

The Place of History in Education Studies

Our aims within this paper are to provide both a theoretical and practical narrative to the creation of a new BA in Education degree, and specifically the academic discipline of the History of Education.

History's place in the study of education has been hotly contested since the 1960s. (McCulloch 2000). Aside from the ubiquitous 'skills versus content' debate, there remains to this day no consensus even upon disciplinary terminology that should be employed by academics and students alike. Is the study of past events in education merely a form of mainstream 'social history'? Or does it warrant a separate and distinctive discipline that is 'History of Education'? In such a conception, the study of the educational past embraces far more than merely 'social and economic' history, and instead is seen to form part of '...the wider study of the history of society, social history broadly interpreted with the politics, the economics and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in'. (Briggs 1972:5).

The 1970s, however, witnessed the academic disciplines of education themselves becoming subject to criticism as proponents of a more unified approach to studies in education gained ascendancy. With the foundation of the British Educational Research Association, commentators such as Bassey drew a crucial distinction between 'educational research' and disciplinary research in educational settings. He contended that whilst the former uses appropriate research to 'improve educational action', the latter was concerned with informing 'understanding of phenomena pertinent to the discipline in educational settings.' (Bassey 1999: 39) The instrumentality of the 'educational research' model implies that historical research is only useful insofar as it can contribute to 'progress' within education.

We contend that all of these approaches to educational history have merit, but entwined within their structure are also flaws that we wished to avoid when creating a new Degree underpinned by the Disciplines of Education. In our deliberations about the form, content and structure of the History element we were guided by three principal criteria. First, the content needed to be sufficiently accessible to non-specialist first year undergraduates whilst preserving the academic rigour and integrity of the degree. Second, it needed to be interesting and engaging. Third, we wanted to create an innovative course reflecting both the disciplinary tradition of history and incorporating broad 'themes', which were to be *revelatory* of this tradition. Our contextual axiom was to inculcate students into an authentic form of educational history, which emphasises the multiple relationships of education and society. Our commitment to the development of history knowledge and skills through the

adoption of this revelatory principle is in direct contrast to the post-1992 Higher Education tendency towards offering numerous 'watered down' educational modules. Such modules provide limited opportunities for students to grapple with the historical dimension and develop associated key skills.

In order to make the History element more accessible to non-specialist students, we were concerned to explode some of the myths and stereotypes surrounding history. We addressed one such myth, that history was entirely reliant upon often obscure texts and documents from the past, by using both traditional texts *and* oral histories. We also provided opportunities for them to practice historical skills, such as seeking out evidence, and critically analysing it in terms of bias and balance. In one such activity students were required to research the history of a school of their choice, and to make an assessment about what social pressures most impacted upon the history of their chosen school. In attempting to achieve our twin aims of both formulating an engaging programme of study *and* inculcating students into an authentic form of educational history, we based our topics in all three years around educational themes, which we believed students would be able to relate to. Using the revelatory thematic principle we planned a syllabus which allowed students understanding of key historical concepts and chronology to emerge *through* the study of the themes, such as 'Calamity and Education', and 'Children's Voices'.

Such an approach, we feel, avoids both the reductionism implied by mainstream historians, who have misleadingly relegated educational history to a strand of social history, and avoids the overtly ideological character of the instrumentalist model, which arguably raids the past for particular evidence to support a theory about how education might be 'improved'. Although the intentions of theorists such as Bassey are doubtless noble ones, the idea of progress in education can never be 'value free'. Similarly, there are, as Hammersley rightly points out, some obvious problems with assuming that educational research can be cumulative in the same way as evidenced based research in medicine - something which Hargreaves implies. (Hammersley 1997 & Hargreaves 1996). By adopting an approach which focuses upon key themes in education, and delivering the content in such a way as to explicate the relationships between these key themes and the key events in the history of education, students can begin to discern the relevance of history to education studies for themselves. The relevance and value of the history of education is *revealed* to the students in an evolving process, in which *they* are ultimately free to make their own judgements about its value relative to other disciplines. Indeed, the distinctiveness of our approach to the history of education lies partly in the fact that it facilitates understanding of the relationship between history and the other disciplines of education. Early evaluations of our programme suggest that it has some merit. Indeed, it is interesting to note that a majority of students were engaged sufficiently for them to opt to attempt a History question over other disciplines on the First Year examination. An above average number have also opted to continue their study of history into Year 2. As academics we are, of course, ourselves subject to an evolving and

revelatory process, and we will continue to review and revise our History programme in order to ensure it remains accessible, engaging, and, most importantly, an authentic introduction to key issues from the educational past.

References

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