

Teaching Theory in History: Some Practical Tips

In most History departments in Britain, 'theory' is defined broadly. It encompasses historiography and cross-disciplinary influences as well as domains such as social and cultural theory. The pedagogic aim of introducing theory into the history curriculum is to enable students to think reflexively about the subject – about the use of concepts, the status of historical knowledge and about its wider societal significance.

The extent to which history students reflect critically on their discipline will depend to a large extent on the particular departmental culture. There needs to be a consensus among colleagues across the department for an initiative to work effectively, even if only a minority of staff are directly involved in it.

Curriculum Design

Adopt a cumulative approach by introducing theoretical components at all levels of an undergraduate programme rather than a one-off module. The benefits will be seen especially in the way students are able to articulate concepts, methods and sources in their final year dissertation or special subject.

Example 1:

- Level 1.

Empiricism – 'commonsense' approaches to History.

- Level 2

'Materialist' histories (e.g. Marxist, socialist feminist), approaches which in various ways critique empiricism.

- Level 3.

Post-structuralist approaches (e.g. forms of gender and postcolonial theory), which further complicate the debate about what history 'is' and does.

Example 2:

- Level 1.

History of history and its significance in contemporary culture.

- Level 2.

Broadening of conceptual and theoretical approaches (e.g. micro-history and Foucaultian genealogy).

- Level 3.

Application of theory to historical materials, demonstrating how it alters possible interpretations of a given event or development.

At Masters level, make sure that theory is discussed alongside other elements of research training, e.g. method/ology, source analysis. Students need to practice how to work with theory and to integrate it in their studies, rather than being left to struggle with it on their own. Becoming reflexive, like 'doing theory', is a skill or accomplishment – the more you do it, the better you get.

Teaching and Learning

The introduction of theory may not be best suited to delivery by formal lectures; seminar discussions around issues and debates may be more productive. Introduce students to common

responses to the different stages of the learning cycle they themselves are likely to go through, e.g. bafflement, resistance, partial understanding, critical engagement.

Encourage reflexivity from the very beginning. Case studies are good way of introducing theory. One way to start is to get students to reflect on their own common understandings of concepts.

Examples:

- Ask students to write about their own concept of the family, drawn from their personal experience. Share the different definitions in a larger tutorial group.
- Ask students to look at a photograph and to describe it. Get them to reflect on the way that the process of writing attempted to capture a visual subject. Explore the question of cultural difference by asking them to share their different accounts of what the picture means to them.

In both cases, students should reflect on the differences in their answers. Why does this occur? How might preconceptions shape interpretation? How far are their descriptions already ‘theorised’?

Assessment

Consider using case studies to encourage students to engage with theory.

Examples:

- Analysing secondary sources, e.g. an extract from a children’s history book or work of historical scholarship, in the light of Hayden White’s theory of history as narrative.
- Using extracts from textbooks alongside the published primary sources on which the extracts are based. Students can then analyse how an historical account or interpretation had been constructed from the primary sources.

The key to effective assessment of these skills is to make sure that students not only understand the theories or ideas involved but also that they are able to apply them to specific historical examples.

Conclusion

The advantage of introducing theoretical components is to widen students’ intellectual reference-points and to deepen their appreciation of history as a specific form of knowledge. It will also improve students’ performance in other subject modules by strengthening conceptual thinking and the ability to discriminate between interpretations. Its impact should ultimately result in more sophisticated and original work across the history curriculum.

Simon Gunn
Stuart Rawnsley
Leeds Metropolitan University