

Creative history teaching

Going beyond historical facts

Yosanne Vella

“Should we be aiming for a detailed context full of factual knowledge, which might possibly contain all the past within one history syllabus, so as not to offend”



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Introduction

There exist many, often divergent opinions on what should be taught in history, what should be included and what should be left out in the contents of a curriculum. For example in 1989 when the National Curriculum was under construction for the first time in Britain, history proved to be one of the most troublesome subjects. The selection of historical knowledge in the programmes of study was criticised of being culturally biased. On the one hand there were those who wanted ‘pure’ British history asserting British heritage and achievement, while others wished for a more multicultural curriculum emphasizing a pluralistic society. A debate which very soon became politicized and eagerly taken up by the media with such titles as ‘Thatcher’s Conquest on history in schools’¹ More recently, this time across the Atlantic, a set of new recommendations by the authors of National Standards for United States History triggered off a controversial debate on what students should know about the American past.² Apparently National Standards aims to promote the achievements of blacks, Native Americans and women while pressure groups from the right demand that emphasis should be returned to more traditional landmark events like for example Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and the Wright brothers.

Is history a “ready” product?

All this provides quite interesting reading and food for thought; however these arguments are based on the assumption that history is a ‘ready product’. It assumes that history is the finished work of historians and for the history teachers and curriculum makers it is just a matter of pushing your favourite topics, for whatever reason, to the forefront of the school curriculum.

This is the traditional purpose of school history, where the main objective for a very long time has been the acquisition of a body of factual knowledge deemed necessary to enrich pupils’ minds.

But should we be aiming for a detailed context full of factual knowledge, which might possibly contain all the past within one his-

tory syllabus, so as not to offend anyone? Is this even possible? Hardly. No matter how hard you try there will always be historical gaps, whole countries, people and events left out.

The nature of history

To find out the best methodological approach to teach any subject, in this case history, it is necessary to look at the nature of the subject. So first of all one must answer the question ‘What is History?’.

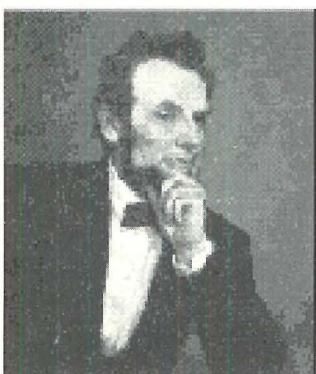
The words ‘history’ and ‘the past’ are often used to mean one and the same thing, but there is one important distinction between ‘the past’, which embraces everything that has actually happened, and ‘history’ which chronicles, investigates, and explains the past. The past is the reality of what actually happened, history on the other hand is an intellectual debate. It is only an interpretation of the past. As Keith Jenkins says: “The past and history in fact float free of each other.”³ To illustrate this point it is enough to mention women’s history. For a long time, women have been ‘hidden from history’, that is systematically excluded from most historians’ accounts. And of course not just women but many other groups, people(s), social classes etc. have been omitted because they were not central to the current historical accounts.

Therefore, it would appear, that facts become historical facts when historians decide to make them so. Even when not expressing any judgments or opinions historians are selective by the very choice of the subject they have picked to work on. It is also the historians who decide in what order and context to place the facts and as every journalist knows, to influence opinion in one direction you merely have to select and arrange the appropriate facts. Historians are products of their own culture and society, and subject to their own prejudices and values. The questions historians ask are determined by questions of their society, reflecting the same apprehensions or optimism of the time. E.H.Carr was right when he said that to understand the history we must first understand the historians.⁴

These arguments might seem to lead to the extreme Post Modernist’s view that no facts exist in history and there is no such thing as objectivity in history. But this is not true. Very few would argue against the existence of certain basic facts. Separate forms of evidence support these facts so that the whole fits together and a framework is built. There are historical facts but none of it means anything until the historian has gone to work on it. As E.H.Carr says, “To praise a historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building.”⁵ Kitson Clark agrees, talking about factual knowledge, he says: “It is only the framework of fact on which

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history can rest, it is not history. History to mean anything must be more than a rehearsal of facts, it must include an interpretation of facts.”⁶

What the good historian does is rigorously check, compare and question all known facts and information about the topic he or she is researching.

Then the evaluation process starts, which includes interpreting evidence, explaining, attributing causes, criticism, tracing results and using the imagination.

And it leads not to ‘the truth’ - historians can come to different conclusions - but to a valid interpretation. In fact in history you can have a situation where different historians are offering various opposing theories on the same subject and they are all regarded by the historical community as perfectly acceptable and their theories are allowed to co-exist at the same time.

Teaching history in the classroom

The nature of history itself, makes it crucial to look at it as a mode of inquiry rather than accumulating knowledge. So if history is mainly concerned with giving valid interpretations, it can be argued that in history classrooms the focus should be on pupils gaining skills that help them to analyse and interpret historical material. If we limit history to merely handing over one fact after the other, we would be missing a key objective of history teaching. After all there is a limit to how much can be retained in one's memory and a large percentage of learned facts are in fact not retained, except perhaps in the mind of working historians. The situation with skills is different, once a skill is learned it can be reused for different situations in the future.

The main objective in history teaching should be skills rather than memorisation of facts. If pupils are to be made aware of the main characteristics of the discipline the classroom situation should create an active learning environment for the pupil, rather than one which presents the teacher as the giver of information.

Creative history teaching as advocated by ‘New History’ goes beyond mere skills required in analysing causes and effects, what is being suggested is that pupils at school, even at Primary level should be given historical sources and establish or ‘discover’ the facts for themselves. By historical sources we usually mean facsimile documentary materials but they can also be artifacts or authentic archival filmstrips. By using source materials we are in fact teaching pupils ‘the structure of the subject’ as expounded by the theories of J.S.Bruner.⁷

It takes years for a historian to become fully

trained in dealing with evidence and to ask school children to do the same might seem inappropriate. But the aim of making children handle evidence is not to turn them into historians.

By looking at and working with evidence the pupil is in no way doing any real historical research. After all when we ask pupils to do experiments in the school science laboratory we are not afraid that their work will hinder the development of science, nor do we expect secondary English essays to have great literary value. Similarly school children are doing history no injustice by handling primary evidence.

M.Palmer and G.R.Batho⁸ give an interesting breakdown of skills when using historical evidence in the classroom, although they warn against trying to ensure that every skill is developed in one exercise, it is more important to choose documents of a content and format interesting to the class.

A. Understanding the documents on			
Skills and Abilities	1.	Comprehension	summarising content, and
	2.	Translation	from one form to another, information.
	3.	Selection	of a fact or piece of evidence
	4.	Analysis	comparing and contrasting
	B. Applying external criteria		
	5.	Recognition	of a fact in a context different
	6.	Application	linking material with (a) own knowledge and experience (b) modern phenomena and
	C. Skills which may utilise either internal or external criteria depending on age and ability		
	7.	Synthesis	selecting material from several sources and presenting it in some communication
8.	Inference	explaining problems in the evidence or to parts of the evidence or to other sources	
9.	Judgment	identifying reliability, bias, and value either by reference to the content or the writer or source of evidence	

Creative teaching as advocated by ‘New History’ is not without its critics. It has been accused of putting emphasis on ‘meaningless’ skills at the cost of factual knowledge. For example Stewart Deuchar accuses ‘New History’ as “presenting children with little or no historical knowledge one result being a dramatic fall in the amount of history actually taught in schools”.⁹

It is true that there were times when teachers in England in their eagerness to promote skills totally abandoned content, and pupils began to be presented with source materials from any historical period without any historical information given at all. One should try to avoid such an extreme rendering of ‘New History’, after all actual historians never work

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On the basis of internal evidence
Understanding terms.
e.g. tabulation of statistical
e relevant to a specific problem
two or more pieces of evidence
On the basis of external evidence
different from that in which it was learnt.
experience;
ideas.
On the basis of external criteria, and ability
General of the sources provided and presentable form, e.g. creative writing.
evidence either by reference to other wider historical or general context.
assumptions, etc. in the evidence present, e.g. style, or to knowledge about the source.



in a vacuum, but they, also must master the ‘facts’ first.

But this should not imply that there are no benefits in creative history teaching and one should stick to traditional modes of history teaching. The results of a study carried out by Denis Shemilt⁹ in 1981 showed clearly that in both interviews and written work pupils following ‘New History’, skill based methods, were more successful than a control group following a ‘conventional’ course of study.

‘New History’ pupils showed a greater ability in applying forms of abstract thinking and reasoning to historical problems, as well as having a deeper understanding of the subject.

Conclusion

Today, the term ‘New History’ is hardly appropriate, considering that teachers in England have now been using it as an integral part of their teaching for almost three decades.

This is not however the case for Malta. While the more progressive teachers have started to implement ‘New History’ methods, there still remain a large number of history teachers who, although perhaps familiar with ‘New History’ methods, have never actually used them in class.

If one were to imagine a spectrum which represents the evolution of history teaching, Maltese and English teachers would be found in different places.

This puts us at an advantage in the sense that we can learn from the experience of others.

We are now in a better position to implement ‘New History’ since now we can appreciate the benefits of ‘New History’ and perhaps avoid its pitfalls.

Endnotes

1. Headline in *Daily Express*, 4.4.90
2. Elson, John. *History, the Sequel*, *Time Magazine*, November 7, 1994.
3. Jenkins, Keith *Re-Thinking History*, Routledge, 1991.
4. Carr, E.H. *What is history?*, Pelican, 1961. Ibid
6. Kitson-Clark, G. *The Critical Historian*, Heinemann, 1967. See J.S. Bruner’s theories in his books, *The Process of Education* (1960) and *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, (1966)
8. Palmer, M. & Batho, G.R. *The Source Method in History Teaching*, Historical Association N.48, 1981
9. Deuchar, Stewart *History and GCSE history*, The Centre of Policy Studies, 1987.
10. Shemilt, Denis. *History 13 - 16: Evaluation Study*, Holmes McDougall, 1981.

Notes for Contributors

Education 2000 is a magazine, published twice yearly (March/April and November/December periods), distributed free to all teachers, school administrators, student teachers and other educational practitioners who are interested in the study and development of the various areas of the school curriculum, teachers’ professional development and school management. Its main objective is to facilitate the dissemination of research findings, effective practice and teaching and learning ideas. Each edition will have contributions related to education in the primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary sectors. We welcome the following kinds of contributions:

- Reports of research which has implications for the school/classroom situation. (A considerable amount of work in this regard is carried out in the form of dissertations for education degrees. Often this kind of work is shelved and forgotten. This journal will seek to assist in the publication of such work);
- Accounts of school/classroom curriculum-related activities and teaching ideas;
- Discussions of current issues in the teaching of the various curriculum areas and subjects at all ages.

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 - all illustrative material in a separate envelope, but with the name of the author and contribution noted on it.
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