

PUTTING HISTORY IN ITS PLACE:

Grounding the Australian Curriculum: History in local community

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Abstract

This position paper develops the case for a greater focus on the teaching of local histories in the Australian Curriculum: History. It takes as its starting point an Indigenous epistemology that understands knowledge to be embedded in the land. This connection between knowledge and country is used to examine recent literature on whether the teaching of history in schools can succeed in the context of the new history curriculum. Various proposals from academics to develop a framework that can be used to select appropriate content and approaches to teaching history in Australia are explored. It questions whether a geographically dispersed and diverse body of students can ever be engaged with knowledge that is often taught far from the place of its making. The paper eschews the traditional concepts used by historians to teach and interpret history, to propose a greater focus on learning from country.

Introduction

Before enrolling in a third year curriculum unit in teacher education, 138 primary pre-service teachers at a university in Australia were surveyed to determine the extent of their prior knowledge of Australian history. The questionnaire 'What do you know about Australian history' used a range of short answer questions. The questions were chosen because they related to the content of the new Australian Curriculum: History from Years 3-6 (ACARA, 2012). The average score of the 138 students who participated in the questionnaire was approximately 6 out of 18 (36%). The highest score was 15 out of 18, and the lowest score was 0.

This lack of historical knowledge is not peculiar to Australia, and is common among teachers in related countries such as Canada, the USA (Osborne, 2003) and New Zealand (Manning, 2011). Given that Lawless (2010) and Clark (2008) argue that history 'is much more than the ability to fill out blanks on a survey' (Osborne, 2003, p. 588), should this level of content knowledge among primary preservice teachers be a concern? Are these results significant in

terms of the capabilities of teachers to teach history in primary schools? How should we be preparing primary preservice teachers to teach 'history' as a discreet discipline? This paper will suggest that neither historical content nor methods should be the initial focus of our preparation in teacher education.

Debates over the correct lens

An Inspector at the New South Wales Board of Studies, Jennifer Lawless notes that there is more to history than teaching content knowledge. Effective and authentic teaching practice in history, she suggests, encourages students 'to be curious and pose interesting and engaging questions about the past' (2010, p. 22). Students should have:

the opportunities to engage in exciting classroom experiences that involve a range of sources, role play, oral history, museum and site visits, archaeology, interpretations, empathy, historical fiction and film, family history and heritage, local history, re-enactments and historical drama (Lawless, 2010, p. 22).

For Lawless, teaching history is about studying the past, and encouraging children 'to be curious about the past' (2010, p. 19). But of course, this begs the question: How do students learn to be curious? Can they be taught to be curious outside the teacher's own curiousness?

In a study of what engages students in history classrooms, Anna Clark (2008, p.6) notes that 'we all know what students don't know about the nation's history. But we are less clear on what they do know. For instance, how do they engage with Australia's past?'. Clark (2008) conducted a study in 2006 of how students engage with Australian history in high school. In interviews with students and teachers at 34 schools across Australia, the response from students was categorical. They described Australian history as 'dull and repetitive' and most of the time they 'seemed turned off' (Clark, 2008, p. 14).

Should it be a surprise when students and teachers alike proclaim that topics such as federation are 'as boring as bat shit', with Clark (2008, p. 22) adding the rider, 'Australians generally aren't renowned for their great or reverential attachment to political history'. She notes this problem of connection to context in an interview with a teacher: 'its [federation] extremely important to all Australians and it is an interesting story, but how do you connect a kid with that?' (2008, p. 30). The teacher answers her own question by speculating that if children were to find federation engaging, 'they'd do it from the local perspective, like what did the saw millers, the loggers and the fishermen and the berry pickers and the farmers think about federation and what did it mean to them in 1901 without iPods and faxes...' (2008, p. 30).

Most curriculum planners and teachers are well aware that when students complain about learning that is boring, they are referring to the disembodied nature of that knowledge and learning, and that the content has nothing to do with them or with their experiences. The

content is disconnected and distanced from their context of experience. We also know that these stories from the classroom highlight the futility of attempts to teach content which has been alienated from its place of production, through distancing techniques that most students of history will never come to know or recognise, irrespective of whether their classroom is in the city or in Arnhemland. However, pedagogical insights and knowhow are often overtaken by political realities.

Clark proceeds to highlight the paradox between what parents and politicians expect from history teaching (that children know their Australian history) and how history can be made relevant and engaging for children (when children think that history is boring)? Children are thinking, where does the knowledge come from, and what's it got to do with me? Clark (2008, p. 31) continues to quote other interviews with teachers: 'it's much more important for the Indigenous students [in my class] to learn about the gaining of rights' and about the times when children were taken from their parents than it is to teach students about federation, which doesn't have any relevance to them.

In a study that has the potential to explicate how kids *do* connect with history, Clark concludes that it comes down to good teaching, that history must be 'taught well' (2008, p. 145). While she returns to a key issue raised by teachers time and again in interviews, that history is linked to place, and children like history when they are connected to the local, this major point is overtaken by her conclusion that history can succeed in schools when teachers employ engaging methodologies. The crucial point made by the teacher above that not even the most engaging and effective teacher will convince a class of Aboriginal students in Arnhemland that they should know about federation, is overlooked. Her study ultimately proposes that history is produced in relation to a carefully honed teaching methodology, which draws upon evidence from the past to arrive at interpretations and conclusions.

History as cognition

In an insightful article on *Can history succeed at school?* Gilbert (2011) examines the goals of the proposed Australian history curriculum, arguing that the purposes of teaching history have not been clarified and there has certainly been no focus on the important question of *why teach history?* He proceeds to investigate the 'problem of content' selection (p. 250) noting that the study of history cannot determine what is important for students to know (p. 251). Gilbert adds that historians have not been able to determine which questions are worth asking, and this was highlighted in Anna Clark's interviews with above students. While politicians and parents might think that they know what students should know, the children themselves may not be interested in such questions. And hence Gilbert returns to the issue of what criteria or model can be used to select the appropriate content, apart from perhaps using periods of

time as an organisational framework. He adds that a chronology of past events is unlikely to engage students in any serious problem solving and decision making (p. 252).

Problems over defining curriculum content lead Gilbert back to a focus on the historians' conceptual categories. He compares narrative explanation and conceptual models of historical process to privilege the argument that narrative experience is unable to offer explanation. He (2011, p. 253) argues that historical narrative is more a form of description of what happened, and fails to employ the bread and butter of historical method, *evidence* to explain and justify. He suggests that narrative is a low order skill that 'fails to offer the deep knowledge for problem-solving in history', drawing upon Vellerman (2003, p. 22) to add: 'telling a story is often a means to being believed for no good reason'. Joan Scott (1991) builds upon this critique from Gilbert and Vellerman to support the proposition that narrative lacks the explanatory and evidential power required of historical discourse.

In a radical challenge to historical method at the time, Scott (1991) questions appeals to personal experience as a source of evidence for writing history. She observes that in personal historical accounts, seeing has become the origin of knowing, and writing its reproduction and transmission. She brings to an abrupt end the growing supposition that experience is knowledge, and argues instead that experience is mediated through discourse just as the historians' conceptual categories filter what is observed and known. She is highly critical of those historians who privilege experience over a conceptual framework in order to lay claims to the truth that 'I was there so I know'. She proceeds to argue that 'experience is not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain' (1991, p. 797), thus positioning language as the foundation and organiser of historical knowledge. Similar arguments were developed by Clifford (1988; 1986) in the field of ethnography and by critical feminists (Harding, 1993, 1991; Haraway, 1991) around this time. They began to question whether experience could constitute a cultural reality or truth. They turned their analysis to an examination of how knowledge is produced in western science.

Gilbert explains that narrative 'fails to offer the deep knowledge for problem-solving in history' (2011, p. 253), and so he turns to a set of benchmarks of historical thinking, *evidence, cause and effect, change and continuity, empathy* (p. 254). He observes that these benchmarks now constitute 'the foundational ideas of the discipline' in terms of their contribution to the organising framework of the syllabus. They accept narrative as having an object insofar as it refers to something outside itself. Narrative is conceptualised as a conveyor of meaning or as a tool to explain. It is capable of explaining an external world, but only through the lens of personal experience (Vellerman, 2003).

Historical narratives

Both Gilbert (2011) and Vellerman (2003) conceptualise narrative as a tool with an object or referent. They equate narrative discourse with ‘knowledge’ and hence they draw a separation between the narration and the interpretation of the historical event, via the narrative. They both argue that narrative aims to *explain*, and therefore to represent events (knowledge) to others, accurately or otherwise. But according to Clark (above), it is this very form of representation that disillusiones and alienates students of history. The students in her study are not motivated by a discipline that continues to distance and alienate.

Vellerman (2003, p. 20) posits that narratives ‘act on the emotional cadence in the audience’ to produce ‘a subjective understanding of how to feel’ about historical events. She proceeds to argue that ‘memorable experiences are the ones that we have stored in the form of stories’, and that such stories, based as they are on individual memory are ultimately unreliable in places such as courts of law and in psychology. But if we compare Vellerman’s position with the work of Halbwachs on knowledge and collective memory, narrative can be conceptualised differently.

Halbwachs (1992, p. 52-53) argues that similarity of family memories is a sign of a community of interests and thoughts:

It is not because memories resemble each other that several can be called to mind at the same time. It is rather because the same group is interested in them and is able to call them to mind at the same time that they resemble each other... We can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group.

Halbwachs (1992, p. 53) emphasises that we cannot understand the strength and the ways in which memories combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the group. He argues that the fundamental distinction between history and memory is:

as long as memory stays alive within the group’s collective experience, there is no necessity to write it down or to fix it as the official story of events. But when distance appears conferring distance and exclusions, opening a gap between past and present, then history begins to be artificially created. History divides the continuum of time into static periods and didactic stages when in reality time exhibits undemarcated and irregular boundaries.

On the question of structure, Halbwachs (1992) argues that what makes memories stick together is not that they are ‘contiguous in time’ but that they are part of a ‘totality of thoughts common to a group, the group of people with whom we have a relation’. The memories have to be placed within a totality of memories common to, for example a family.

Narrative experiences do not need to be conceived as knowledge capable of explaining an exterior world. Rather it is ‘knowledge’ that acts to position the individual within a group, and provides the individual with a collective identity, just as memories of land (of the seasons,

winds, plants and animals habits) give people an identity in-place.

Azarian-Ceccato (2010) tells how narratives are practised as a form of socialisation in an Armenian community in California where the stories of Armenian genocide in 1915 Turkey are retold from one generation to the next as if they are forever present events. These narrative experiences act as a collective production of the community. They are not so much about past events, as much as they are about the present community. The narratives allow the community to real-ise itself in place.

Putting history in its place

In Gilbert's analysis of the Australian history curriculum, he expresses his disappointment over the fact that the National History Summit, along with writers of the Australian history curriculum failed to consider questions such as *why teach history?* Despite the recognition that children are bored with decontextualised historical knowledge (Clark, 2008), there is little attempt by curriculum designers to explore how any other knowledge could be produced outside the interpretive imagination of the classroom. Adopting a framework of concepts to read and understand Australian history does not appear to be a recipe for engaging the interest of students in the discipline. In place of experience students have been required to learn from a 'standardised, placeless curriculum' (Gruenewald, 2002, p. 8). Much of the debate around the proposed Australian history curriculum has oscillated between the dichotomies of personal experience and scientific objectifications. History has, in the main been taken out of its place and put into books and libraries. It has become the detritus of the twenty first century to the point where the discipline has lost its place, epistemologically. And because experiences have been taken out of their place and made to stand objectively 'on their own', historians no longer 'know what to remember and what to forget, what to let go of and what to preserve' (Rose, 1992, p. 16). The discipline has become placeless. A history without roots is being taught.

In the push for objectivity and the desire to be recognised as a legitimate discipline with acknowledged scientific methods, historians readily dismissed a key argument in the debate over teaching history in schools from the then Prime Minister, John Howard at a National Press Club lunch. Howard (2006) observed that 'young people are at risk of being disinherited from their community if that community lacks the courage and confidence to teach its history'. Gilbert interprets this position from Howard as an argument about identity, which it surely is, but it also overlooks the crucial point concerning identity in relation to community, that the teaching and learning of history must occur in relation to 'place'. The purpose for teaching history seems to be quite clear here, at least for John Howard, in that it allows the student to locate him or herself in relation to a place that he or she recognises rather than in relation to knowledge that is objectified and presented in foreign contexts. Howard (2006) argues that

these young people get their place and identity through their interactions with family and community. History indeed comes from somewhere, and to objectify it surely plays into the hands of those who would argue that 'history is fiction' (Curthoys & Docker, 2006).

Indigenous methodologies

Moreton-Robinson and Walters (2009, p. 3) argue that Indigenous knowledge cannot exist outside social relations to country:

As the Western economic and political systems became more broadly institutionalised, the knowledges system gradually became institutionalised within universities and the professions. Indigenous knowledge systems, of course, do not share this historical heritage. Rather, Indigenous peoples have developed their knowledge systems over millennia living on and alongside the land. Indigenous peoples' knowledges are therefore predicated on societal relations with country.

They argue that Indigenous knowledges come from many sources including ancestors, stories and experience, and are embedded in land, in its seasons and memories. This is contrary to the western academic tradition where knowledge is reproduced in disembodied form.

Indigenist researcher, Karen Martin (2003, p. 3) highlights the difficulty for many students in attempting to learn the proposed 'ways of thinking' (concepts) of the Australian Curriculum: History when she talks about her own knowledge and experience being 'measured against pre-determined categories of culture'. Her (2003, p. 13), research questions focus on 'location, or country', adding that (2003 p. 9):

Ways of Knowing is specific to ontology and Entities of Land, Animals, Plants, Waterways, Skies, Climate and Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups. Knowledge about ontology and Entities is learned and reproduced through processes of listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging, applying.

Children do not learn about things outside the classroom in the above model, they learn on country, through the seasons, from the winds and water, the animals. The division between learner and the object of learning is absent. Learning is conditional on the child being connected to country. Indigenous methodologies then are not about discovering 'new' objects, rather they are designed to illuminate the researchers' collaborative relationship to something that is already there in country, in order to build shared meanings (Fredericks, 2007). Knowledge exists in the land rather than in our heads.

The designers would argue that the focus of the Australian Curriculum: History for primary students is on 'significance' within the context of personal, family and local history'. That is, the new curriculum does focus on local community, from an objective distance. The significance or meaning of the local is produced and understood through cognitive concepts such as 'cause and effect', linear sequencing, and through the privileging of expository texts

over narrative. The ways in which meaning is produced through these key concepts will continue to suit those students who divide up their world in these ways, believing that significance is produced in our minds, yet alienate those who bring another epistemology to bear on classroom learning.

Gruenewald (2003) notes that 'places teach us about how the world works'. Place makes us. Sobel (1998, p. 10) focuses on ecological education to conclude 'what's important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds'. The focus of the new Australian Curriculum: History could be on building children's relationships to *their* community, rather than on building their individual cognitive skills and understandings *about* the community. These relationships are built through the child's experiences with place, and through collective narratives of these experiences. It is difficult for western education to imagine a position other than where connections to country come out of students thinking *about* them. Yet this is our task if we are to prepare teachers to teach the Australian Curriculum: History outside the arbitrary and parochial limits of 'cause and effect' and outside the discourses privileged in education that rely on dichotomies for their existence.

Conclusion

It does seem odd that in the context of thousands of years of Australian history, along with the development of complex Indigenous epistemologies across the country that contemporary designers of the new Australian curriculum eschew this wealth of 'knowhow' in their attempts to develop their 'own' epistemology. Indeed, this paper has described how some historians actively denounce Indigenous historical methods as unconvincing. However, they are not yet able to define history, or to identify what is important nor to identify where history comes from (Gilbert, 2011). It must therefore seem a little arrogant to those who have not arrived in this country in the last two hundred years, that a recent group of immigrants could subsequently take so little account of the places and country upon which they have settled, and yet presume to know.

This paper has suggested that learning history is about learning how to read oneself in country. To take history out of the place and put it in books and documents that teach *about* community is to ensure that children become further divorced from the place in which they live.

Although Gilbert (2011), Clark (2008, 2006) and Lawless (2010) provide us with valuable insights into the problems of teaching history in creative and imaginative ways, they continue to be caught within the content versus methods debate. Gilbert supports the teaching of history as a valuable method of teaching children how to think and conceptualise. Both Clarke and

Lawless suggest that if teaching is effective then children will be inspired to learn Australian history. This approach may work in mono-cultural classrooms but it raises issues in contexts where different ontologies are at work. The debate so far has not addressed the question of how we can begin to ground the Australian Curriculum: History outside the content and methods debate. I have suggested in this paper that we could be thinking about how the teaching of history can be actively performative rather than representational. Most teaching is *about* the world *outside* the classroom. Somehow we need to get students and teachers out there too.

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