

What's Going on in Teaching and Learning

Today, History tutors in higher education face a number of major challenges which make the task of teaching the subject more exacting than it has ever been.

Over the last three years, the magazine *History Today* has been charting the state of History in universities and colleges, and its findings are used here alongside information from a variety of other sources - including the History at the Universities Defence Group (HUDG) Annual Surveys of History Departments, *Craft*, the newsletter of the Computers in Teaching Initiative, the individual HEFCE Quality Assessment Reports on History, and the Subject Overview Report - to identify some recent developments in our discipline. What follows is, inevitably, a far from complete record, though we hope that it identifies some key trends.

The World We Have Lost...

Between 1984 and 1987, a Leverhulme/CNAA-funded project examined the undergraduate curriculum in nine very different institutions on either side of the binary line (see C. Boys et al, *Higher Education and the Preparation for Work* [Jessica Kingsley, 1988]). History was one of the case studies explored in depth via a series of interviews with tutors and student surveys over that period. The results provide a fascinating snapshot of History teaching and learning in Britain ten years ago.

There was already some responsiveness to change: to accommodate the issues of student skills, employability, the uses of I.T., and even the first stirrings of modularisation - but mostly in the then polytechnic sector, and with the subject group itself leading initiatives and feeling in control of its own development. 'History remains one of the subjects least susceptible to external manipulation', was the firm conclusion of the working party.

In the larger History departments, in institutions where the place of History was more secure, changes mostly occurred in response to tutors' specialist academic interests rather than to extraneous factors, and were mostly to do with developments in the content of the History curriculum. Here, the purposes of studying History were felt not to require spelling out, rather 'the strongest History groups felt that the goals of History teaching spoke for themselves'.

Students learned to deal critically with a large body of material and arrive at a judgement on it. For the most part, the authors observed, the higher the status of the institution the less perceived need there was for demonstrable skills to be taught. Among historians generally, indeed, there was a suspicion of teaching skills explicitly: 'Some historians, from the whole range of our institutions, wholly rejected the inculcation of skills for employment; this was an objective in conflict with that of personal development. Other witnesses asserted the cultural value of the study of History as a self-sufficient objective, arguing that it was possible and desirable to learn communication and other work-related skills on the job.' As a consequence, there was opposition to the teaching of oral and group-work skills, one view being: 'Let the stream of consciousness flow'.

Overall, the picture that emerged was of a subject with a strong sense of its independence and identity; in control of its own development and responsive to change but in ways which left 'its traditional assumptions largely unassailed'. These traditional assumptions included a general confidence in History as 'worthy of study for its own sake', and a resistance to the explicit teaching of skills which, it was felt, would emerge naturally from the study of the subject. Whether the standard of teaching and learning was better or worse than it is today is a question best left to the reader's own judgement!

A Permanent Revolution?

It is often said that change is life's only constant, and the events of the late 1980s and 1990s would certainly seem to confirm this view. A series of major developments has challenged the assumptions and sense of control of our subject at departmental level, and necessitated a fundamental re-thinking of teaching and learning.

A Mass System Has Arrived.

The percentage of school leavers entering higher education has risen from 14% to 33% in the last decade, and the number of mature students has doubled. One result of this is larger numbers of students with more diverse backgrounds, experiences, formal qualifications, knowledge, skills and ambitions when they arrive to study History than ever before. Even 'traditional' students have different skills and knowledge bases than they did twenty years ago, for A-level History is now far more diverse in terms both of syllabus and teaching methods.

Resources, in general, as no-one needs reminding, have shrunk. A notable feature of this has been a long-term decline in staff-student ratios. The 1994 HUDG survey of History departments noted that the average staff-student ratio in the older universities had risen from almost 1:14 in 1990-1, to almost 1:18 in 1993-4, by which time in the new universities the average was 1:22. For much of the 1980s, by comparison, 1:8 was the norm in the old universities. During the same time, library funding has failed to keep pace with the cost of history texts which rose by 50% in the second half of the eighties, and probably the same again in the first half of the 1990s. Indeed, many History departments have seen decreases in book allowances in real terms over the last five years. This has clearly meant that 'doing more with less' has become a necessity.

Purposes

Recently, there has been a much greater emphasis upon tailoring higher education more closely to the market: on producing graduates fitted for employment. This raises the issue of what do History graduates actually do? The Association of Graduate Careers Services (AGCAS) 1996 national figures for History graduates is revealing. The largest single group (14.9%) go into sales and marketing, followed by administration and operational management (14.5%), financial work (13.7%), and health and social welfare (8.3%). Only 5% become teachers or lecturers.

Unsurprisingly, government agencies and employers have increasingly asked: How does a History degree prepare students for work? This is a real challenge (or opportunity) for us to define and defend the value of what we do.

Modularisation is now rapidly becoming the norm for the History undergraduate degree: 'sweeping all before it', in the words of the History Today 1996 survey. Taking many different forms, its merits have been the subject of intense debate in common rooms and committees. The subject even reached the leader column of the Daily Telegraph on 4 August 1995: 'It comes as little surprise, but is nonetheless dismaying, to learn that History degrees at many universities are in danger of being devalued by new, intellectually sloppy, teaching methods'. We may be tempted, as History tutors, to add: 'Discuss'.

To rehearse the pros and cons of modularisation here would be otiose, though arguments about the erosion of chronological coverage, depth, and understanding are frequently pitted against those proclaiming the benefits of student choice and curricular flexibility. The jury may still be out, but modularisation has certainly made History departments think more clearly about their aims and objectives, teaching and assessment methods, and the design of the History curriculum in general.

Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA)

This is perhaps even more emotive than modularisation - if that is possible. As a result of the History TQA in 1993-4, 17 departments were assessed as excellent, 73 as satisfactory and none as unsatisfactory, though a special HUDG report showed the vast majority of historians to be unhappy with the process. There has, however, been some support for the principle of teaching assessment, many historians commenting that it certainly focused minds on teaching issues in a way that had not occurred before. As one historian put it, the TQA 'caused the department to think much more carefully about its aims and the extent to which these were being achieved'.

Funding for Teaching Development The late 1980s and early 1990s have generated a number of funded initiatives which have allowed development in the teaching of History. Here, honourable mention must be made of the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative (EHE), under whose auspices many History departments ran development projects in skills-based learning; the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP), which established a strong History resource base at Glasgow University to co-ordinate developments in computer-assisted learning, and the Cadbury-Schweppes Prize for the teaching of History, which made a brief appearance in the early 1990s, and was won by the departments at York and Lancaster for work on group projects and History projects in the community, respectively.

Most recently, the HEFCE/DENI's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) has begun to provide resources for several projects involving History. Three, like History 2000, Heritage Studies as Applied History (York) and the assessment of group work (Sheffield Hallam) are specifically History-based. Other FDTL projects, for example, transferable skills development (Newcastle), peer review (Nottingham Trent) and learning processes and staff development (Hertfordshire), involve historians working as part of multi-disciplinary consortia.