



**Subject Centre for
History, Classics
and Archaeology**

WHY HISTORY MATTERS

Institute of Historical Research,

12-13 February 2007

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This was an interesting, enjoyable and thought-provoking conference. For example, discussions ranged from how should British history be taught? What should its relationship to citizenship be? How can history be made relevant? And how should history be made accountable and available to society in general? From these debates several things were raised that I thought were particularly interesting.

Many of the speakers wanted people to have a wider chronological, especially thematic, understanding of British history. This was a breadth v depth debate with many concluding that room was needed for both. It was also emphasised by Linda Colley that a more inclusive 'peoples of this Island history' was needed, for example looking at the history of women, black and working class people of Britain. This point I thought was particularly interesting but I would like to ask why should British history as opposed to World history be taught. For example, one of the speakers Rachel Ward seemed to offer some excellent examples of the teaching of the history of China, showing how this developed an enthusiasm for history in previously reluctant students and helped to combat their racism.

To teach history it was also considered that it had to be made relevant. I believe that this is very important and that most historians address topics that seem interesting and significant for today's society. However, I think that we should ask who determines what is relevant and also that if for instance a school curriculum is developed, how flexible and changeable can it be. What is relevant today may not be tomorrow. History has shown if nothing else how quickly society can change and develop.

Part of the conference was spent in individual break out groups and I was in a group entitled 'School history and academic history, how should they relate?' Stacy Hundrall-Waldron a primary school teacher asked 'What is the difference between school history and academic history' explaining that her five year olds are doing history and that this shouldn't be devalued. One of the speakers Michael Riley, for instance, revealed how teachers and school children had gone to local archives to research World War One soldiers, looking at newspapers, old photographs of their town etc. Surely this is history. I think that she is absolutely right and that as a group we decided that while there are progressions from primary to secondary, GCSEs, A levels and undergraduate study, perhaps the difference should be from school history to higher education history.

It was also suggested that by encouraging teachers to return to universities to study, research, write and potentially publish history, this would further break down boundaries between schools and HE institutions. In turn HE staff should work more with schools both in terms of helping develop the curriculum, especially exams, and

more importantly in learning pedagogical skills and approaches from teaching staff. I think that this would be really important and worthwhile and that schools and universities need to liaise much more to work out what each other are doing

Our group also decided that more research was needed on what the transition between schools and universities was like for young people. Students from my seminar, who I asked upon my return to York, had said that it had been a huge intellectual leap but that they had all felt that they had managed ok. Suggestions like more taster days, sample lectures from University staff, a return to a focus on personal study at A Level were all suggested. Many of these ideas already seem to be in place but I think that more needs to be done and that more recognition and time is needed for academic staff and teachers who undertake such work. It is also important to realise that in many universities first year teaching in particular is undertaken by postgraduate students and that they are the ones who should also be involved in such activities to help aid this transition.

One other question that was asked was what do historians see history at university for? This was in response to an understanding that history at schools should hope to mould good citizens. The thought that academic history was a tool for moulding undergraduates into citizens did not sit comfortably with me. To an extent there is some validity in the argument, I want students to develop skills that will enable them to participate in society, to get jobs, to get into positions of power (at least so they can hopefully defend history against all the threats of curriculum management and higher education costs!). Personally I would love students to all be transformed into postmodern feminists, however, ultimately the fact that this will not necessarily happen is what I really value. I think University should enable students to think critically, understand approaches but not necessarily accept them, to be able to discuss and challenge ideas such as Britishness and Citizenship. In addition students also have their own clear agenda with regards to what they think that history is for.

To conclude, my thanks go to the Subject Centre for History Classics and Archaeology for enabling me to attend this conference. I think it is really important to recognise how much history matters, or perhaps rather how studying the past matters, including heritage, archaeology and many other disciplines. We should study the past to learn about ourselves, but also other people, societies and cultures, and moreover, as the conference reiterated because it's enjoyable and fun.