



Subject Centre for
History, Classics
and Archaeology

Learning and Teaching in History: Structure and Purpose at Level 1

7 June 2007, University of Stirling

Report on a discussion day organised by the Subject Centre for History, Classics & Archaeology

1. *Background to the Meeting*

The First Year – level one – of higher education remains a matter of high priority for faculty and institutional management, for education developers and learning support staff, for departmental and faculty heads; as well as for students, present and future, and for their teachers in secondary education. Its significance is recognized in its adoption by the QAA Scotland as one of their Enhancement Themes for 2006-8. The Institute of Historical Research has held meetings on transition issues and reports of these are available on the Institute website.¹

Added piquancy and point is given by the fertile contrast between the structures of secondary and higher education in England and in Scotland. Entry, in most of our Scottish institutions, to a faculty rather than to a department makes a difference for student and tutor alike. But each institution, and each department, in a discipline with little in the way of prescribed content, has the opportunity to carve out its own approach to teaching and learning, and to the curriculum, in higher education.

Our day of discussion brought together representatives of secondary and higher education in Scotland with members of two departments of History from English universities, departments both of which have a distinctive ethos and a distinctive and innovative approach to the curriculum and to the student learning that its mastery requires.

The discussion and reflection during the day was intended to clarify the relationship between teaching and learning; to help make clear what secondary education can expect of higher education; and what higher education can expect of its entering students. We proceeded through discussion rather than formal papers; presentations provided a point of entry to crucial debates and a provocation to conversation rather than suggesting immediate solutions.

It is often said that, although the proportion of secondary and high school students proceeding to higher education is higher than it has ever been, the gap of understanding between the two sectors remains obstinately wide. We recognize the

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/2s7syg> is the report of the first meeting on History in British Education, held on 14-15 February 2005; <http://tinyurl.com/2i9dta> is the report of the second meeting – History in Schools and HE: Issues of Common Concern, held on 29 September 2005. The IHR website also includes, at <http://www.history.ac.uk/education/>, a brief report on a colloquium on Issues of Progression and Assessment, held on 25 October 2006.

enormous pressures under which all parties are operating at present, pressures which militate against the provision of the time for the discussion which is necessary to bridge that gap. We are extremely grateful to those who took part in this discussion.

2. Programme

The morning sessions involved reviews of the current situation of teaching and learning in the Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers in History, offered by Audrey Farley of Denny High School and Emma Slavin of Glasgow Academy and a report on the first year programme at the University of Stirling by Alastair Mann, who reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of incoming students. In the afternoon, Lynn Abrams of the University of Glasgow spoke on Learning and Unlearning in the first year programme there, with particular focus on histories which are marginalised in schools. Finally, two speakers offered thoughts on the programmes at their own (English) institutions: Elizabeth Redgate outlined the University of Newcastle's world history course and Jackie Eales spoke on the programme at Christ Church University, Canterbury. The programme ended with a brief survey of the ground covered in the presentations and in the discussions which were wide-ranging and vigorous.

3. Attendance

The event was attended by nine from secondary education; thirteen from higher education (from History faculties, from student support services and from teaching and learning development units); and one from the Scottish Inspectorate for Education. A further number of secondary education teachers expressed considerable interest in the meeting but were unable to attend. This report will be widely circulated.

4. The Context: From Education to Higher Education in Scotland

Audrey Farley and Emma Slavin laid out the basic structure of the Highers and Advanced Highers in Scotland. The curriculum for Highers is divided into three periods: Medieval, Early Modern and Later Modern. Within each, there are three papers: Scotland and Britain; Europe and the World; and a Special Topic. To each of these forty hours of teaching are devoted (with additional independent study) in order to provide 'solid topic knowledge'. Particular attention was drawn to the current rule that schools had to choose options from the same time period. And they noted that around 95% of schools plump for the Later Modern option. There is a similar concentration within the Special Topics in Later Modern: the Cold War; Ireland; and Appeasement. The last is overwhelmingly the most popular, though it is not well handled by students. Ireland is thought to be too controversial; the Cold War offers little of interest to current students. In Scotland, re-sits are allowed, but schools cannot pay for the remarking of student papers.

It is striking that the Scottish Qualification Authority does not recognize 'written communication' as one of the skills tested by the Highers in History.

The Highers are currently under review. Participants at this discussion thought that the review would provide a welcome opportunity to abolish the requirement for chronological concentration and thought that it might be a good time for higher education to make its opinions heard.

As to the Advanced Highers, these do not have to be taken after the Highers, the age/stage link having been broken in Scotland (though the meeting did not go on to discuss the possibility of students being offered, as might students in the USA, Advanced Placement Standing: taking rated HE courses while still in secondary school). It is tempting for those who have achieved a grade C in History in Highers to go on to Advanced Highers, but teachers often advise against such a move.

Audrey and Emma offered the hypothesis that Highers left students under-prepared for the practices and ethos of higher education; while the Advanced Highers over-qualifies them (they involve, e.g., a 4,000 word dissertation). They highlighted a number of weaknesses in student learning (and in the context of teaching): students lacked confidence in selecting information and in taking notes; rote learning remained possible, especially given the considerable variety of teaching styles employed; and access to IT was very variable. In addition, use of English remained a problem (more so than weakness of topic knowledge), and students were little given to reading (as opposed to using) books – in some schools, indeed, independent reading would not be specified. There was a continuing battle to make students understand the limitations as well as the possibilities of using electronically acquired information. A number of schools sought to group abilities and levels together, which further confused teacher and student alike, and such a vast ability and experience range underlined the possibility of formulaic teaching – and learning. Finally, the circumstances of teaching in secondary schools do not prepare students for the experience of the large lecture-based courses so characteristic of higher education today: thirty would be a large group in secondary education.

5. Presentations and Discussions

The context for discussion was the substantial increase in student numbers on History programmes in HE over the past decade and more. In their Higher and Advanced Higher programmes, students would be taught in groups of up to thirty, and often considerably less. At University, lecture courses delivered to over 100 students were regular. That higher education is now mass education is evident in that respect (even if, in others, the implications of mass education in a democratic society have been unheeded). What are student expectations of the setting of teaching at University?

The great divide was coming at age 16: students who then went on to Highers expected then to go on to higher education. Higher education was an extension of the longer term educational process, like Highers/Advanced Highers - not legally compulsory but culturally appropriate and necessary. Students, it follows, will bring in

to higher education experiences of secondary education: the language used reflects that. Seminars and lectures become 'lessons', e.g.

There was general recognition that, however well taught secondary students might be, such teaching went on in a context in which pass rates, and the league tables which followed from them, were central. That context prompted or reinforced a pragmatic approach to learning. This was particularly unfortunate in an 'open ended' discipline like History, in which great emphasis was laid upon the individual students' construction of arguments compelling to themselves. There was also a general recognition, tinged by regret, that the instrumentalist agenda was also subscribed to by University senior management themselves. In England, with the fee regime now introduced there, it was probable that pragmatic learning would be further reinforced; and it was widely believed that students would act as 'consumers'. Just what that might involve remained to be seen.

With increasing participation rates in higher education, it was possible to argue that the structure and ethos of the Higher and Advanced Higher programmes ought to be more closely geared to the expectations of higher education as to what an entering student ought to be capable of doing, how an entering student ought to be capable of thinking. The SQA is currently reviewing History at Higher and Advanced Higher level and it was suggested that higher education ought to make a clear, positive and intellectually coherent case for changes in the structure which would serve to diminish the perceived gap which currently separates secondary History from higher education History.

Equally, it was argued that higher education ought to change its admissions practices, to reduce dependence on arithmetically expressed competence and to take more seriously an evaluation of the ability of a candidate to benefit from, and to contribute to, a History degree programme. This would probably involve a return to interviewing - a practice to which Christ Church University, Canterbury, still adhered as Jackie Eales reported, because it was held to be so helpful both to would-be students and to the institution: the History department has around 35% mature students and around 15% non-standard entry. But however desirable such a development, it was noted that History departments lack the personnel to conduct interviews – and that higher education had bowed to a cultural trend which involved a reduction of trust in the professional judgment of the lecturer and a pinning of faith in arithmetical scores (in the guise of transparency).

Lynn Abrams' contribution set out the range of ways of envisaging History with which entering students were unfamiliar and uncomfortable. She instanced students' limited sense of the nature of History as a discipline (especially the centrality of analysis rather than narrative); and of what the materials of History included (reflected in a common belief in that political and diplomatic history represented the mainstream of investigation). Students found the world before the nineteenth century an utterly alien place, to which they had no connection. They had no sense of the *longue durée*; they saw history as driven by individual events. They thought that study at University would involve uncovering what really happened in the past and had little conception that alternative stories might be created and told, by teacher and student alike. They were surprised by the amount of reading they were required to do; and by the very

reduced place accorded to the topics on which they had recently expended so much energy – here the type example was on Nazi Germany.

With much of Lynn's commentary, Alastair Mann agreed: students undertaking first level work in higher education still sought a right way of looking at everything, tended to rely on a single text, and sought direction rather than developing their own critical faculties. Documents had considerable authority and the only interrogation of them which students were prepared to undertake was one which scrutinized them for 'bias', which they believed rendered a document valueless and a failing to which they seemed to feel that past ages were particularly prone. There was general agreement that encouraging students to move away from this facile approach (and showing them the potential riches of other ways of interrogating documents as well as the historical significance of 'bias' in and of itself) was something which secondary education should try very hard to achieve. The move from a narrative to a thematic approach was hard for many students. Alastair added that understanding of religion was at a particularly low level (he instanced the difficulty of persuading students that in the early modern era, religion was a public matter); and that he had found student experience with local history of little use to them. He thought that there was too much emphasis on group work in secondary education and insufficient attention to the approach of the individual scholar, and that this also contributed to students' lack of compunction about engaging in plagiarism. He noted that there was a positive correlation between attendance at lectures and assessment performance but lamented that many students had poor organizational and time-management skills. It was unfortunate that the day did not devote explicit attention to support for student learning in higher education. That would have been particularly valuable, as much of the work at the first level in higher education appeared designed deliberately to take students to the very edges of their 'comfort zones' – and probably beyond. History should be exhilarating, perhaps off-putting.

Elizabeth Redgate showed how the University of Newcastle had built on a new first-level course explicitly designed to remove the geographical, chronological and conceptual blinkers which entering students so willingly wore. The course hinged upon the investigation of 'encounters' and 'identities'. It gave faculty the opportunity to teach close to their research interests and hence to pass on to students the sense of discovery and excitement which historical work involved. The acknowledged weakness of the course was the limited amount of seminar time available for further and deeper discussion of the complex issues raised in the lectures. Newcastle also lacked the sizeable pool of post-graduates which existed at some institutions and which provided excellent teaching: but this was a topic for another discussion.

At Christ Church University, Canterbury, Jackie Eales explained, first-level courses explicitly tackled some of the problems previous outlined during the day and the year as a whole was seen as a 'foundation year'. The structure required students, in small groups, to debate, and to draw upon (and foster) their general knowledge. Elizabeth and Jackie agreed that it remained a challenge to persuade students not simply to have recourse to A-level textbooks and to past notes and essays; that habit was maintained by some students right through to level three.

Lynn Abrams and others noted that there is a debate within higher education as to what students ought to know. The matters which she highlighted were not exactly

paralleled by Alastair Mann. And Alastair commented that although fellow historians at his institution would probably be in agreement about the ways of thinking they would wish entering students to have developed, they would be far less likely to agree on the knowledge they would expect them to bring. Historians in higher education might criticize entering students for their lack of a sense of chronology over a long period, of key events and their relationship to '-isms'. But they themselves are divided as to what is essential and the discussion takes place against the backdrop of a Benchmark statement for the discipline in which the prescription of specific content is virtually absent.² Historians in higher education do not want to prescribe content, yet they realize that content (and its setting) is important. One speaker, for example, hoped that the first level course offered in History would 'cover pretty well everything of first-class importance'!

6. Feedback

Feedback on the day was received from seventeen of the participants. I highlight here comments on the discussions and on their implications (rather than on the catering and facilities....). Fifteen of the seventeen thought the day useful (8) or very useful (7); for sixteen it met their expectations. Particularly appreciated was "the wide range of experience" and "the good balance of school/university input" among the group: this "really helped improve communication, knowledge and understanding between the different sectors." The expression of a "variety of opinions" was crucial: these were matters of common concern and discussion of ways to "bridge the gaps" is most important, but while much of the ground would be common there would always be disagreements. What was important was for those to be clearly articulated and understood.

It was hoped that there would be future meetings on the theme of transition to higher education and that colleagues might be present from the SQA, LTS and the Scottish Executive: that had been our hope in arranging the meeting but it proved impossible for invited colleagues to attend.

Although the provisionality of the discussions was recognized, it was interesting that eleven of those providing feedback reported that they would change aspects of their practice as a result of the day. A characteristic comment was that "I don't foresee making major changes in that which I do, but I am now better informed and better able to recognise and understand misconceptions and gaps in experience and knowledge, which will help me facilitate transition from school to university". School teachers particularly welcomed the encouragement given by higher education colleagues that they should be "more adventurous with Advanced Higher" work and that they should "move away from [offering] all later Modern History at Higher" level. There was also general recognition of the need to attend, across the sectors, to students' ability to grasp long term chronologies and chronological settings. There was some feeling that we rather neglected the institutional, policy and financial aspects of our topic: "perhaps didn't grasp the nettle of overtesting and government policy in education" was one comment and we certainly need to raise awareness of resource issues in both sectors.

² For the statement, see <http://tinyurl.com/2vblmr>.

7. Thoughts and Suggestions for Further Work

Disciplines in which content unfolds sequentially have fewer of the problems faced by the Humanities. Yet what might appear as indecisiveness on the part of History is fundamental to its attractiveness and to its importance: it underlines that the discipline is continually being remade, that students have to create their own, plausible, interpretations and understandings, and that they have to be active learners, taking from teaching what they find convincing and shaping their own learning. Several participants noted that while speakers had expressed concern at the limited understanding among students entering higher education as to what studying history might involve, not all institutions explicitly tackled the question of 'what is history?'. Indeed, at some institutions that might be because faculty could not agree on the shape of a response (never mind an answer).

The intention in reviewing such a situation was not to criticize the teaching which students received at Higher and Advanced Higher level (and Lynn Abrams reported that she herself as a student had epitomized the limitations on which she was now commenting), but rather to emphasize just how much of a gulf existed between the purposes of secondary and higher education. Alastair Mann argued that those who had taken History in secondary school generally proved themselves better and more consistent performers at level one History in higher education than did those who had not previously studied the discipline. Nevertheless, higher education was warned against unreasonable expectations. The chronological spread for which some had called was simply not possible in the context of the secondary school timetable and the expectations and abilities of the whole group. It might, though, be possible, desirable and necessary, to tweak the assessment structure in secondary education in order to give incentives to students (and their teachers) to approach higher education expectation more closely.

Even without such changes in structure, it was suggested that there were a number of ways in which staff involved in the two sectors could and should work more closely together.

Particular attention was paid to the sharing of resources and to the need to extend the range of (trustworthy) electronic resources available to schools. While it was acknowledged that IT provision in some schools remained inadequate, provision of access to electronic resources seemed a more feasible way forward than suggestions for book purchase. Alastair Mann called attention, as an example, to the forthcoming public availability of the records of the Scottish parliament, under the auspices of the University of St. Andrews. Secondary school teachers present argued forcefully that the want of resources was one particular cause of the very compressed choice which teachers and schools made from the options available at Higher and Advanced higher level. The Late Modern options had won almost a monopoly. This was not necessarily because teachers – and students – wanted to study late modern History; but because the resources were most easily available.

In addition, it was noted that University History departments ought to liaise more closely with education departments providing PGCE programmes involving History;

and that they should offer more in the way of focussed CPD for secondary school teachers (while the constraints on the time of those teachers, and on the resources available to them, were acknowledged). Teachers' passion for their subject was appreciated by students in both secondary and higher education and that was often related to an understanding of history as a discipline which was alive, unpredictable, and fresh. Higher education material dealing with good practice ought to be more widely available; equally, the two sectors have a common interest in shifting students away from a dependence on simplistic (and worse) websites, and in developing a culture among students which shunned the many opportunities now available for plagiarism.

It was pointed out that websites, like that of the Subject Centre, contained not only resources, but also material showing how higher education was shaping curricula and student learning: secondary school staff could learn a lot about higher education practice and about the expectations which institutions would have of entering History students from these. One example given was that of Elizabeth Redgate's essay on the departmental discussions about comparative history which had led up to Newcastle's adoption of its 'identities' course: this is available at <http://tinyurl.com/2kjbwm>. A number of references were made to earlier years, when it was common practice for university historians to involve themselves with schools and, indeed, the general practice: the decay of such commitment was regretted. It was acknowledged that pressures on higher education staff had accumulated and that, in the absence of a 'service' category like that commonly used in contracts in the USA, a revival of such commitment was most unlikely – even though it was obvious that such contacts would be to everybody's advantage.

In our future discussions as to the joint and respective responsibilities of secondary and of higher education, we need to attend to:

- Students' knowledge of the past (content),
- Students' ways of thinking about the past and about History as a discipline, and
- Students' ways of expressing their knowledge and their thoughts.

And we need to develop a consistent approach which brings these three matters together and sees them as development and progression. They are often considered as distinct: hence consideration of the third point gets packaged as 'support'. Consistency would allow us both to expect more of, and offer more to, our students. Despite the best efforts of their secondary school teachers, students are all too often without the basic building blocks of grammar, punctuation and an awareness of style; without a recognition and mastery of these, they are unable to exercise critical awareness when reading and lack self-awareness when writing. There remain, that is, obstacles to their effective work as students in higher education, as historians, and as rational and critical citizens.

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