

## **What sense do students make of using scholarship in the classroom? Contextual questions for early careers teachers**

It's hard to imagine these days that when I played football at primary school in the late 50s and early 60s we rarely saw professional footballers in action. There was only one live match on TV each year – the Cup Final. Highlights of international games were on TV occasionally but too late to watch on school nights. There were no weekend coaching sessions either, of the sort that fill local parks today. No wonder as 7 and 8-year-olds we milled about the pitch with no idea of positions, tactics or anything much else really.

I've started with my long-ago experience of primary school football because it has something in common with students 'doing history' at school without ever having seen the work of historians:

What do historians do – and why? What are the individual skills required? What does the final product look like?

It seems important that students are introduced to the work of historians throughout their history education but how do you get the best out of using such scholarship? As a small contribution, I've set out below a series of questions which underpin the most important question of all:

### **What sense do students make of using scholarship in the classroom?**

Finally I've contextualised the importance of this question by briefly looking at three other initiatives that I feel never fully realised their potential, in large part because we did not spend enough time asking what sense students were making of them.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **The individual questions that underpin my central question.**

#### ***What is scholarship and how does it differ from other forms of historical communication?***

Using scholarship implies that what's being used has a particular status that's different from other texts and forms of historical communication. So do students need to see other kinds of historical communication for comparison e.g. school textbooks, 'popular' histories, podcasts, TV series tie-in histories, academic articles etc and discuss explicitly how they differ? What marks out scholarship

from other forms of historical communication? Do they need to be aware of the roles of footnotes and bibliographies or other features?

For an introduction to identifying different types of history books at A level see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/DifferentTypesHistoryBooks.html>

What counts as ‘scholarship’? It can be difficult to gauge the status of books outside your own specialism, especially books written for a general audience by someone with a history degree (or two) but who writes about a range of historical topics. What can appear to be scholarly to a non-specialist can be given short-shrift by a research historian.

What are the overlaps between scholarship and new archaeological finds? Can archaeology be used fruitfully to build up ideas about the role of scholarship?

***What preconceptions do students bring about the nature of ‘doing history’, what historians do, what types of history books etc exist?***

This is a critical issue. What sense students make of using scholarship depends on what preconceptions they bring with them about the nature of history when they arrive in your classes. Is History a subject that’s essentially about ‘facts’ and certainties or a subject in which uncertainty is a constant and in which alternative interpretations of the past are continually evolving?

If students think of history as being fundamentally about facts then is it much harder for them to appreciate the role and nature of scholarship? And is there a risk that they simply see scholarship as providing the ‘right’ answers because it’s the most recent version of history?

***Why use scholarship in the classroom?***

What precisely are your takeaways about scholarship – what do you want students to take away, remember and re-use in later years and beyond the classroom?

Some possibilities are to use scholarship to exemplify, model or discuss:

- a) that historical interpretations are current and developing – not static. History is a continuing enquiry and conversation amongst historians.

b) different types of historical writing and where the ideas and material in their school texts comes from

c) what historians do – ask questions, develop arguments, revise interpretations, communicate.

d) to excite students with the idea of new interpretations and discoveries

e) how historians use sources as evidence to build an argument/interpretation and deal with uncertainties and gaps in evidence.

f) how historians discuss causes and consequences change/continuity etc

And strongly linked to the issue of objectives:

How does the use of scholarship progress and how does the complexity of takeaways develop as students get older?

What can GCSE and A level each contribute to students' understanding of how historians work?

***Does it have to be recent scholarship?***

Does using recent or new scholarship have a different purpose from using high quality scholarship from earlier eras? Does this depend on your exact objectives in using scholarship?

What do students think happens to older research and scholarship – is it only fit for recycling?

***What has to be left out of your curriculum to make way for discussion of scholarship?***

A horribly practical but essential question – but to do this successfully takes another big bite out of your already limited time. How do you assess the losses against the gains?

And finally, back to my core question:

***What sense do students make of using scholarship in the classroom?***

Can students, in their own words, explain what scholarship is and why they're using it in lessons?

How does exposure to scholarship affect students' understanding of the nature of history and why it's valuable for them to study?

To make a significant impact on students' thinking are the following required?

- a) explicit explanation of why students are using scholarship, what it is, how it's different from other types of historical communications
- b) Diagnosis of students' preconceptions
- c) Explicit tasks and discussion of whether their preconceptions have changed or adapted as a result of this work?

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Contextualising the Questions**

What prompted me to pose the questions above, particularly my core question about what sense do students make of their work with scholarship?

I've done so because of a fear that, like other valuable initiatives in the past, the use of scholarship in the classroom might not deliver its potential if insufficient classroom time is spent on identifying and discussing the aims of this work with students.

Here are three very brief and therefore simplified examples:

#### ***1. What sense do students make of ... the 'discontinuous' SCHP syllabus?***

SCHP's original course structure consisted of 4 units – a Development Study across time, a Depth Study covering around fifty years, a History Around Us unit exploring a local site and a Modern World study tracing the development of a current issue such as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The purpose of this structure was to explain to students why history could make a valuable contribution to their education – each of the four units had particular goals (and by goals I don't mean assessment objectives). However, teachers who came to SCHP/SHP in the 80s and afterwards often didn't have the training needed to understand those deeper aims. Therefore, as SHP spread, many teachers saw the variety of the 4-part syllabus as an end in itself – and what many students saw was an even simpler interpretation of what SCHP was about – they defined their course as

being ‘Medicine, The American West, the Arab-Israeli conflict and castles’. Students, therefore, didn’t make sense of the structure of their course. They didn’t know and couldn’t explain why their course had four very different components – it was just a bundle of diverse content.

SCHP/SHP had therefore failed to achieve its deepest aim, to enable students to understand how studying history could illuminate and help them navigate their own world.

## **2. What sense do students make of ... using sources in the classroom?**

SCHP’s original rationale for saying that students MUST use sources was that, firstly, sources are an integral part of how historians study the past so they should be an integral part of school history and, secondly, that by learning how to assess the objectivity and value of sources for particular questions then students can learn how to assess the objectivity and value of the information they read, hear and are pulverised by through media today. Their historical skills will help them become more discerning, aware, thoughtful citizens. Is that how students make sense of their use of sources or is it just another activity they do in history, another hurdle to cross en route to an exam grade?

## **3. What sense do students make of ... enquiry questions?**

Much time is spent developing enquiry questions but do students see them as having a particular status as ‘enquiry questions’ or are they just another question in a day packed with questions in every lesson? Do they know what makes an ‘enquiry question’ different from other questions?

I’ve explained at length (in the link below) how and why in my mind enquiry questions are so important. It’s because they involve explicit use of the enquiry process that can ultimately develop students’ ability to study independently – a reason that has to be discussed and explained explicitly otherwise, in students’ minds, they’re just tackling yet another question.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/EnquiryImportance.html>

## **Conclusions: What sense do students make of ...**

What these parallels suggest is the absolute importance of identifying what sense students make of using scholarship in the classroom and relating it to their preconceptions about the nature of history. The ideas above all had admirable aims and the potential for making a huge contribution to students’ understanding of the nature of history and the value of studying it – but if students don’t understand and can’t explain explicitly why they’re on the receiving end of such teaching, then the dice are heavily loaded against achieving the aims we’re hoping for.