

Institute of Historical Research

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Some contexts for thinking about 'History in British Education'

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Most of our discussion is on the period up to the moment of graduation from an undergraduate programme: and that is generally taken, by default, as being about age twenty-one.

But when is an education in history begun, and when completed? Formal education, perhaps, finishes on graduation. Informal education, though, is endless, literally life-long: one's life is history. We learn from the society in which we live; we also contribute our experience to the raw material of future students. No doubt some ex-history students go beyond that and do actually put to use information gleaned in their undergraduate studies; more often, though, what is put to use is the vocabulary of history and the analytical power that both produces and drives that vocabulary. It is possible for many people to live without keeping Thomas Cromwell in their active memories; for many to live without, even, say, Chartism. But few can manage without consideration of processes of change, of rights, of democracy, of propaganda, and so on. History is one of a select band of disciplines, most of them humanities (and of the kind likely to be derided as non-vocational by those wedded to short term views), of which that can be said with confidence. The National Trust reports that only 7 per cent of the visitors to its properties set out with the explicit intention to learn; but 78 per cent leave having learned, and acknowledging their learning. Randolph Starn has reminded readers of the *American Historical Review* that 'it is no stretch, except perhaps for our professional egos, to suppose that museums actually deliver more history, more effectively, more of the time, to more people than historians do'. (1) History promotes life-long learning; life-long learning is history.

Beyond that, there are probably a million 'amateur' historians, thinking and practicing, in the country. Of few disciplines, again, can that be said: literature would be one, with, for example, its creative writing and its reading circles. In our discipline the urge is towards local history and family history. Here we face a tremendous challenge, for these sub-disciplines are widely regarded amongst our academic colleagues as being of pretty low status within the pecking order of the discipline. Do we, in practice, as historians, and does the nation as a whole, do enough to realise the potential for an educated and rational citizenry of this pervasive commitment to history?

When is an education in History begun? In one sense, the sense that involves the capital 'H', the answer must be: for those favoured years when the school curriculum has a slot called History. In another sense, the answer must be at birth: for exactly the same reasons as adduced above. One cannot escape from history, at any age. But there are moments when one's involvement in history is forcibly brought home: when parents, and, probably, grandparents die; when one is made redundant; when the nation goes to war.

But in the curriculum sense, the formal sense, involvement can be switched on and off, according to the vagaries of the national curriculum and so on. Different periods, different lands, might be studied; different learning outcomes, key skills, demanded, arguably appropriate to each stage. Again, the continuum is broken. We now have a higher percentage of 18 year olds going into some form of Higher Education (HE) than ever before. But can we say that we have a clear view of the skills which they take with them into HE? We do not know what a tariff, a points score, at A level actually imports: other than that it is higher or lower than that achieved by another applicant. And that, while being a blessing for a hard put admissions tutor and for journalists, signifies little.

We need, that is, to look at the current suppositions as to levels of learning and skills across the formal board. HE is, of course, still optional: but with a greater proportion of young people leaving at 16+ than at 18+, with a cultural expectation that if you last until 18+, you will go on into HE, it is virtually compulsory. But we do not really join up the experience of primary, secondary and higher education as we should. Maybe we would find that expectations before the age of 16, perhaps even of 18, are couched in unreasonably demanding language (remote from marking scales actually used); expectations for those aged 21 unreasonably low. It is also a sad fact that it is extremely difficult to get a grasp of the

portfolio of qualifications which students present to an HE institution. We know of the simple numbers taking history (though I am not sure that we know the numbers retaking); what we do not know is what proportion of applicants have taken, say, history, French and English, as opposed to history, economics and mathematics. Still less do we know how those profiles have changed over time, and what such changes might imply about the skills and interests of students and about the particular niche they seek to occupy within the wide-ranging history curriculum.

We need, too, to address the question of risk. A number of students seek, on entering HE, to continue studying precisely the history they have previously studied. They seem to be risk averse. Others flit across the curriculum, encountering previously unconsidered, unknown, periods and areas, problems and concepts. What do we know of the consequences - in classification, perhaps also in subsequent careers - of such a choice? Ought we to encourage the latter group (and in more imaginative ways than simply requiring a pre-1500 module to be taken)? The pressures of the classification system exert a substantial weight, reinforcing the general cultural tendency towards pragmatism: what do I need to do to get a mark of 60 for this assessment? Do the assessment systems of HE sufficiently take account of the encouragement of risk, the possibility of failure (after all, historians throughout HE are united by the likelihood that they have had a journal article or a book proposal rejected: failure is our common denominator)?

Finally, our discussions remind us of the need to keep 'joining up' our thoughts and our practices. In these meetings at the Institute of Historical Research we are doing that chronologically. Do we not also need to perform such a review laterally, between the disciplines which a student is pursuing? Very few degree courses involve solely history, even if only history appears on the degree certificate. History students work with literature students, with anthropologists, and so on; do we plan those modules so as to ensure that the students' varied skills are put to best use: teamworking, the ability to understand how other people arrived at perhaps radically different conclusions whilst persuading them of the validity of one's own approach - those are after all at the heart of the notion of 'employability'. Few careers can be built simply on mastery of a discipline. What ought we to do to build consistency of approach? It seems a travesty that many degree programmes billed as 'joint' degrees have, in practice, absolutely no sinews between the two halves ('Students on the joint programme in History and X take the same courses as students on single subject honours programmes in History or X, but only half as many'). E. M. Forster's injunction 'Only Connect' seems to me a crucial one.

Notes:

1. Randolph Starn, 'A historian's brief guide to new museum studies', *American Historical Review*, February 2005, p. 68. [Back to 1](#)

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