



Better History

Report of an Invitation Seminar held at Anglia Ruskin University

Saturday 16th January 2010

Dr Seán Lang is Senior Lecturer in History, Anglia Ruskin University. He is an experienced textbook writer and history teacher and was Head of History at Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge 1992-2001. He is a Fellow and former Honorary Secretary of the Historical Association.

Martin Roberts sits on the Academic Steering Committee of the Prince's Training Institute. He was Headteacher of the Cherwell School, Oxford 1981-2002 and currently sits on the Governing Bodies of two secondary schools. He has written many history textbooks for schools. He sat on the Council of EUROCLIO and is a Fellow and former Deputy President of the Historical Association.

Nicolas Kinloch is Professional Tutor at the Netherhall School, Cambridge, where he was Head of History 1985-2005. He has written textbooks for school and was editor both of HINDSIGHT GCSE history magazine 1990-2005 and of Teaching History. He is a former Deputy President of the Historical Association.

This seminar was prompted by alarm at the increasingly vulnerable state of history in schools revealed by the 2009 Historical Association survey of secondary history teachers¹. It had representation from a wide range of bodies including state and independent schools, university history, an awarding body, a training agency, Euroclio and history publishing. The recommendations in this report represent the conclusions of the organisers in the light of the discussion and debate.

Four major issues emerged:

- The case for history to be compulsory to 16
- The case for a continuous and coherent 11-16 history course
- The importance of building up and extending students' historical knowledge
- The damaging effects of the current mechanistic and formulaic methods of assessment at GCSE and A level

1. Recommendations

In the light of the discussions at the seminar, we make the following recommendations:

- 1.1 **A broad baccalaureate of important subjects, including history, should be taken by all students to the age of 16.** There was unanimous agreement that a good knowledge of history is essential for the educated citizen, and that history, alongside other important subjects, should form part of the education (whether to GCSE level or to another appropriate level) of all students up to the age of 16.
- 1.2 **Students should follow a continuous and coherent course of study in history from 11-16.** The current situation in the history curriculum, whereby students study one set of topics in Years 7-9 and then embark on a quite separate set of topics in Years 10-11, has gone unquestioned for too long.
- 1.3 **The building-up of an extensive body of historical knowledge should be a central aim of the history curriculum.** For a variety of reasons the importance of knowledge in history has been needlessly and damagingly downgraded. This needs to be reversed.
- 1.4 **Current source-based examination questions should be ended. Instead, students should be required to work during their studies with genuine historical sources in as near to their original form as possible.** Current practice in working with historical sources, especially in examinations, is formulaic and a very poor preparation for genuine historical practice. Encouraging, rather than requiring, the use of real sources is not sufficient to ensure that it happens.

¹ http://www.history.org.uk/news/news_415.html

- 1.5 **Examinations in history should be independently reviewed by history teachers and academics, so as to reward, rather than penalise, wider reading and more imaginative thinking.** A number of factors have pressurised teachers into adopting a 'safe but dull' approach to history teaching, which is thereby failing brighter students and lowering academic standards.

2. History for All

- 2.1 Everyone agreed on the essential importance of history and that it should form an important part of the education of all students up to the age of 16. Because history best explains how present societies have developed and are developing it is of critical importance to a healthy democratic society. Yet the Historical Association report gives evidence of history been progressively squeezed out of the school curriculum at Key Stage 3 and reserved for the more able at GCSE. *There is therefore a real danger of a sort of educational apartheid whereby history could be restricted to the more able or even the more affluent.*
- 2.2 One of the problems is that history's importance has tended to be defined in terms of its skills. In fact, history's unique importance lies far more in its subject matter than in its skills. Indeed, participants pointed out that many of the skills history can develop are also offered by other subjects, including English and Geography. We therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 1

A broad baccalaureate² of important subjects, including history, should be taken by all students to the age of 16.

- 2.3 Currently, students study one set of historical topics in Years 7-9 and then if they opt to continue with history, they embark on a quite separate set of topics in Years 10-11 as their GCSE course. This practice is based on a false premise, namely that progression in history is measurable only in terms of historical skills. Moreover, it has left history very vulnerable to being squeezed or sidelined within the curriculum. A single history course, in which the material learnt in Years 7-9 would count towards the final result at 16+ and could be one

² See, for example, the International Baccalaureate (see <http://www.ibo.org/>) and the Welsh Baccalaureate (<http://www.wbq.org.uk/>).

of the criteria for the award of an A* grade, would be much less open to being cut by headteachers with an eye to league tables.

- 2.4 A single course would need to establish a basic chronological framework, but it would also need to use thematic approaches to help students build on topics that are already familiar to them. It might, for example, start with an element of family history, which manages to include both the immediate and a sense of chronology. This thematic approach can help students see historical connections, what one participant called the “Ah, I see” factor.
- 2.5 A single course would allow enough time to reach a proper balance between English, British, European, American and world history. A study of the British Empire might well address many of these issues. However, such an approach would need to be supported by a full range of resources and training, which should be planned and designed from the outset.
- 2.6 We therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 2

Students should follow a continuous and coherent course of study in history from 11-16.

3. The Central Importance of Historical Knowledge

- 3.1 There was strong consensus that good history teaching comes when a teacher with a fund of knowledge and a burning passion for the subject can communicate these effectively to young people. However, the current state of history teaching in schools effectively militates heavily against this. Central to this has been the systematic underplaying of the importance of historical knowledge.
- 3.2 The downgrading of the importance of knowledge in school history has taken many forms. It has resulted in part from the heavy emphasis on the development of historical skills, but it also reflects a more general change in attitude towards the authority of knowledge itself. It is increasingly common to hear commentators confuse knowledge with mere information, as if Google has somehow made knowledge irrelevant; it was even thought by some participants that teachers can have a degree of fear of a large body of knowledge.

- 3.3 The modular examination and curriculum structure has militated against the acquisition of knowledge and has reinforced artificial boundaries both within and between subjects, with the result that, particularly at A level, examination courses now cover measurably less than they did before 2000. Yet it is by the acquisition and use of historical knowledge that historians are primarily judged.
- 3.4 The relevance of school history
- 3.4.1 One criticism sometimes levelled against history is that it is not 'relevant'. In fact, history is always relevant, no matter what period is being studied. Not only is all history about the human condition, but all history helps develop the sort of thinking skills that, unlike transitory technical skills, are never outmoded. But relevance in history is a fluid concept and is not necessarily linked to chronology – in other words, a distant period of time can be just as relevant as a recent period, sometimes even more so. What is important is to bring out the modern-day relevance of the history we teach.
- 3.4.2 Thus, for example, the constitutional changes of the late seventeenth century are directly relevant to the modern-day controversy over police detention under anti-terrorist laws, which are themselves directly relevant to the study of, say, 'coercion' laws in nineteenth-century Ireland. The Elizabethan or Victorian poor laws can be compared with the modern-day problem of the 'benefits culture'. ***It is not a question of choosing topics for their modern-day relevance; rather topics should be chosen on historical grounds and their relevance then brought out.***
- 3.5 We therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 3

The building-up of an extensive body of historical knowledge should be a central aim of the history curriculum.

4. Historical Sources

- 4.1 The seminar was unanimous on two points:
- Students should work with historical sources
 - They should not work with them in the way they are currently expected and required to

- 4.2 Current practice in working with historical sources as required for assessment purposes is formulaic and a very poor preparation for genuine historical practice. A useful comparison can be made between the purely artificial source exercises set in history examinations (“Compare Source A with Source D” for no very apparent reason) and the sources exercises set in Archaeology and in Classical Civilisation courses, where the *point* of the source questions (given the fact that so much of the original is missing) is much more obvious.
- 4.3 It is frustrating that the true fascination of working with real historical sources (one participant mentioned the enthusiasm with which her pupils had greeted a ledger belonging to the grandfather of one of them, a general in the Belgian army) is precisely what is killed by the mind-numbing source exercises currently set in examinations. Participants therefore wished to see students engage with genuine sources in the classroom, and accepted that the analysis of source material might not be best suited to assessment through examinations.
- 4.4 We therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 4

Current source-based examination questions should be ended. Instead, students should be required to work during their studies with genuine historical sources in as near to their original form as possible.

5. Assessment

- 5.1 If history is perceived as a difficult subject (whether or not statistical analysis of results supports this), it is largely because of the way in which it is assessed. This may be by comparison with other subjects; however it is also true that a number of factors have put pressure on teachers to adopt a ‘safe but dull’ approach towards teaching history. Thus, even though research consistently indicates that ‘teaching to the test’ leads to *lower* results than more imaginative teaching which goes beyond the strict bounds of the course, many teachers stick rigidly to the specification and its associated resources and do not venture out more widely into the subject.
- 5.2 Moreover, with the phenomenal growth in the number of appeals against results, itself a result of what one participant called the “I need an A” culture, exam boards themselves tend to play safe, with heavily prescriptive mark schemes and narrower mark ranges, leading teachers to adopt a ‘safe’ approach to preparing students. As a result more original thinking, which has not been anticipated in the mark scheme, is often penalised rather than rewarded. The growth of

'badged' textbooks and resources (i.e. those written by examiners for specific courses) is an understandable phenomenon but has been allowed to discourage students from reading more widely.

5.3 We therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 5

Examinations in history should be reviewed so as to reward, rather than penalise, wider reading and more imaginative thinking.

6. A Way Forward

6.1 We recognise that many of these recommendations strike at the heart of current practice in school history teaching and assessment. Nevertheless, we believe that our proposals present the basis for a far-reaching but achievable reform which will improve and strengthen this vitally important school subject. We hope to present our recommendations for further consideration and debate by all those, within education and outside, who share our concern for the future of school history.

Seán Lang
Martin Roberts
Nicolas Kinloch

Anglia Ruskin University
Cambridge
January 2010