
Enhancing Learning and Teaching in History: A Digest of Research Findings and their Implications

Introduction and Background

This History study formed part of a wider investigation, the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL) project. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme, and was undertaken by a team of researchers from Edinburgh, Durham and Coventry Universities.

The ETL Project aimed not only to investigate key features of teaching and learning in contemporary higher education settings, but also to examine ways in which, in collaboration with departmental partners, student learning and engagement within such settings can be enhanced. The project has been working in thirteen universities and colleges, focusing predominantly on first and final-year course units in four subject areas: biology, economics, electronic engineering and history. A focus on the concerns and practices of these specific disciplines has been at the heart of the ETL project and there has been an effort to identify the forms of learning and teaching that will 'go with the grain' of these disciplines. The evidence underpinning the project's overall findings comes from analyses of nearly 6,500 student questionnaires, interviews with over 600 students and almost 80 staff, and course documentation.

Further information about the work of the project, can be found on its website, from which *Digests* and other publications (including a final report of the History strand) can be downloaded free of charge at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl>.

This *Research Digest* summarises key findings of the intensive study of undergraduate learning and teaching in history and points up their implications for course design and teaching approach.

The first phase of the study included a literature review, analysis of teaching quality assessment reports

for history, and telephone interviews with key staff in four contrasting departments. The main phase has involved collaborative research and development work with departmental partners in three different universities which varied considerably in institutional type and the nature of their student intake. The detailed focus was on individual courses: three large, first year modules and three-later/final year ones. These modules were followed for at least two years, with at least two rounds of data gathering.

A close-grained description of the learning and teaching environment of each module has been constructed based on course documentation, interviews with staff and ongoing discussion with course teams, student questionnaires and interviews. There were 1624 completed questionnaires (designed within the project to capture student orientations and approaches to studying and experiences of the modules) and 47 group interviews with 168 students.

Key Findings

- ◆ The diversity and distinctiveness of the study of history at university
- ◆ Centrality of ways of thinking and practising in history
- ◆ Challenges of a non-vocational subject and the impact of local contexts and change
- ◆ Fostering students' engagement by explicitly communicating expectations and modelling historical reasoning
- ◆ Importance of joined-up course design, aligning activities and assessment with purposes and providing a coherent learning experience
- ◆ Value of a dialogical teaching approach and encouraging student agency

Key Findings and Implications

- ◆ Central purposes and practices in the study of history at university

Diversity and distinctiveness

History as a discipline is characterised by a wide-ranging focus and diversity of concerns; ranging across time periods and geographical areas, examining different facets of the human past and 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 broad curricular patterns can be discerned, the UK-wide picture is one of students encountering very different content areas, structured and taught in varying ways. This diversity stands in contrast to other discipline areas where there is much greater common agreement concerning the core knowledge required and the sequential ordering of concepts and content.

Given this variability in subject matter and curricular approach, the question arises: is there anything other than the 'the past' which both unites historians in their teaching endeavours and provides history undergraduates with a distinctive educational experience?

The historians whom we interviewed in the pilot and main phases of the ETL project had widely varying subject specialisms and came from institutions of contrasting types with differing degree structures, student intakes, history curricula and proportions of time that students spent studying history. Despite these contextual contrasts, there were strong commonalities in view about how to assist students to manage the transition to university and develop historical understanding.

This involved moving "students away from the familiar" by means of a "layered" process of progression. The historians whom we interviewed agreed on the value of drawing students away from: modern, chronologically based, history to study other cultures, periods, and topics in a thematic fashion; away from textbook certainties to an appreciation of the partiality of evidence and contested interpretations; and away from descriptive/narrative approaches to the questioning of sources and historians' accounts. They also portrayed undergraduates' progress in historical studies as an iterative process of refining skills and increasing maturity of judgement, adding new layers of understanding as they interacted with successive substantive domains.

Ways of thinking and practising in history

In our research a very strong commonality emerged in lecturers' views of how they wished students to conceptualise and take forward historical work, allowing us to identify a number of central *ways of*

thinking and practising in history. Feedback from presentations we have given to several different groups of historians, numerous informal discussions with historian colleagues, and close reading of the literature have allowed us to have some confidence that the ways of thinking and practising identified by the historians whom we have interviewed in the ETL project have wider currency within the profession as a key 'common denominator' in history. These ways of thinking were viewed as both intrinsic to the discipline and as valued outcomes of historical study. Such habits of mind shaped the aspirations that staff had for their students and can be seen to underpin the various means by which they sought to develop undergraduates' historical capabilities and understanding. To achieve a high quality of engagement with historical topics, students were seen as needing to develop along the dimensions summarised in the insert below.

Ways of thinking and practising in history

- ◆ appreciation of history as socially constructed and contested
- ◆ skilled interpretation / synthesis/ evaluation of historical evidence, topics
- ◆ placing particular events / topics within broader contexts
- ◆ alertness to interconnections among phenomena
- ◆ sensitivity to the 'strangeness of the past'
- ◆ ability to view events and issues from different perspectives
- ◆ readiness to separate out one's own preconceptions
- ◆ communicating representations of subject matter in appropriate forms of expression and argument

It is not claimed that the listing is a definitive statement of the historical purposes and practices pursued in undergraduate courses; and individual historians or departments may place greater emphasis on some elements than others. The listing, however, does give a clear sense of what lies at the heart of history's distinctiveness. These 'ways of thinking and practising' appear to *constitute* the terms in which the enterprise of reading, researching and writing history is framed.

- ◆ Challenges entailed in teaching History, and taking account of local contexts and changes

Teaching a non-vocational subject

Enabling students to move towards realising the potential benefits of studying history at university is made more demanding by the fact that, in contrast to

more vocational subjects, history students are largely going to remain peripheral participants within a 'community of practice'. Only a small proportion will become professional historians, yet they need to be brought sufficiently into engagement with the values and mind sets embedded within disciplinary practices in order to progress their historical understanding and action.

This brings us to the central questions of how undergraduates can be encouraged to buy in to the purposes and habits of mind entailed in studying history, and how staff can most effectively support and energise their efforts. While this *Digest* points up clear implications for practice that have emerged from the ETL project, the following section highlights the dangers inherent in any simplistic template of prescriptions of 'good practice'.

Tailoring to context

The ways of thinking and practising in history identified in the preceding section centrally informed teaching efforts in the courses we studied, very often in ways that were congruent with students' own background, concerns and experience. At the same time it is necessary to stress that these ways of thinking and practising should not be conceived of as free-standing entities independent of the agents who deploy them in specific situations.

Focusing in on the constraints and affordances of different settings, even within the limited number of history courses examined in the ETL project, differing means were being used in different courses to engage students in historical ways of thinking and practising. The interaction of institutional-level and module-level factors had a strong bearing on what teaching strategies and activities made sense within a given context. In addition conditions were rarely settled, and there were examples of the need to accommodate changing circumstances, sometimes at short notice. Among the adjustments made were those required in response to institutional re-organisation, semesterisation, staff changes, and implementation of a virtual learning environment system.

Thus rather than seeking to identify an ideal type set of teaching actions that can be applied across all university history departments, it can be argued that development activities are best directed at considering how teaching activities can be carefully crafted to pursue disciplinary practices in ways that are well-tailored to the situation of specific groups of students and what can be achieved in a local setting. It also needs to be acknowledged that planned changes will always be affected both by everyday contingencies and the conditions of current university life where structures and procedures are far from static.

Nevertheless, as well as having a course design congruent with a department's students, there were evident in these history modules certain general features of design and teaching approach that are likely to be productive across all settings.

- ◆ Fostering students' intellectual and affective engagement with historical ways of thinking and acting

The explicit communication of expectations

Prominent among these general features was a theme which ran through the design initiatives that we pursued with departmental partners of explicitly communicating expectations concerning the pursuit of historical study. This included giving clear 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.

Modelling historical reasoning

Students whom we interviewed also indicated the helpful impact of staff directly modelling or otherwise flagging up appropriate ways of thinking in history. As examples of such modelling and scaffolding actions, 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 supported in seminars in their analysis of the features of contrasting historiographical approaches. In a third setting students drew attention to the developmental value of the lecturer paying close attention in tutorials to the effectiveness of their ways of arguing with one another or with historians' perspectives. The following quotation from a 1st year student interview participant describes the way the interrelationship of evidence and argument had been clearly modelled in lectures.

... it's purely the structure of the lectures. And they emphasise, both aspects that are important are continually – so at the end of it, I mean, if you are going to pick up on the evidence then an argument will be presented: and then a piece of evidence and another argument and a piece of evidence. And it's just reinforcing that which obviously they deem as important.

Such activities can also be seen as acting to give students a language within which to talk about history. These actions of taking out to students disciplinary perspectives and their associated forms of expression may be viewed as creating the grounds on which dialogue between staff and students, and between students themselves, concerning historical topics could proceed.

- ◆ Providing a coherent learning experience by means of 'joined-up' course design

Yeah, I mean I think the lectures are very focused and interact really well with the seminars, so there's definitely a sense that there's design to it, or rather than some modules which you think, you know, what's going on here?

Alignment of historical practices and specific course purposes with the nature and sequence of module learning activities and assignments

A central thrust of development activities in the ETL project involved departmental partners working to achieve a clearer articulation both among the different elements of teaching and course activities and in their relation to module purposes. For example, in one module setting the course team decided 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.

While the ETL project revealed these and other examples of assessment that were well-crafted to resonate with historical purposes, together with the provision of effective formative feedback, some problems and constraints were also evident in this area. Some of the student interviews raised questions as to whether the precise forms of assessment employed were always best suited to support a questioning, interactive encounter with the secondary literature and primary sources. Individual members of staff also faced constraints in terms of moving to forms of assessment that would be more fully consonant with general historical practices and specific module purposes. General university assessment regulations and/or established departmental patterns of assessment acted to limit their freedom to create assignments that would be more congruent with disciplinary practices.

Making more explicit and accessible the rationales underlying the particular design features of a module

The ETL project found that it was productive for students to understand the reasoning behind the structuring of content, organisation of activities and assessment of a module, particularly if explanations were explicitly related to key features of historical study.

Gaining a stronger sense of overall course purposes and the function of particular activities also increased the effectiveness of course teams. Particularly in the first year modules, with large student enrolments and a correspondingly greater number of tutors, students were more likely to report getting consistent guidance and having broadly equivalent learning experiences when all those teaching the course had a similar appreciation of module purposes, procedures, expectations and criteria. While creating a shared vision of a course had clear advantages, it could on occasion prove problematic for staff to achieve regular reflection on a module's direction and progress.

◆ Value of a dialogical teaching approach and the encouragement of student agency

It's not trying to say read this and you'll be ok. It's more suggestions. He's making you think for yourself which I find important. There are some modules and you'll learn what they tell you but you won't have a chance to think for yourself. This one you get given all the information and you construct your own arguments. You're not told what to think.

We have noted earlier in this digest how staff in the courses within the ETL project were *taking out* to students a clear representation of the discipline's purposes and practices. At the same time they were acting to *draw students in to participating* in historical debates and displaying historical ways of thinking and practising. For example, in one first year module the controverted nature of historical accounts and the provisional nature of historical knowledge were highlighted and the processes of historical reasoning were modelled in a clear fashion. This explicit communication of disciplinary practices was coupled with a very dialogic introduction to the module's content and concerns, where in the words of one interview participant, students were given "the space to handle these different interpretations." On this and other courses students were thus given scope and encouragement to display their own agency in interpretation. The motivating effect of being provided with this space for personal interpretation was also noted by students, as the following quotation illustrates:

... most historians want to, they want to try and find, try and make the picture clearer, try and delve deeper and I think we wouldn't be doing this if we weren't curious and ... because of the way he is and the nature of the module is sort of quite an open delivering to you. It does make you want to go there and try and work it out for yourself.

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 conceptual struggles. In addition students noted how their own *affective engagement* with history was energised when staff actively displayed passion for the subject.

Our work in the ETL project therefore can be seen to point up the importance in course design and teaching of the interconnected goals of

- ◆ clearly communicating to students central ways of thinking and practising in history and
- ◆ creating environments where participation in these practices is fostered.