

In this article I offer a selective overview of some of the ongoing and emerging issues concerning history education in England and the USA. I also try to explain why the history teaching practices in these two countries are very different.

Some Background

In America, where education is decentralized, individual states set their own standards and guidelines for teaching history; however, teachers across the country tend to use the same textbooks which are produced by big publishing companies. Students are typically required to take both American history and World history courses during high school (age 14-18), although studying history is optional during their final year. In elementary and middle schools history is generally subsumed within a broader social studies curriculum.

In England, a National Curriculum has been in place since 1988. Here I refer solely to England because there are curriculum differences for history across England, Wales and Northern Ireland; meanwhile, the Scottish education system is quite different. Until the age of 14, English students follow a program of study that prescribes history content, concepts and skills, as well as expected attainment levels. After age 14, history is no longer mandatory; students who choose to continue with their studies take GCSE and Advanced Level history courses which are managed by various examination boards in accordance with government guidelines.

Whose History? Controversies over Content

Political wrangling aside, however, American history education is used unabashedly to promote a sense of national pride and belonging among students; whatever their personal family history, American students will say “We wanted to be free from the British”, for example, when they talk about the American War of Independence.

The world over, history is one of the most contested subjects on the school curriculum. Because history is so intimately tied to questions of national, ethnic, religious and political identity and power, different groups often compete to see their ‘version’ of the past represented in school history textbooks and curricula. Of course, India itself has not been immune to such struggles in recent years.

In America, the recent controversy surrounding the social studies curriculum review in Texas was a reminder of how history education continues to be a battleground for different political agendas in this country. The stakes were high because Texas has one of the largest education budgets in America; textbook publishers tend to cater to Texan curriculum specifications which are reviewed every ten years. This time, conservative advocates successfully pushed for revisions that downplayed the Founding Fathers’ intent to create a secular government for America; they also secured a more prominent place for their hero Ronald Reagan. In contrast, attempts by other groups to include more positive Hispanic role models were thwarted.

Political wrangling aside, however, American history education is used unabashedly to promote a sense of national pride and belonging among students; whatever their personal family history, American students will say “We wanted to be free from the British”, for example, when they talk about the American War of Independence. The overarching story told by American textbooks is one of American exceptionalism and of ever-expanding rights and freedoms for all her citizens, as evidenced, for instance, by the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement. Today’s history textbooks do include the perspectives of at least some of the groups who were once sidelined from official accounts of America’s past; nevertheless, the traditional national narrative remains intact.

The type of content studied in England is quite different, although during the 1980s in particular many on the right—including Margaret Thatcher—argued forcefully that students should learn a straightforward narrative of



events and accomplishments in British history. At present, a debate has been re-ignited about whether more British history should be taught in schools with the express aim of encouraging a greater sense of “Britishness” (which is seen as more inclusive than, for example, “Englishness” or “Welshness”). Several prominent historians have criticized the relative weight given to topics such as Nazi Germany and America’s Great Depression in comparison to topics of direct national significance. They have also criticized the piecemeal nature of the curriculum which does not allow students to develop a coherent overarching story about the past.

History as a ‘Discipline’ vs. History as ‘Content’: Debates about How History should be Taught

One reason why students in England study relatively little British history is that the principle purpose of studying the past is not seen to be about promoting patriotism. From the 1960s onwards ‘new’ history gained traction with English education experts and teachers. In a nutshell, ‘new’ history was a response to ‘traditional’ history which critics said taught students to memorize rather than to think. Advocates of ‘new’ history pushed for a greater emphasis on ‘history from below’ rather than on national politics and military campaigns; they also wanted to see more non-British history in the curriculum and increased attention paid to the perspectives of different participants in events. They favored in-depth studies of particular themes or moments from history rather than extensive chronological sweeps of the past. The Schools history Project (SHP), founded in 1972, was a key proponent of the ‘new’ history approach and its syllabi were popular with teachers (who were free to choose their own curricula pre-National Curriculum); today SHP is still influential, particularly as the National Curriculum, despite furious protests from the right, ended up incorporating many aspects of ‘new’ history.

Although debates about ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ approaches to teaching history have generally fallen out along political lines in England, ‘new’ history is not necessarily about promoting a left-wing or populist agenda. Instead, it is about focusing on history as a dynamic discipline or way of knowing about the world rather than a collection of hard and dry facts. To understand the past, students are encouraged to think like historians: analyzing historical evidence, considering different historical interpretations, constructing arguments about why something happened or stayed the same, and/or considering

the significance of particular events or developments. It is important to note that substantive knowledge about the past—or ‘content’—is vitally important for developing a disciplinary understanding of history; it is just not the be-all and end-all. While some critics have lambasted the idea of trying to create mini-historians when the vast majority of students will not become professional historians, others have argued that it benefits all students to learn to think critically about the past and how we know about it. Indeed, the aspiration to teach history as a discipline is in line with the appeal made by many prominent educators in the West to teach for deep understanding across all aspects of the school curriculum.

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Although the idea of teaching history as a discipline is starting to make some inroads in America (and has long been present in some classrooms), the majority of teachers and administrators continue to take a ‘traditional’ approach toward history education, closely following textbook content. Prominent history education experts in North America—such as Sam Wineburg (USA) and Peter Seixas (Canada)—advocate an ‘inquiry-based’ or disciplinary approach to history education, arguing that such an approach enables students to develop sophisticated historical understanding as well as a keen interest in history. Their research, alongside that of English researchers (e.g. Peter Lee, Denis Shemilt and Ros Ashby), has also highlighted that students’ thinking about history is often counterintuitive and that students need to be supported and challenged to develop powerful and productive ideas about history. For example, many students

initially believe that history is just “there” and doesn’t have to be constructed from historical sources or that events happen because historical actors want them to: teaching history as a discipline is not easy.

Looking ahead: Emerging Ideas for History Education

The media regularly reports that both American and English students know very little about the past, despite years of history education. While such concerns are decades-old and framed simplistically, something is arguably amiss. In England, the worry is that students can’t build up a coherent picture of the past because they are too busy practicing their historical thinking ‘skills’ on random topics. In America, where greater emphasis is placed on learning facts in chronological order, students seem unable—or unmotivated—to retain what they are supposed to have learnt.

Recently there has been growing interest in the concept of “historical consciousness” as a means of re-imagining teaching history as a discipline. Historical consciousness broadly refers to how as humans we situate ourselves in time and relate our lives to the past and future; it is about using the past to understand who we are and the lives we are living and can expect to live. For example, experts like Peter Lee are currently interested in developing ‘usable historical frameworks’ that would help to structure students’ understanding of the past; these frameworks would help students assimilate and organize new knowledge but not in a rigid or dogmatic way as in ‘traditional’ teaching. Such

frameworks, which would encompass the history of humanity as a whole, would initially be taught quickly but would be continually revisited, adapted and critiqued as students’ disciplinary knowledge became more sophisticated. Students would also be encouraged to make connections between the present-day and the past.

Many developments in history education have been driven by research. However, many decisions about what to teach and how to teach it boil down to the bigger question of why teach history? Those who believe that the most important reason for teaching history is to make young people feel proud of their nation’s past, for instance, will obviously have different ideas about what to teach and how to teach it than those who are more concerned with developing students’ disciplinary understanding of history, including how we even know about the past and why there might be different interpretations of the same event. Somewhat different again will be the practices of educators whose primary goal is to help students understand how they fit into a bigger picture of human history and can use the past to orient their own lives. Of course, there are other potential purposes of history education that I haven’t touched on here, such as teaching students moral or religious lessons and/or inspiring them to become politically or socially engaged; again, holding these as priorities will affect practice. Given that the purpose of history education is a matter of opinion, debates about history education are likely to continue for a very long time—and not just in America and England.

Some Suggested Resources

1. Benchmarks of historical thinking website, Center for the Study of Historical Consciousness, Canada: <http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks/>
2. English National Curriculum: <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/subjects/key-stage-3/history/index.aspx>
3. History Thinking Matters, resources for history teachers: <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/>

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