Chapter 11:
Teaching history: Inquiry principles

Weblink 1: A brief history of history teaching in Australia

The opening vignette of Chapter 11 described a history lesson in a modern classroom. But history teaching in Australia used to be very different.

Fifty years ago, following the example of British education, teachers taught mainly ‘a straightforward and unchallenged chronicle of the past … often the story of heroic men and their wondrous achievements. Occasionally, a woman made an inspiring appearance, nursing the wounded by lamplight in the Crimea, saving young immigrant girls in Sydney from fates worse than death, or braving the surf to rescue shipwrecked souls’ (Hoepper & Quanchi 2000:5). The most common activity in history classrooms was ‘reading around the class. Underlining central facts. Annotating key words. Memorising. Enlivened now and then with a dramatic embellishment by the teacher’ (Hoepper 2004:13). This is what is now often labelled the ‘Old History’.

Now, fifty years later, Australia has developed a national History curriculum. The national Shape of the Australian History Curriculum paper highlights how much things have changed. It states ‘Introducing students to historical understanding involves teaching methods of historical inquiry. Students need to learn about history and practise it’ (NCB 2009:5). It further declares ‘Teachers describe, explain, model and monitor the process of historical inquiry so that students develop increasing initiative, self-direction and expertise. A variety of teaching and learning approaches and activities can be used, including teacher exposition, student debates, site visits, museum studies, use of historical narrative and hands-on activities such as the use and interpretation of authentic and virtual artefacts. An end result of historical inquiry should be a well-supported response to the question posed. Such a response could be in a variety of formats …’ (NCB 2009:7).

In those intervening fifty years, History had mixed fortunes as a school subject. From an initial heyday, its position declined in most primary and secondary schools. Primary Social Studies, in which History had been prominent, changed as more social, cultural and environmental elements were added. In the secondary school, History faced more competition from other subjects, and the number of students choosing History declined.
In the 1970s, the British Schools Council History Projects ‘spawned an alternative tradition of history teaching with quite different assumptions about the role of the teacher, the organisation and selection of content and the purposes of the subject’ (Husbands et al 2003:10). It challenged the ‘great tradition’ of history teaching and advocated an ‘alternative tradition’.

**Figure 1: The two traditions of history teaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners and pedagogy</th>
<th>The ‘great’ tradition</th>
<th>The alternative tradition</th>
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<td>Emphasises the didactically active role of the teacher. Assumes a high level of teacher subject knowledge. Learner’s role is largely passive.</td>
<td>Emphasises constructivist models of learner engagement with the past. Places a premium on teacher’s ability to manage student learning activities.</td>
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| Content               | Characterised by a concern with national history. Focuses on the understanding of the present through engagement with the past. | Characterised by a variety of content reflecting world history and the experiences of a variety of groups. Stresses the importance of learning about a variety of historical situations and contexts. |

| Purposes of learning history | Defined through the content of the subject. Focuses substantially on the cultural capital of historical content. | Defined through the contribution of the subject to wider general education. Focuses substantially on the preparation for working life and the acquisition of skills. |

(Husbands et al 2003:12).

The Schools Council project promoted the idea of student ‘inquiry’. Systems and commercial publishers responded with books and kits packed with historical sources for classroom investigation. The projects began the transformation of school history education from a memory-based, information-focused activity to one premised on ‘the idea that adolescents could be taught to understand history as a sophisticated form of knowledge’ (Wineburg 2001:42). Under that influence, syllabuses around Australia were revised to incorporate an inquiry approach.
By the 1980s, however, history’s place in the curriculum declined with the introduction of ‘social science’ subjects in the junior secondary school, and with the offering of a wider range of optional subjects competing with history in the senior years. In the compulsory years of schooling (usually Years P-10) the social science emphasis gained momentum in 1993, when the Australian states and territories adopted a set of Key Learning Areas that included Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). Generally, the percentage of time allocated to history in school curricula declined as historical learning became just one ‘strand’ within SOSE. Most affected were the junior secondary years, where history generally lost its status as a separate subject. By 2000, SOSE or similarly-named subjects were adopted by all Australian jurisdictions. History had a place within SOSE - particularly in the strand called ‘Time, Continuity and Change’ – but it was nowhere near as prominent a place as it had held decades earlier.

As the twenty-first century dawned, the teaching and learning of history in Australian schools was undergoing a revival. In 1999, alarmed by a study of young Australians’ historical knowledge, the Australian Government commissioned an inquiry into history teaching. Further alarmed by the generally bleak findings published in the subsequent report - *The Future of the Past* (2000) – the government established a National History Project (later the Commonwealth History Project). The six-year project aimed to improve teacher knowledge and expertise, to revitalise classroom practice and to enhance the historical knowledge of Australian school students.

Read these findings of *The Future of the Past*, the report of the national inquiry into history teaching:

- Many primary school teachers are inadequately trained in history teaching.
- In many primary schools, history appears to be a marginalised part of the Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE) curriculum.
- Many young students leave their primary schools uncertain about the nature of history.
- In the junior-middle secondary school, teachers, who have little or no history background, are frequently allocated to teach history-within-SOSE.
- There has been a recent decline in the number of students studying history at senior school level in most jurisdictions.
- A widespread view that in-school professional development in history teaching is virtually non-existent.
- Australian history in schools is generally represented by teachers as suffering from lack
of continuity, topic repetition and lack of coherence.

- Many recently-trained graduate teachers ... were applauded for their enthusiasm but ... [had] an apparently deficient knowledge-base in historical studies.

Discuss the extent to which these findings resonate with your own experience and knowledge of history teaching and learning in schools. Select one or more of the findings and propose a strategy to address the problem.

In 1999, when concern about young Australians’ historical knowledge prompted the government inquiry mentioned above, there were some claims that the advent of SOSE had contributed to the problem. By 2007, the wheel had come full circle with the announcement by the Coalition federal government that it would develop a national curriculum, including Australian History, for all Australian schools. Before the 2007 federal election, the Labor opposition adopted a similar policy. After the election, the new Labor government decided that History would be one of the four subjects developed in the first stage of the national curriculum initiative. A new National Curriculum Board (NCB) began development work in 2008, and a paper – Shape of the Australian History Curriculum - was finalised in May 2009, just as the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) took over from the NCB. In May 2009, newly-appointed teams began to write national syllabuses in English, Mathematics, Science and History.

References

Hoepper, Brian and Quanchi, Max 2000, History in Years 1 to 10 Studies of Society and Environment Key Learning Area, Queensland School Curriculum Council, Brisbane.


Husbands, Chris; Kitson, Alison; Pendry, Anna 2003, Understanding History Teaching, Open University Press, Maidenhead.

Shape of the Australian History Curriculum, National Curriculum Board. Available at: www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Australian_Curriculum_-_History.pdf