

The importance of subject specific training

It is my passion for history and interest in young people that has sustained me both as a teacher and latterly as a PGCE history tutor. Last term a number of seemingly unrelated issues began to coalesce in my mind. Over the summer I met a number of teachers that had completed their training in previous years within our PGCE partnership. Many of them expressed fatigue with the relentless exam-focused nature of the teaching that they felt they had been forced to adopt – described by, many as an ‘exam factory’ approach, that served to reduce their history teaching to the most instrumental of elements. A related concern was the feeling of a lack of creativity in their role. In October, as the HA was responding to a government consultation on Continuing Professional Development (CPD), I asked for feedback, once again from ex-trainees. While this was hardly rigorous research, their overall conclusion echoed the findings of the HA’s annual surveys: very little history-specific training is being offered – a critical omission given the high profile given to increased subject knowledge at GCSE and A-level. The final issue was my experience of the chaotic way in which teacher-training places were allocated this year, creating real anxiety that ‘university-led’ PGCE partnership routes – routes that have traditionally included a strong



subject-specific element (facilitated by sufficiently large numbers in each subject and stable communities of mentors) – were in jeopardy. Put together, these issues made me think more deeply about the importance and future of subject-specific training – within both initial and continuing professional development – prompting this SWOT analysis.

Strengths

The Carter Review (2015) of ITT foregrounded the importance of subject-specific training both in terms of subject knowledge and subject pedagogy. This is not new. Jerome Bruner put it simply enough when he wrote, ‘It takes

no elaborate research to know that communicating knowledge depends in enormous measure upon one’s mastery of the knowledge to be communicated.’¹ The focus on the subject can help curb some of the problematic excesses of genericism. Critically, and in relation to my introductory comments, subject-specific training can help keep teachers connected to their passion and creativity. It is the well-spring of planning and is particularly effective when pursued collaboratively.

Weaknesses

Yet a myopic or overemphasis on the subject can serve to eclipse another source of the teacher’s vocation,

namely the student. This emphasis can be problematic in a number of ways. If the subject becomes too esoteric, it can become challenging for students to access, while an uncritical approach, by the teacher, to the substantive knowledge of history may also serve to maintain existing social and knowledge hierarchies. In addition, in the culture of performativity suggested in the phrase 'exam factory' it might lead to dangerous oversimplification. Keith Barton has highlighted how 'focusing exclusively on the logic of history as an academic discipline' may serve to make history meaningless to many students by denying their affective needs and desires.² This is not a case against subject-specific training but an appeal to make equal and important consideration of students in all their diversity.

Opportunities

Our current trainees currently undertake a school-based task in which they and their mentor both agree to read a piece of historical scholarship, a shared reading experience. Later the work is discussed in school together and reflections are then shared with other trainees. While we hope that what they learn will inform their teaching, the task is rooted in the belief that engaging with historical scholarship is valuable and enjoyable in its own right. Part of the rationale resides in helping trainees feel connected to a wider history community.

In reflecting on the experience, most of the trainees reported that the task put them back in touch with their own learning, acknowledging in one case that they had 'missed reading history books'. In particular, it highlighted the value of scholarship over the textbook, as a way of building subject-specific knowledge and in giving some agency back to teachers. Across all of the contributions we were discussing, the theme of change and continuity was particularly evident, with most of the trainees prompted to take a longer-term view than they might otherwise have done and each alerted to the possibility of new links and patterns. This shift to longer-term narratives, to the long durée, is one factor



driving the curriculum changes. It also has academic support and is really pertinent to the classroom history teacher who needs to render the past meaningful to young people.³

Also essential to the value of the task was the collaborative aspect, beginning with the initial discussion with their school-based mentors and subsequently with each other. Beyond helping to reconnect to their interests in history, it was in discussion that people drew deeper meanings. One pair reading Starkey's *The Reign of Henry VIII: the personalities and politics* commented: 'This led my mentor and me to discuss our own perceptions of the key historical figures, particularly Henry VIII "the rugby lad" and Cardinal Wolsey "just really arrogant"'. 'For others, even the discussion involved in selecting what to read was fruitful. Choosing Jonathan Phillips's *Holy Warriors: a modern history of the Crusades* was deliberately intended to address a gap in both the trainee's and the mentor's subject knowledge and was useful to 'broaden the scope' of the Year 7 medieval course that was very 'England-centric'. The opportunity of this type of task to support subject-specific development as well as rekindle interests and passions was evident. For many it enabled the development of appropriate focus – a genuine historical question – as well as stocking the larder with interesting golden nuggets for use in the classroom.

Threats

Lack of access to high-quality subject-specific development is a key concern. The problem is compounded when the contexts in which teachers work offer little in terms of time for collaboration. Institutional expectations that reduce the function of the teacher to that of a processing manager on a factory floor, or afford little time for collaborative reflection and give minimal value to subject-specific dimensions of teaching run the real risk of alienating teachers.

Conclusion

Reconnecting teachers to their subject is one way of rekindling passion and creativity. Developing that in a collaborative departmental setting, by giving it sufficient time, can both allow a consideration of what this knowledge of the subject means in terms of what we know about our students and enable a degree of agency through shared learning.

Jason Todd is a History Tutor on the Oxford University PGCE programme

REFERENCES

- ¹ Bruner, J. (1960) *The process of education*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- ² Barton, K. (2009) 'The Denial of Desire: how to make history education meaningful' in L. Symcox and W. Wilschut (eds) *National History Standards: the problem of the canon and the future of teaching history*, Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age.
- ³ Guldi, J. and Armitage, D. (2014) *The history manifesto*, Cambridge University Press.