

Report to the LTSN
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Practising reflexivity: the learning and teaching of theory in history

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The purpose of this project was to investigate the learning, teaching and assessment of 'theory' components in taught undergraduate and Masters programmes in England and Wales. It was designed to respond to the proposal in paragraph 19 of the History Benchmark Statement (2000) that 'all History students should be expected to reflect critically on their discipline, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings and its intellectual standing'. We were especially interested in modules that attended directly to 'theory', in the broad sense in which it is applied in History, including the study of historiography; social and cultural theory; the history of history; and the influence of other disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology. Such approaches are seen as promoting reflexivity, in the sense of encouraging students to think critically about the kind of knowledge that historians produce.

We had a number of basic questions. How many university History programmes include distinct theory components? How is it structured into curricula? What evidence is there of innovative practice in delivering such material, which History students often find difficult? How did theory fit into wider learning, teaching and assessment strategies? To attempt to answer these questions we undertook a web survey of all universities in England and Wales where History is taught as single or joint honours, or at Masters level. This was followed by interviews with eight historians in six universities, divided equally between pre- and post-1992 institutions, in departments which the web survey had identified as containing relevant curricula. Finally, we investigated teaching and learning materials used in these institutions and drew also on wider secondary reading.

In undertaking the web survey it proved necessary to distinguish between 'method' modules, which were skills-driven, and theory or historiography modules, though the two were sometimes elided in practice. The latter were offered in between a quarter and a fifth of undergraduate programmes, with slightly higher proportions being found in 'old' than 'new' institutions. At Masters level theory was more prevalent, being present in almost half the old university programmes and a third of those in new institutions. These figures might be considered high, reflecting the impact of the postmodern turn of the 1990s. But it should also be noted that at undergraduate level over three-quarters and at Masters over half of History departments do not currently appear to offer any explicit opportunity for the kind of critical reflection proposed in the Benchmark Statement. Where theory modules were found at undergraduate level, they occurred at different points across the various years, following the interests of particular members of staff. Only in a very small number of departments was there evidence of a reflexive component being built into the curriculum in a progressive manner across different levels. In these cases, however, there was evidence of much good practice.

Students not only encountered a variety of the types of theory itemised above, they also did so in a structured fashion, enabling them reflect on the nature of historical knowledge and methodology at each level in increasingly demanding ways. One positive benefit of this was an improvement in student's confidence in handling historical debates and in evaluating sources and methods across the whole range of History modules.

How to teach theory to students who are often perceived to be wedded to empirical narrative required particular strategies. Some departments used a first-year module on history and postmodernism (or an equivalent) as a shock tactic, to provoke students into debate about the subject. Other specific strategies included case-studies, enabling students to read the primary sources on which a particular historical interpretation was based. What this graphically illustrated was the fragmented and partial character of the evidence on which seemingly smooth, authoritative narratives were constructed. Other exercises, on subjects such as the family, involved students' writing short summaries on their own family history and then comparing them. This immediately revealed different views of what the 'family' is (extended/nuclear, single/dual parent, etc.), so that students became aware of the contested nature of categories and institutions they took for granted, even before an explicit historical dimension was added. Resistance to theory was a common issue encountered by those we interviewed and respondents spoke of the need to confront it head on. One way of doing this was to alert students at the outset as to their likely responses to the material at different stages in the learning cycle, from incomprehension and rejection to partial understanding and critical engagement with theoretical ideas. Students sometimes saw theory as a form of 'indoctrination'; here the response was to emphasise firmly that they were not required to adopt a particular theoretical position, merely to engage with it intellectually.

The project has generated a number of outcomes, including an 8000-word article to be submitted to a scholarly history journal and a guide entitled "**Teaching Theory in History: Some Practical Tips**". We are also keen to establish a network of historians interested in new and effective pedagogic strategies in this domain. During the course of the research we have learned much about the place of theory and reflexivity in university History teaching. We have been impressed by the imaginative design of many curricula and the creativity and commitment of those who help impart theoretical skills, sometimes in the face of departmental indifference or hostility. Yet the research also suggests that much remains to be done before History departments can claim to meet the demands of reflexivity proposed in the Benchmark Statement. The task is an important one, for without this reflexive knowledge and skills, students (and historians) will find it difficult to grasp the demands of an increasingly theorised historiography or the intricacies of methodology. Without such reflexivity we may remain trapped in our own historicity, in the unwitting application of anachronistic concepts and categories to past societies.