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University History Teaching:
Disciplinary Distinctiveness, Design and Dialogue

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Introduction

All disciplines within Higher Education would want to claim that enabling students to achieve effective understanding of their subject area brings great benefits, both to the individuals concerned and to society at large. At the same time academic practitioners also recognise that coming to grips with their area of knowledge presents students, and thus their teachers, with particular sets of challenges.

This short presentation is based on the work we have been doing over the past four years in the history strand of an ESRC/TLRP project about Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses. We will be highlighting some key features of the **distinctiveness** of historical study and some of the ways in which the **design** of teaching, learning and assessment activities, together with **dialogue** among and between staff and students, can help the potential benefits of studying history at university to be realised.

Distinctiveness

History as a discipline is characterised by a wide-ranging focus and diversity of concerns; across time periods and geographical areas, involving different facets of the human past, using a variety of theoretical frameworks. The discipline's broad ambit is in turn reflected in the *lack of a standard university history curriculum or degree structure.* While several curricular patterns have been usefully identified,[1] we are more likely to be struck by the very different kinds of history, organised and taught in different ways, at different stages of a degree programme. This diversity is in strong contrast to other discipline areas such as economics where there is much more of a common curriculum based upon agreement about the core knowledge required and the sequential ordering of concepts and content. In the words of Jordanova, "'History' includes so much and has such fluid edges that the idea of a delimited body of knowledge is not really appropriate … there is no body of historical knowledge that underpins the whole field … unlike the natural sciences [that] possess bodies of theory and knowledge without a mastery of which one cannot be said to practise them at all".[2]

If the subject matter and curricular approaches are so variable, is there then anything other than 'the past' which both unites historians in their teaching endeavours and provides history students with a distinctive educational experience?

We started out in the ETL project by interviewing a number of historians teaching in four quite different institutional settings each highly rated for the quality of their teaching. Despite all the contrasts in local contexts – such as institutional size, age and status, student characteristics and qualifications, staff numbers and interests, or the proportion of students' time spent studying history – what emerged were some strong commonalities of view about the need at university level 'to move students away from the familiar' by means of a 'layered' process of progression. The interviewees agreed on the value of moving students away from modern chronological history to study other cultures, periods, topics and themes, away from textbook certainties to the partiality of evidence and contested interpretations, and away from descriptive/narrative approaches to the questioning of sources and historians' accounts. They also thought of the way in which students would make progress as an iterative process of refining skills and increasing maturity of judgement, adding new layers of understanding as they interacted with successive substantive domains. As the History Benchmark Statement puts it, "the general process is one of developing and reinforcing similar skills and qualities throughout the programme".[3]

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[1] e.g. T. Hitchcock, R. Shoemaker & J. Tosh (2000). Skills and the structure of the history curriculum. In A. Booth & P. Hyland, eds. *The Practice of University History Teaching*, pp.47-59. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[2] L. Jordanova (2000). *History in Practice*, p.26, p.28. London: Arnold and OUP.

[3] History Benchmark Statement (2000), para.22. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

In the course of our subsequent research, including detailed work undertaken with six history modules in three contrasting institutions over a two or three year period, close reading of the literature, presentations to different groups of historians and numerous informal discussions, we have come to identify *'ways of thinking and practising' as a key 'common denominator'* in history. There would appear to be certain shared ways of thinking that historians view both as intrinsic to the discipline and as valued outcomes of historical study. Such 'habits of mind' shape the aspirations that staff have for their undergraduates and underpin the varied contexts in which, and the various means by which, they seek to develop students' historical capabilities and understanding.

Ways of thinking and practising in history

- sensitivity to the 'strangeness of the past'
- readiness to separate out one's own preconceptions
- ability to view events and issues from different perspectives
- appreciation of history as socially constructed and contested
- skilled evaluation/interpretation/synthesis of historical evidence
- alertness to interconnections among phenomena
- placing particular events within broader contexts

The listing above is not definitive, nor restricted to university level study, and individual historians or departments may place greater emphasis on some elements than others. But it gives a flavour of what lies at the heart of history's distinctiveness. Moreover, in highlighting the centrality of 'ways of thinking and practising' we are not simply identifying another set of skills, for these 'ways of thinking and practising' seem to *constitute* the manner in which the enterprise of reading, researching and writing history is framed.

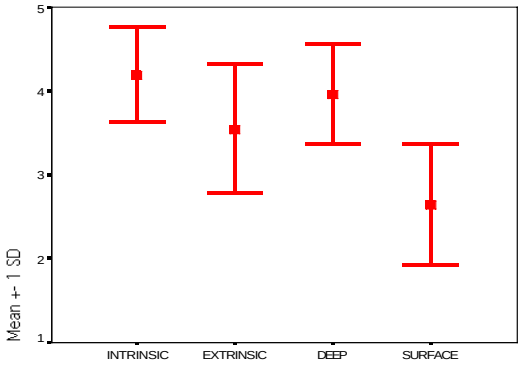
Disciplinary challenges and affordances

Enabling students to move towards realising the potential benefits of studying history at university is a complex matter, made more demanding by the fact that in contrast to more vocational subjects the large majority of history students are going to remain peripheral participants within a 'community of practice'.[4] Only a small proportion will become professional historians and scholars, and yet they need to be brought sufficiently into engagement with the values and mind sets embedded within disciplinary practices in order to progress their knowledge and understanding of history. This brings us to the central questions of how can students be encouraged to 'buy in' to the purposes and habits of mind entailed in studying history, and how can staff most effectively scaffold their efforts?

A promising finding in the ETL data was the baseline motivation of the history student respondents and their general approaches to learning, which echo previous findings about the high levels of subject commitment and concern for personal development among history students.[5] As the table below indicates, a high proportion of the students sampled across the six modules reported having a strong interest in the subject for its own sake and were also strongly inclined to take a deep rather than a more surface approach to learning.

Overall responses of students across the six history modules on four scales (range 1 - 5)

	intrinsic orientation	extrinsic orientation	deep approach	surface approach
N	882	881	875	875
Mean	4.19	3.54	3.96	2.65
Standard Deviation	.56	.76	.59	.72



[4] E. Wenger (1998). *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: CUP.

[5] A. Booth (2000). Creating a context to enhance student learning in history. In A. Booth & P. Hyland, eds. *The Practice of University History Teaching*, pp.31-46. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Nevertheless, achieving student engagement, particularly in a subject which as our student interviewees sometimes ruefully observed requires a lot of reading, and is cognitively demanding,[6] is an enduring challenge for which there is no magic bullet.

Part of the difficulty has been that until fairly recently there was relatively little public knowledge generally about what went on in university learning and teaching environments. The advent of quality assurance has gone some way to ameliorating the situation, as well as championing the virtues of purposive course planning. However, as the survey of QAA history reports we carried out in the pilot phase suggested, the relationship between rhetoric and realities is not always transparent. Fortunately we are not entirely reliant on official snapshots and the picture of what is happening on the ground is being fleshed out by a growing literature that is increasingly the work of historians themselves. The last decade has seen considerably more information becoming available and discussion taking place about the rationales and practicalities of the ways in which course teams and individual lecturers are going about their teaching and their students are being encouraged to learn. The amount and range of pedagogically-oriented literature in history now compares quite favourably with the situation in many other subject areas.

The history strand of the ETL Project

A focus on the concerns and practices of specific disciplines has been at the heart of the ETL project which seeks to provide nuanced accounts, whose implications are more likely than generic findings to resonate with practitioners. Making use of questionnaires, interviews and course documentation, the ETL project has involved fairly intensive work over an extended period with specific modules – six in the case of the history strand. At the outset we sought to understand module purposes and the aspirations teaching teams had for their students, whilst also gaining a picture of the students' approaches to learning in general and expectations of the particular module. Towards the end of the module we collected information about the experiences of students and staff so as to identify which aspects of module design and of the teaching processes had helped encourage the kinds of learning among students that the staff valued and were hoping to foster. The findings, which included certain suggestions about adaptations to the way a module was organised and run that might further enhance students' learning, were written up in formal but confidential reports. Further discussion resulted in some agreed changes being made to the module, with a further round of data gathering, analysis and reporting back. What has emerged from our research is not just a reinforcement of several claims made in the generic literature, but concrete examples of what was either already being done or was newly undertaken in the course contexts studied to help bring about desired results in terms of student engagement with history.

Fostering student engagement with history through design and dialogue

Before giving illustrative examples of what seemed to benefit students in developing their understanding of ways of thinking and practising in history, it is worth emphasising the contextual contingency of teaching, learning and assessment strategies. For while the impact of the details of module structures and processes on students' achievements and the benefits of enhancing opportunities for various kinds of dialogue came across strongly in our findings, so too did the challenges and affordances of different departmental and institutional contexts.

Practicalities and possibilities

Looking across the six history course settings with which we were concerned, it was strikingly evident just how dependent 'good practice' and 'what works' are upon an intertwined web of contextual factors. These factors operate at several levels and in combination influence whether one approach or another is likely to be appropriate and productive, and what scope course teams actually have for manoeuvre and fine-tuning. The broad dimensions of variability included institutional age, mission and facilities; undergraduate student profiles (e.g. age, qualifications, prior history study); staffing (e.g. number, range of subject expertise, institutional location of history teaching staff); degree and curricular structures (e.g. module duration, patterns of assessment, proportion of students' time spent taking history courses in any one year and overall).

Nested within these institutional contrasts were specific module characteristics such as scheduling and staffing, the nature of the student cohort, customary teaching provision, assessment requirements and weightings. The interaction of macro and micro factors thus has a strong bearing on what teaching strategies and activities make sense within a given context; what is 'ecologically valid'. In addition situations were rarely static and there were many examples of the need experienced at module level to accommodate changing circumstances, sometimes at short notice. Among the adjustments made were those required in response to institutional re-organisation, semesterisation and commitment

[6] As convincingly demonstrated by educational psychologists such as Wineburg. For example, S. Wineburg (2001). *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

to using a VLE, fluctuations in student recruitment, and staff changes due to sabbatical or funded leave, ill-health, or moving on to another post either internally or elsewhere.

Design

The findings in relation to course design provided many discipline-specific illustrations of generic desiderata. Our first example concerns the value of *achieving a better articulation of course purposes with the sequence and nature of learning activities and assignments.* Thus in one module setting, the course team decided to intersperse what had been a front-loaded sequence of lectures with seminar sessions and activities, and in another setting to link tutorials more closely with lectures as regards their timing, substantive focus and student activities. In other modules written assignments were refocused, so as to encourage students to reflect more on their own learning and the nature of history as a discipline, or to make connections across themes within a thematically-based course. A second example underscores the value of *creating opportunities for students to obtain and use feedback on their progress.* One productive strategy, for instance, was to have formative or low stakes assessment for undertakings that were either new to students, or likely to be particularly demanding at this stage of their historical studies. As a result students were encouraged to have a go, try things out, discover what they needed to practise, and make improvements.

Dialogue

Our findings pointed up the centrality of dialogue to ways of thinking and practising in history. Various arenas and kinds of dialogue – among teaching staff, between staff and students, and among students – were seen to be beneficial, starting with *making the rationales underlying the particular design features of a module more explicit and accessible*. It seems that a lot is to be gained by capitalising on the time and effort already invested in determining the various aspects of a module, and sharing the underpinning reasoning with all members of a teaching team and with the students involved. Particularly in the first year modules, with large student enrolments and correspondingly large numbers of tutors, the more highly developed the teachers' appreciation of module purposes, procedures, expectations and criteria, the more likely it was for students to report getting consistent guidance and having equivalent learning experiences. From the student perspective, understanding the reasoning behind the organisation, running and assessment of a module also paid dividends, particularly if explanations were explicitly related to key features of historical study.

Another important element of dialogue was the *deliberate fostering by teaching staff of students' awareness of the nature of the discipline*, which happened in a number of ways. On the basis of the first set of findings several of our collaborative partners decided to be more forthright, either in student course books and/or in introductory lectures, about what studying their particular module would and would not entail and why this was the case. Examples included explaining more clearly such matters as why a thematic rather than a chronological approach had been taken, the reasons for the central placement of a mock trial, the advantages of using a skills development workbook, and what primary as compared with secondary source investigation contributes to the reconstruction of history. Staff also sought to give more *explicit guidance*, tailored both to the specific module and the students' stage of study, concerning how to think about as well as how to go about required historical tasks. Student respondents highlighted the helpful impact of staff modelling historical reasoning or otherwise *flagging up appropriate ways of thinking in history.* In one module a debate format was used in some lectures to demonstrate how historians go about marshalling evidence to support or contest different lines of argument. In another module students were encouraged in seminars to analyse the features of contrasting historiographical approaches. In a third setting students drew attention to the developmental value of the course teacher paying close attention in tutorials to the effectiveness of students' ways of arguing with one another or with historians' perspectives. The *encouragement of student agency* in terms of formulating their own historical arguments and positions was assisted by a sense of staff approachability and the creation of learning climates in which students felt free to ask questions of one another and of historical materials, as well as to expose individual understandings or misconceptions.

In this contribution we have foregrounded findings to do with the **distinctiveness** of historical study at university level, drawn from the history strand of a large-scale disciplinary focused research project. We have also used a few examples from this research to illustrate some of the ways in which elements of **design** and **dialogue** can help promote undergraduates' engagement with, and development of, historical ways of thinking and practising. Different aspects of the history strand findings have been the focus of various conference contributions and will appear in written form in due course. Further details will be made available on the ETL project website (http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl) which also gives information about the project and its outcomes to date.