers were reluctant to divulge! The Usable Historical Pasts project in 2008 looked at whether students were able to see the past as a coherent 'whole'.[8] Perhaps unsurprisingly, although rather disappointingly, the study found very few students saw the past as connected, instead the past was recounted as a series of disconnected (largely political) episodes, which seemed to have little value or purpose for the students.[9]

When planning what to teach, the 'so what?' question is essential, but is one that can be extraordinarily difficult. Yet as history teachers what we teach and why we teach needs to be intellectually defensible. For me, this can be achieved through a focus on making history meaningful. By meaningful, I mean that:

- the issues being examined resonate through time, so allow us to use that knowledge to make sense of issues now
- students can see how the past is being used or manipulated to support a particular idea or discourse within their own lives
- students might be able to connect with the experiences of those in the past, because the issues explored reflect issues within students' lives

Such a focus would hopefully allow students to see that history is useful and valuable in helping them navigate the world in which they live. I believe it is possible to construct such a curriculum by greater emphasis on:

- Developing understanding of substantive concepts
- Developing coherent 'frameworks of reference'
- Developing historical consciousness
- Reflections about what to study

A focus on substantive concepts

In previous iterations of the National Curriculum, a focus on substantive concepts has been less conspicuous than that of second-order concepts. This has been remedied to an extent by the 2014 National Curriculum which explicitly includes these as an aim of history teaching. There is however much potentially fruitful work to be done here. Haenen, Schrijnemakers and Stufkens provided a Dutch perspective on teaching Empire as a concept, but this could be developed further – for example helping students make comparisons between the Roman Empire, with later empires such as the Carolingian, Angevin or Byzantine Empires, and going beyond Europe to explore empires in African and Asia. [10] More recently, teachers such as Palek and Bridges have explored the importance of establishing secure substantive conceptual understanding and how this can be developed.[11] However, this seems to be an area where more energy could be expended.

Carefully choosing substantive concepts can make history meaningful to students as the issues raised often resonate through time. This means we have to carefully select substantive concepts. For example, the National Curriculum includes terms such as 'peasantry', yet this seems potentially restrictive, being possibly tied to particular notions of place and period (such as peasants in feudal societies). However, using more broadly applicable terminology, such as hierarchy or societal

position might offer greater flexibility, opening up the ability to examine how different societies at different points in time are structured, and who does or doesn't have access to power (and still allows the use of period and/or topic-specific terminology).

Substantive concepts can also offer a model of progression. Elizabeth Carr provides a great example of such opportunities.[12] By getting her Year 7 students to look at 'power' and 'authority' through a focus on Empress Matilda and Eleanor of Aquitaine, students can see that people in the past may have exercised power and/or authority, at different points. This topic then helps students make sense of later topics, where power is contested.

Additional layers of understanding can be developed by introducing related concepts such as legitimacy, in other words by what right do people hold sway over others. Also, a focus on 'power' might emphasise a 'top down' approach to history content, so examining protest offers opportunities to adopt a more 'bottom up' approach to questions of power, authority and legitimacy. This growing understanding of the concept of power can be developed by examining different forms of government (for example, various forms of monarchies, democracies and dictatorships), in different periods of time, and on different scales (for instance local, regional, national, imperial, trans-national). Developing substantive concepts seems to provide a good, future direction for expanding the scope of a history curriculum.

If students can see how the issues associated with substantive concepts reverberate through the ages and across geographical space, they can build a web of meaning associated with those concepts, which in turn would allow them to apply that understanding to the contemporary world.

A focus on 'frameworks of reference'

Frameworks of reference have been written about elsewhere and there have been discussions about what 'big' stories of humanity should be told (for instance, how societies organize themselves, or how people provide for themselves).[13] The idea is to provide a quick map of the past, identifying key landmarks, then to revisit these bigger stories and populate them with more events, people and detail, to allow students to create a growing sense of the interconnectedness of the past. This could provide a possible model for curriculum planning. The debate would be around which issues or stories to focus on. Dan Nuttall has experimented with getting his students to consider the big story of the twentieth century, as well as the story of empire and which nations were strongest in the last century.[14] Keith Barton has proposed other themes, arguing that students should focus on issues that are going to persist into the future and that require further deliberation to address them, namely exploitation/oppression of others, movement of peoples, inequality of need and changes to the natural environment.[15] Adopting a 'framework of reference' approach can help determine what substantive content should be studied, and which could be seen as highly relevant by students in making sense of the world as it is.

A focus on historical consciousness

Another idea that could help students see history as meaningful derives from the notion of historical consciousness, as developed by the German philosopher, Jörn Rüsen.[16] Historical consciousness emphasises how history is used by individuals, to link the past, present and future, and to orientate oneself in time, not simply how history is 'done'.

Rüsen has developed an interesting typology of historical consciousness, detailing what he has called exemplary, traditional, critical and genetic. These refer to different ways of narrating the past and

how that past is used (and not just the history that is learned in schools). In the traditional notion of historical consciousness, history is used to explain and justify actions in the present (and implies a justification for their continued existence). Thus divisions in a society, for example along religious or ethnic lines, help to explain hostility between groups, which are then maintained through reference to the past. The exemplary use of the past is largely based on common-sense assumptions about the past, where the past is seen as a repository of uncontested knowledge; this knowledge is used to provide examples of how we should behave in the present. In simplistic terms, this could focus on the actions of campaigners and reformers, such as William Wilberforce and Elizabeth Fry, whose actions would be seen as worthy of emulation. Both suggest an uncritical reflection on the past.

The critical and genetic forms of historical consciousness both draw upon disciplinary notions of history. Understanding how the past is constructed is crucial, so emphasises the importance of evidence and how it is deployed. This approach also provides insights into how history is (ab)used. The genetic model also emphasises the flow of time – change and continuities are key to using the past, seeing what developments have happened, what developments did not happen, and understanding that there are different possible futures. In this sense, developing and being aware of forms of historical consciousness, provides history with a clear function, helping people orient themselves in time, and reflect on our direction of travel. This imbues history with considered judgement and deliberation, and also suggests history has a strong moral purpose in helping people consider where society moves next.

Adopting a historical consciousness model, that recognises the ways in which history is used, appears to offer a powerful means of understanding the world as it is (and how it could be). As an approach to the study of history, it appears to provide a powerful way of making history meaningful.

History and what to study?

Potentially the biggest area for dispute is what specific content should be studied. This is partly shaped by questions about what we want to achieve through the study of history, but also whether we subscribe to ideas around frameworks, historical consciousness and so forth.

At present there is a clear emphasis in the National Curriculum to develop a coherent overview of 'our island story' and given various government pronouncements it is obvious there is a desire to present a celebratory view of this story. In some ways this does provide a framework for understanding the past and does feed into some notions of historical consciousness, but it is an exclusionary model (for example, who is referred to when we look at 'our' history?). It also overlooks the fact that history is not a single story, upon which we can all settle. This then raises the question which stories or whose stories do we include in our curriculum. Calls for a move away from an Anglo-centric curriculum are not new. In 1989, Slater lampooned the history curriculum as:

> largely British, or rather Southern English; Celts looked in to starve, emigrate or rebel, the North to invent looms or work in mills; abroad was of interest once it was part of the Empire; foreigners were either, sensibly, allies, or rightly, defeated. [17]

Yet for many years, this call gained seemingly little traction (apart from a few notable exceptions for instance Dennis, Lyndon-Cohen and Justice2history)[18]. More recently, particularly following the Black Lives Matter campaign, there has been a significant interest in building a wider range of stories into the curriculum, and this seems to be borne out by the most recent HA survey (Figure 7). The emphasis on decolonisation also means the focus has shifted from simply including such histories,

but also looking at the past from the perspectives of those who have previously been overlooked or marginalised.

At the same time there have been calls to make the past more representative or reflective of the past's inherent diversity. Boyd has argued eloquently about how the role of women should be better reflected in the history we teach, while Hollis has not only looked to bring in a stronger focus on women, but also the history of the LGBTQ+ community.[19] For me, this is a crucial element in history because it reflects the range of individual lived experiences – for young people to see the past as meaningful we need to populate the past with real people. Not only does this allow students to connect their own experiences to those in the past, but it also extends students' understanding of those experiences by exploring the complexity of such experience in a range of time periods and places.

The emphasis on a more representative curriculum would require a greater focus on social and cultural history, instead of a more traditional political, national narrative, which would reflect a turn in academic history. Academic history concerns itself with an ever-increasing range of areas of study, for example material culture, public history, queer history, the history of emotions. And in doing so the subject has demonstrated porous boundaries, drawing at various times from subjects such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. As teachers we could be more cognisant of what questions history can answer and the limits of the subject; for example, Christopher Browning's book on Battalion 101 *Ordinary Men* is an extraordinary piece of history, but does it help us fully understand the motivations of those men and their role in the Holocaust? James Waller's book *Becoming Evil* treads similar ground but approaches the issue from the perspective of a social psychologist, bringing new insights into how we might understand people's actions in the past.[20]

So where next?

I do feel there is much to be proud of within the history education community, especially given the changes that appear to be happening as reported in the 2021 HA survey. It is a vibrant, sharing community (not least through the pages of *Teaching History*), that has over time strived to enhance the quality of young people's experience and understanding of the past. But another aspect of the community is its ability to reflect on what has been achieved and to ask questions about what else could be done. It is in this spirit that I pose questions about where we should focus our attention. At the heart of any curriculum discussion must be questions about what to teach and why. Stemming from this I would argue we need to need to examine how we can best develop young people's understanding of substantive concepts (as well as debating what those should be), helping students create a strong mental map of the past, with a clear sense of why the past is studied and how that can be abused, combined with serious consideration of what topics and perspectives ought to be embedded in our curricula choices. As such I look forward to how we, as a history education community, address these intriguing and challenging issues.

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[1] See for example, Harris, R. and Burn, K. (2016) 'English history teachers' views on what substantive content young people should be taught' *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48 (4), 518-546,

[2] Harris, R. and Reynolds, R. (2018) 'Exploring teachers' curriculum decision making: insights from history education', *Oxford Review of Education*, 44 (2), 139-155

[3] Haydn, T. and Harris, R.(2010) 'Pupil perspectives on the purposes and benefits of studying history in high school: a view from the UK', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 42 (2), 241 — 261

[4] Gert Biesta provides an interesting critique of this process. He describes the threefold function of education and the three domains of education purpose as 'qualification' (acquisition of knowledge, skills, dispositions);

'socialisation' (development of norms and ways of doing things) and 'subjectification' (development of young people as agentic actors). The development of each requires judgement on the part of teachers, because there are different positions to adopt in each area and there may be tensions within and between these domains. See Biesta, G. (2015) 'What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement and educational professionalism', *European Journal of Education,* 50 (1), 75-87.

[5] Harris and Reynolds, *op cit.*

[6] Counsell, C. (1998) *Analytical and Discursive Writing,* London: Historical Association; Chapman, A. (2003) 'Camels, diamonds and counterfactuals: a model for teaching causal reasoning', Teaching History 112, Empire Edition 46-53.

[7] Carroll, J. (2021) But WAS it history? E.H. Carr and history curricula. https://jcarrollhistory.com/author/jcarrollhistory/

[8] For a summary of this project see: Howson, J. (2009) 'Potential and pitfalls in teaching 'big pictures' of the past' in *Teaching History,* 136, Shaping the Past Edition 24-33.

[9] This has been discussed in Denis Shemilt's work, where he discusses students' understanding of the past as a series of incoherent 'event-spaces'. See for example, Shemilt, D. (2000) 'The Caliph's coin: The currency of narrative frameworks in history teaching', in P. Stearns, P. Seixas and S. Wineburg (eds.), *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History,* New York: New York University Press, pp. 83-101. Some teachers have experimented with ways to help students build a more usable historical framework, for example, Rogers, R. (2008) 'Raising the bar: Developing meaningful historical consciousness at Key Stage 3' in *Teaching History,* 133, Simulating History Edition, 24-30; Nuttall, D. (2013) 'Possible futures: Using frameworks of knowledge to help Year 9 connect past, present and future' , in *Teaching History, 151, Continuity Edition,* 33-44; Richards, H. (2018) 'The devil is in the detail: Are we teaching history the wrong way round?' in *Teaching History, 172, Cause and Consequence Edition,* 52-60.

[10] Haenen, J., Schrijnemakers, H. and Stufkens, J. (2003) 'Transforming Year 7's understanding of the concept of imperialism: a case study on the Roman Empire' in *Teaching History, 112, Empire Edition,* 28-34.

[11] Palek, D. (2015) ''What exactly is parliament?' finding the place of substantive knowledge in history' in *Teaching History, 158, A Grounding in History Edition,* 18-25; Bridges, A. (2018) 'The particular and the general: defining security in Year 8's use of substantive concepts', in *Teaching History, 171, Knowledge Edition,* 56-65.

[12] Carr, E. (2021) 'Power, authority and geography: medieval political history through the stories of powerful women' in *Teaching History,* 184, Different Lenses Edition, 70-81.

[13] For example, Howson, J. (2007) 'Is it the Tuarts and then the Studors or the other way round? The importance of developing a usable big picture of the past' in *Teaching History,* 127, Sense and Sensitivity Edition, 40-47; Howson (2009) *op cit.*; Shemilt, D. and Howson, J. (2017) 'Frameworks of knowledge: Dilemmas and debates', in I. Davies (ed.), *Debates in History Teaching* (2nd ed.), London: Routledge, pp. 66-79.

[14] Nuttall, *op cit.*, has experimented with getting students to examine at the big story of the twentieth century, the story of empire in the twentieth century, and who was most powerful.

[15] Barton, K. and Ho, L-C. (2021) *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony,* New York: Routledge.

[16] Rüsen, J. (2004) 'Historical consciousness: Narrative structure, moral function, and ontological development', in P. Seixas (ed.) *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 63-85.

[17] Slater, J. (1989) *The Politics of History Teaching: A Humanity Dehumanised?* London: University of London Institute of Education.

[18] For example, Dennis, N. (2016) 'Beyond tokenism: teaching a diverse history in the post-14 curriculum', *Teaching History*, 165, 37-41; Lyndon, D. (2006) 'Integrating black British history into the National Curriculum' in *Teaching History*, 122, , pp. 38–43; Mohamud, A. and Whitburn, R. (2016) *Doing Justice to History*, London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

[19] Boyd, S. (2019) 'From 'Great Women' to an inclusive curriculum: how should women's history be included at Key Stage 3?' in Teaching History, 175, 16-23; Holliss, C. (2019) Being ambitious with LGBT history. https://freshalarums.wordpress.com/2019/01/14/being-ambitious-with-lgbt-history/

[20] Browning, C. (1992) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperCollins; Waller, J. (2002) *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.