

Introduction

Over the last ten or so years, the issue of how skills should be taught in History has risen swiftly up the agenda. As the number of students has increased, and their backgrounds become more diverse, there has been increasing realisation that if history students are to learn their subject effectively (and more independently), they need the study and personal skills to do so. Too often they seem to lack these essential skills when they arrive at university, and sometimes for much of their course.

At the same time, a wide variety of 'stakeholders', including government and employers, have been demanding that all subjects should enable students to acquire skills relevant to the world of employment. There has been a particular emphasis on transferable skills, and now 'key' skills including 'communication', 'IT', 'numeracy', 'learning how to learn' and 'working with others'.

In History, as in most humanities subjects, the rise of the transferable skills agenda has not been uncontentious. In its report to the Dearing Committee, the History at the Universities Defence Group (HUDG) reported on the basis of a survey of 67 History departments/subject groups that:

The main issue dividing the profession is now whether their subject should offer training in transferable skills, but whether that training should be explicit ... or left implicit.

Whilst this is not the place to discuss the arguments on both sides of this debate (though reflecting on one's views on it can be an instructive exercise), what is clear from the report is that more and more tutors are facing the need to introduce skills effectively into history teaching whilst retaining the subject's integrity.

Thirty-five of the departments responding to the HUDG questionnaire believed 'that specific introduction to study skills is an essential part of a history degree'. For many teaching skills is simply a supremely practical issue. Most modular degree schemes now demand explicit articulation of skills to be developed. Moreover, possessing effective study skills can make students more successful in their own course, and more confident about taking greater responsibility for their own learning which is at the heart of the active, critical understanding we value in our subject. Yet all too frequently there is still no provision of even study skills training, still less training in other skills. This, despite recognition of the differences in requirements between school and higher education, and the problems of making the transition from one to the other, and the fact that less than 5% of our history graduates nationally go into careers directly related to their subject.

For these reasons, skills teaching has in recent years become an important area of development and experimentation in history teaching. A variety of approaches has been tried, from study skills booklets to full integration into history courses and modules, and they all have strengths and weaknesses. All the recent research, however, emphasises the importance of the department as a whole developing a coherent and systematic approach to the issue, geared to what students need to be successful on their particular course. One history tutor can work wonders, but it is the overall departmental approach that can really make a substantial difference.

Some Questions

1. What key study / other skills do your modules / degree course require?
2. What skills would you like your students to gain from their history degree?
3. Do you tell them? How do you make it clear that you value these skills?
4. What is the current level in these skills of your first-year students on entry?
5. What do you / you department provide in the way of skills training?
6. Do you feel that this is adequate? If yes, what evidence do you have of its effectiveness?
7. What do your students think?

Some Further Reading

- Assiter, A. (ed) Transferable Skills in Higher Education (London, Kogan Page, 1995)
- Gibbs, G. Developing Students' Transferable Skills (Oxford, Oxford Centre for Staff Development, 1994)
- Gibbs, G. & Habeshaw, S. & T. 53 Interesting Ways of Helping Your Students to Study (Bristol, Technical & Educational Services, 1989)
- Guirdham, M. & Tyler, K. Enterprise Skills for Students (London, Butterworth, 1992)

Useful practical guides for History students are:

- Abbott, M. et al History Skills: A Student's Handbook (London, Routledge, 1996)
- Black, J. & Macraill, D. Studying History (London, Macmillan, 1997)
- Dunleavy, P. Studying for a Degree in the Humanities and Social Sciences (London, Macmillan, 1986)
- Northedge, A. The Good Study Guide (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1996 edn.)
- Northedge, A. & Chambers, E. The Arts Good Study Guide (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1997)