

History education in a post-truth world: a view from England

Terry Haydn, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England

t.haydn@uea.ac.uk

Abstract

Concern for truth and respect for evidence are fundamental pillars of the discipline of history. As Lipscomb (2016) noted, ‘You cannot be a historian and a liar.’ Concern for truth and respect for evidence are also important elements of a just society and a healthy democracy and it could be argued that lack of respect for truth and evidence is currently causing serious problems in many countries.

School history could be an important asset in cultivating an understanding of the importance of truth, and the complexities involved in ascertaining the validity of truth claims, and yet in England and many other countries, it is a neglected facet of school history. In the current version of the National Curriculum in England, there is no mention of the word ‘truth’. Although the issue of ‘interpretations’ of the past receives appropriate attention in curriculum specifications, textbooks and writing about the teaching of history, less attention has focused on the importance of developing pupils’ understanding of the concept of truthfulness or veracity, in the sense of the ethical importance of making an honest attempt to provide the most accurate explanation possible from the evidence available.

Radical changes in the way that people access information over the past decade, with a huge increase in the amount of information about the past (and the present) accessed my social media outlets has drastically increased the amount of ‘bad history’ that people are exposed to. This is ‘bad history’, in the sense of history that is not mediated by the university, the school room or any community of professional practice (Haydn and Ribbens, 2017).

The paper argues that a historical education appropriate to these changing times needs to expose students to ‘bad history’, and to explain to them why it is bad, how it persuades, and why it is produced.

The concluding section of the chapter suggests ways in which history teachers might help to develop pupils’ understanding of the importance of respect for truth and evidence as a moral and ethical issue, rather than simply an intellectual one.

Differing ideas about the aims and purposes of school history

Why do all countries make their young people study history? There are different ways of looking at the usefulness of school history. Traditionally (and up to the present day in many countries), governments/states/nations have tried to use school history to cultivate loyalty and pride in the nation (Cajani *et al.*, 2019).

In the UK, as elsewhere, there has been a high profile public and policy debate about the aims and purposes of school history. Some have argued that the aims of school history are enduring and unchanging, and should not be subject to the whims of what is topical, relevant or fashionable. Former Chief Inspector for Schools (an important role in the UK education system) argued that ‘When it comes to history, surely the focus ought to be the national story and the national story hasn’t changed in the last decade or so (Woodhead, 2005). Former Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove stated that ‘Curriculum content should contain the classical canon of history.... We should pull back from seeking to make content more relevant to the contemporary concerns and lives of young people’ (Gove, 2010a).

In the UK, the main aim of school history was often seen as a vehicle for inculcating a sense of patriotism into young people (see, for example, Aldrich 1990). More recently, this has morphed into a concern for helping ‘social cohesion’ – binding everyone together with a positive, shared identity, so that everyone gets along and feels a sense of togetherness and common purpose (Gove, 2010a).

In the UK, from the 1970s onwards, more importance was attached to the idea of history being useful to young people; giving them ‘transferable skills’, making them more employable, the idea that understanding the discipline of history is actually useful in real life, for making intelligent decisions, making good judgements about the validity of claims to knowledge.

Over the past decade, some attention has focused on global problems and the role that history might play in helping improve these international problems, for example, climate change. The English National Curriculum for history states that school history should help pupils to understand ‘the challenges of their times’ (but the focus remains predominantly on the transmission of a knowledge of the national past). This raises the question: what are ‘the challenges of our times’?

(Underpinning all these aims and purposes is the idea of ‘historical perspectives’. Is there any issue, question, problem into which we cannot gain more insight by looking at what has gone before?)

The success of right-wing political parties in the UK over the past decade has led to a move towards the more traditional forms of history which dominated prior to ‘The New History’ which evolved in the 1970s. The past decade has seen increased emphasis on the importance of substantive historical knowledge and a focus on transmission of a body of knowledge about the national past. Politicians and policymakers have been sceptical about the amount of time given to the idea of developing ‘skills’ through school history, and the importance attached to the understanding of second order or ‘disciplinary’ concepts’ (see Haydn, 2012 for further development of these points). The result is that in a ‘counter-revolution’ to the advent of ‘New History’ in the 1970s, ‘official’ school history in the UK has regressed to the traditional model of history in schools before the 1970s. Whereas most countries in Europe

were moving towards a historical education which included ideas about historical thinking, historical culture and historical consciousness, the UK was moving in the opposite direction, towards the restoration of school history as the transmission of a positive and celebratory story of the national past. In the words of a recent Secretary of State for Education, ‘What parents want is children sitting in rows learning about the kings and queens of England’ (Gove, 2010b).

A (comparatively) unremarked change in the English National Curriculum, compared to the 2007 version (DfE, 2007) was the excision of moral and ethical dimensions of the school curriculum, which was contained in a section on the aims, values and purposes of the school curriculum. This focused largely on human rather than national values as the following extract demonstrates:

Equality of opportunity for all, a healthy and just democracy... commitment to the virtues of truth, justice, honesty, trust and a sense of duty... to make a difference for the better... develop principles for distinguishing between right and wrong... develop pupils’ integrity and autonomy and help them to be responsible and caring citizens capable of contributing to the development of a just society... enable pupils to challenge discrimination and stereotyping, develop awareness and understanding of, and respect for, the environments in which they live, and secure their commitment to sustainable development at a personal, local, national and global level... develop their ability to relate to others and work for the common good.

The 2014 version of the National Curriculum removed the section on these moral and ethical values and dispositions and replaced them with the stipulation that all schools and teachers of all subjects must promote ‘Fundamental British Values’, defined as Democracy, The Rule of Law, Individual liberty, mutual respect for those with different faiths and beliefs, Tolerance. (DfE, 2014).

This paper considers the implications of these changes in the context of the socio-cultural changes outlined in the abstract. It argues that school history should evolve to help pupils to address ‘the challenges of their times’ (Department for Education, 2014: 1). It suggests that if the history curriculum focuses solely on the nation state and national history, we will lose out on some of the benefits which the study of the past might bestow on young people, and the ways in which it might make society, and the world, a better place.

The importance of getting pupils to understand that the learning of history can sometimes do more harm than good

It would be ingenuous to suggest that a historical education is *a priori* ‘a good thing’ and that the more history young people know and learn, the better things will be for the nation and for society. History can sometimes do more harm than good. In the words of Denis Shemilt, ‘At their most potent and malignant, selective, partial and mythical histories transmitted outside the classroom have nursed religious, ethnic and national hatreds, scratched the scabs of victimhood and breathed new life into old grievances (Shemilt, 2011: 73). In similar vein, Niall Ferguson points out the dangers of what he terms the ‘pseudo-history’ which is now widely accessed by those who get most of their history from social media:

Pseudo-history plays an important part in justifying massacres by giving perpetrators the idea that their enemies are not quite human and that exemplary violence will accelerate their expulsion. The communist president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, lit the fuse in 1989 with a rabble-rousing speech to mark the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. The watchword of Milosevic’s campaign was that the Serbs who lived in Bosnia and Kosovo were “endangered”.

This is the repulsive tradition to which the Christchurch killer, Brenton Tarrant, belongs. His 74-page manifesto, *The Great Replacement*, is a grab-bag of pseudo-history that casts Muslims in the western world as “invaders”, invoking past battles between Muslims and Christians.

The difference is that Tarrant did not need a modern equivalent of Milosevic to feed him this drivel. Unlike in 1992, it is now possible for a mediocre underachiever to educate himself by wandering through the wormholes of the internet, going wherever Google’s algorithms may lead — which is generally from Wikipedia to the most febrile conspiracy theories and then on to alt-right message boards.

(Ferguson, 2019)

An important part of a historical education appropriate for the 21st century is to get pupils to understand that the past can sometimes have a powerful and sometimes harmful impact on the present, by resurrecting or sustaining ancient hatreds and grievances. They should also understand that these grievances are sometimes ‘stirred up’ and invoked in unscrupulous ways for unethical and immoral purposes in order to justify present day positions and policy aims. The way that history has been used to inflame passions and hatreds in Ireland and the former state of Yugoslavia is a graphic demonstration of this way of ‘using’ history.

It is important to teach pupils to distinguish between good and bad history

As long ago as 2002, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm warned that ‘History is being invented in vast quantities... the world is today full of people inventing histories and lying about history (Hobsbawm, 2002). If this was the case in 2002, it is even more the case today, given the proportion of information about the past (and the present) that people get from social media – unmediated by books written by professional historians, the history classroom, or the university seminar.

In view of this change, a crucially important facet of school history needs to be to teach students the difference between good and bad history. Rather than attempting the impossible task of shielding pupils from bad history, a good way of doing this is to show them examples of bad history, and explain why it's bad, and how unscrupulous people try to use history to manipulate the public. Given the sophistication with which information can be manipulated and distorted in contemporary society, it is more important than ever that history teachers devote some time to educating students in 'information literacy'. Students need to be taught to discern between serious and rigorous or 'respectable' history, history which is primarily for entertainment, and history which attempts to distort the past for political purposes. They need to be able to challenge manipulative or distorted readings of the past when these are used in support of present day political objectives, they need to be able to question lazy and simplistic analogies, they need to understand concepts such as confirmation bias, 'astroturfing', 'polemic' and 'sophistry'. They must be able to spot 'sweeping generalisations for which there is not adequate evidence' and be able to 'contest the one-sided, even false, histories that are out there in the public domain (Macmillan, 2014: 37).

The concern to use school history to develop pupils' critical (and digital) literacy is not new in England. In 1985, the History inspectorate was stressing its importance:

Young people are constantly confronted by persuasion from political parties, pressure groups, the media and advertisers. At 16 some will be members of a trades union; at 18 all will have the vote. Young people will be helped to cope with a bewildering world if they have some understanding of political and economic history, demonstrating the use and abuse of political power, the long-term effects of policies, and the complexity of cause and effect. But their effectiveness as citizens will depend above all on the crucial historical skill of assessing and evaluating the record of human behaviour.

(HMI, 1985: 11)

The issue of information literacy has become more important than ever, with the increasing power of Facebook and Twitter. It was recently found that around 40% of young people in the UK thought that if something was on Google, it must be true (Ofcom, 2013). This is a very worrying phenomenon.

This is important not just because of the amount of 'bad history' that is currently in the public domain but also because of the frequency with which history is manipulated and distorted by politicians and pressure groups for present-day purposes (Macmillan, 2009). Macmillan describes some of the 'tell-tale' characteristics of 'bad history':

Bad history tells only part of complex stories Bad history also makes sweeping generalisations for which there is not adequate evidence and ignores awkward facts that do not fit Bad history ignores such nuances in favour of telling tales that belong to morality plays but do not help us to consider that past in all its complexity.

(Macmillan, 2009: 36–7)

As pupils go through their secondary education, they move beyond the ingenuous idea that all historians are, or are supposed to be, ‘objective’, towards an understanding that (even) historians have differing standards when it comes to ‘using their evidence in a scrupulous, honest, critical and informed way’, to try to tell ‘an unfettered, impartial and objective truth’ (Lipscomb, 2016). There are several qualities that delineate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ history – the assiduousness with which relevant sources have been unearthed, the depth and breadth of knowledge of other writing in the field, lucidity of explanation, and clarity and appropriateness of conclusions drawn. But an important element of quality is the honesty and integrity of the historian in trying their best to tell the truth about the past (Wong, 2001). As the Lipstadt–Irving trial (disputing the accuracy and integrity of David Irving’s writing about the Holocaust) illustrated, it is the difference between negligent, sloppy and badly written history, and deliberate manipulation and distortion. Integrity is not a peripheral or optional quality for a historian to possess. In spite of the difficulties in providing a complete and perfect truth, ‘The truth is what we must always seek’ (Lipscomb, 2016).

It is possible to think of this facet of history (that is to say, the degree of ‘honesty’ or integrity, as opposed to the other qualities which contribute to quality) in terms of a continuum:

Figure 1: Veracity scale.

- Absolute rigour, integrity, scrupulousness and open-mindedness in handling evidence.
- Tendency to look for evidence that supports prior viewpoint and not to look too hard

Elsewhere.

- A bit ‘fast and loose’ with the evidence, prone to generalisations based on tenuous evidence.
- Conscious elision of evidence that does not conform to desired hypothesis.
- Prepared to manipulate and distort evidence without conscience in order to make it fit preferred hypothesis.

(Haydn, 2017: 173)

There are different varieties of bad history, ranging from the ingenuously inept historical analogies often dredged up by politicians (good examples of the ‘Dunning-Kruger’ syndrome), to the elegant sophistry of journalists and politicians trying to distort and misrepresent the past for present day purposes and to ‘weaponise the past’ for political advantage. There is the bad history of generalisation, oversimplification and exaggeration, where complex historical crises are reduced to simple solutions and applications to current problems, and current and (by comparison) harmless mainstream liberal politicians are called Nazis or compared to Stalin. Then there is the ‘cod-psychiatry’ and ‘amateur stabs at psychoanalysis’ of the ‘why not make it up’ popular historians keen to find psycho-sexual angles on historical figures in order to sell more books (Morris, 2013). A form of bad history particularly prevalent in the UK (but also found in other countries) is the cosy, rose-tinted and nostalgic recalling of a better, brighter and more noble past, to contrast to current struggles, and to paint a picture of national superiority; what the historian Richard Evans has termed

‘the wonderfulness of us’ school of history. Hence the invocation of ‘The Blitz Spirit’, the social solidarity of rationing and the ‘miracle’ of Dunkirk to justify Brexit (O’ Toole, 2019: 2), and the positive portrayal of the British Empire as a superior model of empire compared to other versions. As the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak notes, ‘Imperial nostalgia is deliberately selective. It sweeps the darker sides of history under the carpet. It imposes from above a version of history that is one-sided, distorted, biased. It tells us what we are allowed to remember, and what we need to forget. It also pretends that history was simple. It never was’ (Shafak, 2018). Most corrosive and dangerous of all bad history is the cynical and knowing falsification of the past by demagogues and populists, to create anger and hatred against outsider groups, ‘stoking anger and nostalgia to secure popular support’ (Le Carre, 2019).

Although in the UK, it has become unfashionable to place emphasis on ‘transferable skills’, the aim should be that as well as understanding the differences between good and bad history, pupils should almost instinctively learn to question contemporary sources as well as historical ones, in terms of asking questions such as ‘How do I know this to be true?’, ‘What is the authority or warrant for believing this information?’, and ‘What is the reason behind this story?’ As well as understanding the difference between good and bad history, they should also understand the difference between good and bad journalism, good and bad science, good and bad research and good and bad internet and social media sources.

Developing pupils’ digital and information literacy

Part of the solution to the problem that most people are ‘easily led’ by the sophistication with which information about the past (and the present) can be manipulated and distorted (Thomson, 2000), is to devote some time in school history to the development of pupils’ digital and information literacy, particularly in relation to their ability to ascertain the reliability of information derived from social media and internet sources. Wineburg’s recent research on the ability of adults (including history graduates and professional historians) revealed that even adults with a background in history education were not always adept at assessing the reliability of websites (Wineburg, 2018). Mike Caulfield’s work and internet tutorials (see, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNEecWrRHgw>) are a useful resource in this respect.

Developing pupils’ understanding of ‘provenance’ is no longer just a question of explaining terms such as corroboration, contradiction, unwitting testimony etc; it needs to extend to an understanding of terms related to contemporary information sources, and terms such as astroturfing, dead catting, trolling, bots and doxing. They should also develop an understanding of why there are pressures on veracity, and why sometimes the truth is compromised, if they are to understand the world they are growing up in. They need to be helped to develop the crucially important skills of good judgement in handling information intelligently, and the cultivation of an informed scepticism about the ways in which the past is used and abused. In the current political climate, they need to understand that many countries, history is used to demonise other countries, religions and social groups, and create hostility to those within who are not really ‘one of us’, in order to deflect attention from other issues and problems. As Michael Wood notes, ‘We can all be prey to myths that set one group against another (Wood, 2019: 11).

Developing pupils' understanding of the ethical dimensions of history as a discipline and the importance of truth to society

Over the past few years, there has been a catastrophic collapse in respect and concern for truth (the bedrock of historical enquiry), and this is having very harmful effects on many countries as bad people are spreading lies, hate and fear, for unethical and immoral political purposes. As far back as 1981, Norman Longworth warned: 'It does require some little imagination to realise what the consequences will be of not educating our children to sort out the differences between essential and non-essential information, raw fact, prejudice, half-truth and untruth, so that they know when they are being manipulated, by whom, and for what purpose'. Given the assault on truth, and the increase in the amount of 'bad history' in the public domain, we need to not just help pupils to 'get at the truth', in terms of being able to handle information intelligently and judiciously, but to understand the moral and ethical importance of truth.

Although it is important to develop pupils' ability to handle information intelligently, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for optimising the use of school history to society. There is also a moral and ethical dimension to the study of the past, and this relates to the development of individuals who have a concern for truth, and respect for evidence. These are dispositions, not cognitive abilities. As I have argued elsewhere,

Many of the bad things that happen in the world are done by people who are very clever, who did well in history at school, and who often have high-level qualifications in history. They are, at one level, very skilful at handling evidence, in the sense of cleverly manipulating and distorting it for morally and ethically dubious purposes. They are not good at handling evidence in the ethical sense, and this has often had a harmful effect on democratic societies and on life on the planet generally.

(Haydn and Ribbens, 2017: 742)

The ethical dimension of history is acknowledged in relation to the teaching of history in some countries, most notably in Canada, where it is given the status of being one of the six main 'historical thinking' concepts, which are deemed to contribute to 'promoting critical historical literacy for the 21st century (<http://historicalthinking.ca/ethical-dimensions>) by the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness at the University of British Columbia. Even here, concern for truth does not form part of the list of ethical issues that students need to learn about. This seems a strange omission given the centrality of 'truth' to the discipline of history.

Historian of Education Richard Aldrich argued that one of the distinctive features of the discipline of history was that it had at its core 'respect for evidence and truth' (Aldrich, 1990: 53). Wang *et al.*, (2015) explain that the traditional Chinese saying 'to seek truth from facts' was based not just on notions of assiduousness in accessing sources, but also on the idea of honesty and integrity in the consideration of those sources.

Peter Lee refers to this dimension of school history as 'cognitive ethics':

If we teach history as history, we will be handing on cognitive ethics (respect for evidence, respect for persons as sources of arguments and so on)... Historical

understanding requires ‘rational passions’ like a concern for truth and respect for persons. Students who care nothing for the scope or power of an explanation, omit to ask if another account is equally valid, or are happy to ignore evidence, have simply not begun to grasp the discipline of history.

(Lee, 2012: introduction)

Concern for truth does surface occasionally in the English system of history education. In 2007, an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) report on history teaching stated that ‘history must not lose its integrity and become distorted for different purposes’, stressing that pupils needed to learn ‘to use evidence critically and with integrity’ (Ofsted, 2007: 4.2.7). However, the disposition of respect for evidence and concern for truth is not a high profile element of a historical education in England under current curriculum arrangements.

To find a more substantial statement of the importance of concern for truth in school history, it is necessary to go back to an extract from the then Secretary of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph’s 1984 article, ‘Why teach history in school?’:

The complicated interplay of evidence which is itself not certain and subject to interpretation gives history a particularly valuable part in the development of an adult understanding. It helps pupils to understand that there is a range of questions – be they political, economic, social or cultural – on which there is no single right answer, where opinions have to be tolerated but need to be subjected to the test of evidence and argument. As the pupil progresses in this encounter with history, he should be helped to acquire a sense of the necessity for personal judgements in the light of facts – recognising that the facts often be far from easy to establish and far from conclusive. And it should equally awaken a recognition of the possible legitimacy of other points of view. In other words, it seems to me that ***the teaching of history has to take place in a spirit which takes seriously the need to pursue truth on the basis of evidence***, and at the same time accepts the need for give and take in that pursuit and that teaching in that spirit should encourage pupils to take a similar approach.

(Joseph, 1984; emphasis added)

History as moral exemplar. Teaching young people about ‘agency’ – in the past and the present, and about ‘good and bad’

History does not exist in a values-free zone. We must never forget that there is a moral and ethical dimension to the study of the past, and that we should spend some time explaining to pupils that there are people in the past who have done great harm, and some who have done good things that have benefitted humanity. And that they themselves are historical agents. History shows that individuals and groups have and can make a difference to the world we live in, for good or bad. We need to teach history in a way that persuades pupils that history is relevant to their lives and to the sort of society we live in. History is not just about the past; it can be helpful to keep in mind the ‘So what?’ question. At the end of teaching a topic, spend a bit of time discussing why the topic is relevant to our lives today, and in terms of

providing insight into not just why things are as they are today, but what light historical perspectives shed on possible futures.

Part of this is making the point that lies have consequences; from the consequences of the ‘Stab in the back’ legend in Weimar Germany, to Exxon’s suppression of research about the effect of the company’s activities on climate change, and other lies that have cost thousands of lives and have caused great harm.

Another part is the development of citizens with some sense of moral and ethical responsibility: ‘Practical wisdom or the capacity or predisposition to act truthfully and with reason in matters of deliberation, thus with a strong ethical component’ (Aristotle, quoted in Oancea and Furlong 2007).

Conclusions

There is now widespread concern about changes to information systems and their effects on the health and vitality of liberal democracies (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, Pomerantsev, 2019, Runciman, 2018). The impact of recent developments has had a startling impact on political culture in the UK. A recent opinion poll reported that over 60% of voters think the risk of violence against members of parliament is ‘a price worth paying’ over Brexit (Walker, 2019), and thousands of internet and social media trolls routinely issue death threats to elected politicians. This is in a culture where political violence was until recently, an occasional phenomenon. It is not just that politicians now seem able to lie with impunity, it is also that both in the UK and elsewhere, people do not appear to care about being lied to: politicians routinely lie, and yet do not lose popular support. Intelligent and well-educated people ‘put tribe before truth’, profit comes before truth, political gain comes before truth, being told something comforting about the past comes before truth.

There are limits to what school history can achieve, but at least it should make the effort:

If history does not guarantee attitudes or aspirations, it is a necessary if not sufficient condition which might enable the making of informed choices. It not only helps us to understand the identity of our communities, cultures, nations, by knowing something of their past, but also enables our loyalties to them to be moderated by informed and responsible scepticism. But we must not expect too much. It cannot guarantee tolerance, though it can give it some intellectual weapons. It cannot keep open closed minds, although it may, sometimes, leave a nagging grain of doubt in them. Historical thinking is primarily mind-opening, not socialising. But in a country where the virtues of competing goods in open market places are more zealously proclaimed than those of competing ideas in open classrooms, and where, more contemptibly, deference and conformity seem more valued than independent thought and debate, thinking historically is a strand in the fabric of national thought which must be jealously and urgently defended.

(Slater, 1989:16)

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