

An Under-Estimated Concept?

The centrality of Uncertainty in studying History

As a young teacher in the 1970s I was tremendously excited by the Schools Council History Project's *What is History?* pack. The pack was an introduction to using sources as evidence, beginning with the Mystery of Mark Pullen – the sources being the contents of Mark's wallet, found by his dead body in a rural lane. What was he doing there? How and why did he die? Students at KS3 were absorbed, puzzled, intrigued.

Most of the rest of the pack built on the same approach while introducing different types of sources – the Mystery of Tollund Man transferred the approach to a historical context, then came explorations of Richard III and the Princes in the Tower and Emily Davison's Derby. All created interest and engagement but they produced one other reaction too – frustration.

Students were frustrated because there were no certain answers to any of the core questions from what happened to Mark Pullen onwards. Time and again lessons ended with students begging to know the answer – uncertainty wasn't what they expected at all in history lessons. They expected certainties, definite answers, facts – and for me to produce the answer from my back pocket just before the bell sounded. This was because their most basic and powerful preconception was that History was about certainties, that it involved learning facts, that there was one correct version of the past – what really happened – and this version would be revealed to them across their years of history lessons. I've probably expressed that preconception quite crudely but it's there or thereabouts as description – and all the more powerful in its impact on students' thinking because it was rarely articulated by students.

What is History? was designed to challenge that preconception but, in retrospect, even a term spent studying questions to which there were no definite, certain answers didn't do enough to make a significant dent in students' ideas. In part my teaching didn't help. I was focussed on discussing sources and using it as evidence, itself a new idea in the 70s. I hadn't been introduced to one single source during my classic 'Golden Age' grammar school education in the 60s. As a result I didn't hammer the 'history is about uncertainty' theme. I didn't finish the package with a certainty – uncertainty continuum line and ask students where they'd put each of the main questions we'd explored on that continuum. I didn't challenge that core misconception head-on.

More important than my limited teaching, however, was the context of the rest of the History courses students studied – the majority of KS3 was a chronological coverage of largely British history. O level and CSE courses didn't ask about uncertainty – they wanted answers, just as the students wanted to be told what the answers were so they could reproduce them in exams. Those courses drowned out the idea that History is discipline in which we're constantly having to think about how certain or uncertain we are about our answers to questions.

I've been reminded about all this recently by my own experiences of 'doing' history while researching and writing about the Redmayn family in the fifteenth century. The sources are very limited, chiefly consisting of references in the extensive government records to family members' being appointed to local government and military roles or being granted land and money. There are no personal records other than wills – no letters, no household or estate documents. This means there are huge gaps in what I can find out so, in writing about the Redmayns I've constantly been thinking about the validity of what I can say – for every paragraph, sometimes for each sentence, I have to ask myself 'how certain or uncertain can I be about this?'

And this has made me wonder whether 'uncertainty' is the under-estimated or even forgotten concept in history education. That's a big claim (and whether 'uncertainty' is or isn't a concept could be debated but that's just splitting hairs) – but, looking back, I know that I failed to challenge students' most basic misconception about studying history. They came in thinking that history is about facts and certainties, that there's right answers, correct interpretations of almost every topic. I thought it just took a few lessons to make students realise this isn't the case – and I was wrong.

This makes me think that uncertainty has to run through History courses like Scarborough through a stick of rock – visible in every bite. One of the problems is that too many questions that students tackle appear to be expecting certainty – to students, questions such as 'Why did William win the Battle of Hastings?' are about identifying the 'right' explanation, not inviting them to explore why we can't be certain about the exact balance of reasons for William's success. Students need to be asked 'why can't we be certain about why William won the Battle of Hastings?' – thus making uncertainty explicit and valued, a virtue, not a failing. That's another idea students struggle with – that uncertainty is not just OK but a strength when setting out on a historical enquiry. This goes against the grain of much they encounter in the rest of the curriculum where uncertainty feels like a confession of failure.

And this can't be a one-off question – it doesn't matter whether questions are exploring explanations, the balance of change and continuity or significance etc. in all cases, students need to be invited to discuss the degree of certainty and uncertainty that's possible. Related closely to this is the need for students to become imbued with saying 'it depends' when answering questions – and that this is also a strong answer, not a weakness. 'It depends' on who, where, exactly when we're discussing, the immense diversity of experiences of events and reactions to events – and so get away from generalisations which sound certain but are too much so.

Therefore degrees of certainty/uncertainty need to be engrained in the warp and weft of courses, visible and explicit throughout courses – again just like Scarborough runs through a whole stick of rock and isn't just visible in the last inch. At the end of every enquiry they need to place themselves or their answer on a certainty-uncertainty continuum and see physically and very concretely that they aren't right up at the certainty end, that History is about degrees of certainty and uncertainty.

And if students don't see History as being a discipline that involves the constant analysis of the degree to which we can be certain, then what sense do they really make of historians offering differing interpretations? Is there a risk that they see the 'scholarship' they read in the classroom as the 'right' answer rather than being the latest stage in the conversation amongst historians about a question or topic?

And, if they don't abandon that most basic misconception (the assumption that studying History involves learning all those facts and certainties), then they will miss out on what is, I think, one of the most significant ideas that's transferable to life beyond the classroom. One way in which the discipline of History can help students navigate challenges in their world is to help them become more comfortable with uncertainty and realise that in 'real life' simple, certain answers are as rare as they are when studying History.

So for all those reasons, when I look back I know that I badly underestimated the importance of uncertainty in constructing courses and specifications and in the teaching that followed – it was a visitor not a continual resident and thus didn't have the necessary effect of challenging and changing students' perception of the nature of History or of appreciating the value of the uncertainty for navigating life beyond the classroom.

See also:

Why we should frame questions that explicitly suggest answers will be uncertain.

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

The Nature and Significance of enquiry in History Teaching

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

Abdelsebhor, Aswan and why I think it's important to teach history?

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/SmileAswan.pdf>