6

Historical teaching and learning practices for first-year English undergraduates – reflections for improving historical thinking

Celia Penelope Hughes

Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Copenhagen

Introduction

Students embarking upon degree-level history can expect to be introduced to a more subtle and advanced way of thinking about the discipline. Understanding how and why historians study the past the way they do means learning how to become careful and questioning readers of historical texts and acquiring the vocabulary necessary to engage in historical discussions (Donnelly & Norton 2011). University history teachers generally anticipate that first-year undergraduates arriving in their classrooms will be familiar with some of the core practices and customs guiding historical source work as well as the particular shape and style of historical writing. Although new, the disciplinary culture these students encounter is likely to feel not entirely removed from the history classrooms they left prior to the start of higher education. In contrast, first-year undergraduates who come to the discipline without this background, enter what can often feel like an alien and daunting landscape in which they see themselves as outsiders unable to participate in historical conversations.

This project reflects upon particular teaching and learning experiences involved in an introductory history course for first-year undergraduates studying BA-level English. It explores the challenges these students typically encounter when working with primary source documents and considers what it means when history faculty ask these students to think "historically". The reflections discussed here derive from a combination of teacher-observations and student evaluations of the learning that took place in a series of document analysis tasks as part of the history course all first-year English undergraduates take in the autumn semester. “The Making of the English Speaking World” (MEW) was initially designed and continues to be run by the small team of British and American historians in the department of English at the University of Copenhagen (KUA). It is designed to provide English-degree students with a sense of the origins, development and dimensions of the English speaking world. Over fourteen weeks students study the social, cultural and political agencies that enabled the global spread of English from the fourteenth-century to the present-day. Although intended to complement the range of introductory core courses, including literature, grammar and linguistics, English students take during the first semester, an important element of MEW is to provide students with a basic grounding in historical methodological practices. Particular focus is given to teaching students how to read and analyse historical documents as a means of addressing historical problems.

This project was guided by my experiences as a newly-appointed Assistant Professor of British History teaching this course for the first time in autumn 2012. Previously, I had only ever taught history undergraduates in the United Kingdom, and was unprepared to meet the specific teaching and learning demands this new disciplinary, linguistic and cultural setting presented. I was particularly struck by the confusion and quite often difficulty Danish students displayed around historical documents when asked to use them to make sense of a particular historical problem. Together my teaching and their learning experiences forced me to confront the new demands I faced as a higher education history teacher in KUA’s English department that suggested important pedagogical lessons for my practice. My students’ frustrations and excitement working with unfamiliar historical texts and methodological tools prompted me to consider what our teaching and learning experiences might tell us about what it means for these students to learn to think as historians and what strategies might guide them towards the kind of understanding they need in order to exercise ‘historical thinking behaviours’ to interpret and find meaning in historical documents and to engage in historical conversations (Tally & Goldenberg 2005).

It is worthwhile thinking in more detail about some of these behaviours and how students acquire them in order to fully illustrate the value of this pedagogical study. Historians who teach undergraduates and school teachers who teach post-16 history are in general agreement about some of the particular skills and cognitive processes students should be expected to exhibit when working with historical documents. These include being able to assess, evaluate, and compare texts within their specific historical context, to reach defensible conclusions about historical problems, and to understand how and why historians find different meanings in the documents they examine. Pedagogical scholars like Sam Wineburg have made valuable contributions to the scholarship of history teaching and learning with their discussions about the important role document studies play in helping students to master 'the habits of historical thinking' (Wilson & Wineburg 2001, Wineburg 1991, 2000, 2001). Wineburg argued that when students are given opportunities to explore primary and secondary sources in depth, they most closely approach the kinds of cognitive and emotional thinking – evaluating and inferring drawing upon appropriate historical context – that professional historians typically display (Wineburg 2001). Research has shown that students who practice these habits with historical source work ultimately perform better in the humanities and in the sciences because they develop the critical thinking skills engrained within these fields (Brown 2000). Such findings illustrate the important contribution historical source work offers to undergraduates embarking upon their English-degree studies. It suggests the potential pedagogical value of thinking more carefully about how to best foster student learning in this area. When performed well, source work offers to produce more highly achieving graduates equipped with the intellectual and emotional habits for participating in the "knowledge society" (Pickles 2011). The development of clear guidelines and models of practice is crucial if, as history teachers, we are to fully realise our professional responsibilities towards our students. We should see these as contributions to creating a disciplinary culture in which we aim to share with our students "love" for our subject and its value in cultivating their "full potential" as scholars, "learners and citizens" (Booth 2004).

Such ambitions present considerable challenges. As historians researching and teaching outside our discipline, we lack the cultural security that comes from belonging to a community of professional scholars and students fluent in, or at least familiar, with its language. The project of scholarship of teaching and learning has highlighted the importance of clearly defining the kinds of thinking students should be expected to do in each disciplinary field. The reason is that each discipline has its own particular "conditions of knowledge" so that successful learning depends upon familiarising students with these cognitive processes as effectively as possible. This becomes particularly important in educational systems where students regularly move between disciplines (Pace 2004). This project seeks to contribute to recent reflections in this area by exploring the experiences of first-year English undergraduates when introduced to historical source work. It reflects upon my own teaching experiences, my observation of students' learning, and assesses the value of a methodological seminar introducing students to some of the key language and practices involved in historical source work. It draws upon student responses to a questionnaire completed after this seminar, a detailed teaching and learning log I completed over the course of the 2013 autumn semester, and students' performance in their mid-term examinations. It argues that a step-by-step practice-based model of learning most effectively consolidated students' theoretical understanding about how to work with historical sources. It explores common student misperceptions about source work and persistent difficulties they displayed in learning how to situate and assess primary sources in their specific historical context. It shows that student learning and performance was most optimised when students were asked to use historical sources to assess a specific historical problem, and suggests the importance of designing document-based studies that offer step-by-step scaffolding for how to read primary and secondary sources alongside each other, to evaluate and cross-reference sources and to draw conclusions based upon wider contextual understanding.

The project sought to explore the following questions:

1. What world views, preconceptions and experiences do English-degree students bring to the classroom that may influence their engagement with historical documents (Pace 2004)?
2. What experiences do students have of historical source work prior to the MEW course?
3. What specific challenges do students exhibit when introduced to historical source work and what particular teaching strategies might help them to develop the historical thinking habits the discipline demands of them?

Methods

Students taking the MEW course in the 2013 autumn semester were the first undergraduates to have a specific lecture and seminar introducing them to some of the theoretical thinking on history methods and practices. This was deliberately placed early on, in week three of the fourteen week course. It was introduced on my initiative as course co-ordinator, following consultation with my two other teaching colleagues, who had longer experience teaching the course and who agreed with my reflections that students needed a more thorough initiation and methodological grounding if they were to develop the historical thinking skills necessary for document-based study. The course is structured into three main teaching components: each week students attend a lecture designed to give an overall introduction to some of the key themes of topics such as the emergence of English in the fourteenth-century; the making of Great Britain and the Caribbean and the Atlantic World. These are followed by student discussions in their reading groups and two-hourly seminars framed around contextual questions that ask students to draw conclusions based upon careful assessment of a range of secondary and primary sources. Previous experience with this teaching and learning model has seen students more able to display critical thinking practices in reference to secondary than primary texts which were often a source of anxiety and uncertainty.

The methods and practices seminar was designed to introduce students to the some of the ways in which professional historians use historical sources and to equip them with some basic strategies to encourage them to assess the range of sources they would encounter in “an historically appropriate way” (Pickles 2011). An important element of the seminar was the opportunity for students to experiment with two different approaches of source assessment; firstly, the study of primary sources to address a specific historical problem (Tosh 2010). This is the model that students usually work with on this course and although designed to guide their assessment, it can limit the “horizon of possibilities” students see in sources (Portelli 1997), all depending on the kinds of questions they ask. I hoped that revisiting sources previously studied in the first two weeks and applying the more nuanced source-oriented approach historians often work with (Tosh 2010) might encourage them to exercise historical curiosity, to identify new ideas, and to make inferences to find new meanings.

The exercise was designed, above all, to familiarise students with historical methodological language, and to develop their confidence in managing the uncertainty that often exists around primary sources. It was also intended to model for students the practices of historical source analysis. Following the seminar I asked the 65 students from my two classes to complete a qualitative questionnaire (appendix A) that asked them to reflect upon their learning experiences. I recorded my own observations of their learning in the teaching and learning log I completed over the course of the semester. I initially intended to follow up this questionnaire with a second survey at the end of the course, asking the students to reflect upon some of the specific skills they had acquired from repeated practise with source-based tasks. However, their very limited responses (16) to the first questionnaire suggested that my own reflections from the weekly log would be more illuminating and that a second-round of questionnaires was unlikely to elicit the considered reflections I sought. The responses to the questionnaire, nonetheless, revealed valuable insights into students' historical thinking, including misperceptions that British and American school children have been shown to exhibit. Some of these misperceptions I saw eroding in the course of later document-based seminars, whilst other analytic skills students continued to struggle to master. The subsequent sections will draw upon my log and students' responses to the questionnaire to reflect upon students' learning in this methodological-framed class. They will suggest what students' responses to the questionnaire tell us about their understanding of historical practice. They will also reflect upon the different teaching strategies I employed in subsequent seminars to address some of the particular difficulties students showed around the documents, and which models worked better than others.

Reflections

Students' experience of historical work: beliefs and misconceptions

The students' response to the questionnaires revealed that most started the MEW course with only limited experience of historical source work. Although 56 per cent recorded that they had 'some experience' of such work (44 per cent had had 'little or no experience'), further responses revealed this was generally limited to some discussion about how to categorise sources, whilst some mentioned they had been introduced to basic techniques for source analysis. The overwhelming majority of this work had occurred in the second and third years of their gymnasium studies, with the exception of one student who recorded they had studied HF History as part of the entry requirements for the BA English degree. However, the minimal details students gave in their answers made it difficult to assess the exact nature of the work they had undertaken. Assessment of students' performance in the close source work undertaken during the first three seminars revealed some awareness about the importance of assessing the reliability of sources, and how this related to author motivation and historical context. However, many struggled to evaluate the documents and to make inferences about possible layers of meaning by drawing upon their contextual understanding of the period. Their observations on the source content of the fourteenth- and sixteenth-century documents remained generalised and unsupported by explanations of appropriate context. The unfamiliar sixteenth-century language and sheer length of William Tyndale's texts also acted as obstacles making the students reluctant to hypothesise meaning. These early sessions highlighted the need to provide students with guidance that would move them away from description – what they saw in the document – to context-specific interpretation – what might this mean and how does it relate to our historical problem?

An important learning objective of the methods and practices seminar was to make students self-conscious about the process of critical thinking when working with historical documents. Learning about the types of questions historians ask of their sources and being able to explain why they do so, meant students learning to understand what it means to think historically. Classroom discussion around these questions, when and why historians might ask them, and what factors might affect the type of questions asked was intended to clarify students' thinking around the theory guiding historical practice. Above all, asking students to consider a range of questions it might be conceivable for historians to ask of their sources was designed to show them the importance of keeping an open mind when approaching historical texts. It was also intended to begin to dissolve the rigid thinking students can sometimes display around historical sources, and to familiarise them with the acceptability of uncertainty when working with sources.

The discussion confirmed research that has shown students often hold set ideas about why certain types of documents are inherently more reliable than others. The importance of assessing a source's reliability was one of the skills students most frequently listed amongst the four the questionnaire asked them to suggest as important for successfully completing the course. In the classroom activity many students chose a diary or testimony as an example of a primary source, and suggested the inherent unreliability of this source on account of its bias. Their rigid thinking around the dangers of using such sources betrayed confusion over how historians actually work. Barton has identified as a potent myth the notion that historians use a "sourcing heuristic" to evaluate bias and reliability. He has argued that such a myth demonstrates a misguided understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed. According to this view historians examine historical sources and consider how far they can be trusted to present accurate accounts of past events (Barton 2005). In their questionnaires students echoed this sense that there was a ‘correct’ model for ‘how to analyse texts historically’; the key to unlocking or ‘decoding’ meaning depended upon having the ‘correct tools’ and being a ‘smart’, ‘critical’ or ‘objective’ reader. ‘Knowing whether or not [a source was] reliable’ was for these students what it meant to think historically.

Such a view perhaps explains why it was that students struggled with the task that asked them to revisit in small groups one previously studied primary source from the course, and to assess it according to a source-oriented approach. Moving around the groups revealed that students were preoccupied with the question of authorship, and that having researched the author’s background, the meanings they found in the sources related directly to the author’s own individual history. Students’ struggled to draw upon their wider contextual knowledge of the period to see different possibilities in the document beyond the authors’ own views. An example of this was students’ assessments of John of Trevisa’s notes on his 1387 translation of Ranulph Higden’s *Polychronicon*. In this source Trevisa tells us about the transition of French to English language in fourteenth-century England and how, from 1385, English had become the language of learning for all grammar school children. Many students examining this source focused on debating how far Trevisa could be trusted as a ‘reliable’ witness to this transition. They drew upon his expressed disapproval of this development to speculate on the possibility that he might have been exaggerating the magnitude of such changes. Yet they did not ask why he might hold his particular view, how representative it may have been amongst men of his religious education, why he was speaking on this question, and what his view tells us about the importance of language and learning for certain sections of late fourteenth-century English society. Students overlooked more subtle possibilities and details contained within the source that also raised questions, for example, about the role of the plague in the language transition.

Modelling source-based practice

The students’ performance in the methods and practices seminar and their responses to the follow-up questionnaire illuminated the potential value of a carefully managed, step-by-step approach to source work. It suggested the need for a model of practice that would help the students to visualise the documents in relation to the contextual seminar questions framed around a particular historical problem. Subsequent seminars revealed the difficulty students found in relating their understanding of the general historical context, as absorbed from lectures and individual secondary reading, to the specific views and details the sources expressed. This was notable in the seminar that asked students to assess a selection of primary sources to consider what they told us about when and why the English language won out in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland, but not the English Protestant religion. Students struggled to make sense of and manage the cross-section of political views the sources represented, and to explain these in the light of their wider knowledge of the historical narrative. They either tried to answer the question in general speculative terms that drew upon their understandings of contemporary social power or made observations about specific viewpoints the sources expressed, but failed to explain these in historically contextually-specific ways. It was not until I spent time visiting the students in their smaller groups and guiding them towards possible meanings by asking further contextual questions that they began to make connections to begin to draw historically informed inferences.

Several students expressed the difficulty of understanding the documents in relation to the wider context they had read and discussed prior to the seminar. Faced with an average of six different primary documents, they needed appropriate scaffolding to begin to relate the sources to the wider context, to cross-reference sources, and to develop more informed, in-depth explanations supported by specific evidential examples drawn from a selection of the sources. This finding supports Peter Frederick's argument that teachers need to model for students how to interpret a historical document by guiding them through a close textual reading. Not only should they use a variety of documents (which this course already did), but they should be brief enough to be visually present in class (Frederick 1999). In this context I discovered one of the obstacles hindering my students' ability to read the sources in relation to each other; in contrast to earlier generations of history students, this cohort no longer had hard copies of the documents laid out in front of them. The students rely on being able to download the documents from the online course page, but this saw few of them annotating the documents and visually drawing comparisons across several documents at any one time. This perhaps suggests the value of the type of online assessment task that has seen American high school students undertaking scaffolded online exercises using digitised primary sources to help integrate acquisition of historical contextual knowledge and historical thinking skills (Tally

& Goldenberg 2005). Yet it also suggests the value of developing document tasks that encourage students to critically assess secondary sources alongside primary ones. This would help to challenge students' misperceptions about the inherent 'trustworthiness' of secondary texts in relation to primary ones, and would teach them to read and understand secondary sources as just as much products of their specific historical context. Above all, it would illuminate the social dialogue historians enter into with their sources and the influence their specific worldview has upon their reading and their approach to particular historical problems. This could be done by incorporating extracts of secondary sources within the document collections we ask students to consider. At present the course sets two secondary chapters or articles as weekly required reading in addition to the primary documents. But by including short secondary extracts as part of a document 'set', students could be encouraged to research and reflect upon the sources' providential details just as they are trained to do with primary sources. Often such details are given immediately above the main text of the primary document, and the guidelines students receive for documentary analysis encourage them to use these as 'an anticipatory framework' for assessing the meaning of the text (Wineburg 1991).

Rarely over the course of the weekly seminars did students show signs of asking why historians drew the conclusions they did. In a seminar framed around the question of why the British chose to establish a settlement in Botany Bay in 1786, the extent of their confusion over historiography became clear. Asked to consider how and why historians' arguments and approaches to this historical problem had changed over time, they were able to give detailed narratives of the shifting arguments. Yet it took a carefully managed question and answer session to guide them towards an understanding of how the changing historical context in which each of the historians had been writing might have shaped the questions they asked and the conclusions they drew. The value of this particular seminar was the way in which it made students conscious of the critical thinking processes historians engage in. Students were asked to study the same collection of primary sources - James Mantra's Proposal, 23 August, 1783; a letter from James Mantra, 23 August, 1783 and Lord Sydney's report to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, 18 August, 1786 – from which successive generations of historians had formed their competing arguments. They were asked to find evidence to support or refute each of the main arguments, and to consider whether the issue could be resolved on the basis of the documents alone. The task required them to critically assess the credibility of secondary sources and to give evidential examples to support their arguments. It saw students starting to display the kind of in-depth analytical thinking the discipline demands, and to move beyond the narrative frameworks most had given in their mid-term essays. They now began to engage in a critical dialogue with historians, drawing upon their wider contextual knowledge of the eighteenth-century British Empire and the social, economic and political processes making the Anglo-world. The task encouraged students to move beyond a binary approach to questions of reliability and bias – a source was for either biased or not, reliable or not – to consider some of the more subtle factors shaping subjectivity and historical reasoning. It also alerted them to the layers of possible meaning to be found in individual documents. Whereas students had entered the classroom expressing the implausibility of questioning the views of professionally-trained historians, by the end of the lesson, most had given clear views about which arguments they found most convincing, with historically substantiated reasons why.

Conclusion

This project has reflected upon some of the teaching and learning experiences involved in an introductory history course taken by English degree undergraduates at the University of Copenhagen. It has focused on the particular misperceptions these students held and the challenges they met when asked to perform the kind of historical thinking normally expected of history undergraduates. It highlighted the demands we make of these students when we ask them to critically assess a range of complex primary and secondary sources to find layers of context-specific meaning. Not only must students have a strong grasp of the contemporary English language in order to assemble a narrative understanding of contextual events and historical developments, and to understand the meaning of historians' arguments and ideas. They also need a working knowledge of how meanings of this language have shifted over time and place, if they are to begin to make sense of the complex subjectivities historians bring to a historical problem.

My findings suggest the value of history teachers providing these students with the kind of carefully scaffolded tasks British and American students often work with in post-16 history courses. Although scholars like Barton caution against the artificial construction of 'document-based activity', because it gives students false impressions of how historians actually select and work with documents, at a more sophisticated level source-based activities that ask students to evaluate and assess competing historical interpretations offer much learning potential for non-native English speakers new to the discipline (Barton 2005).

This study will conclude by suggesting some practical guidelines history teachers in the English department might bear in mind when thinking about how to inspire their first-year students, and to foster the kind of higher level historical thinking that fulfils definitions of critical thinking in the arts and humanities:

1. Design document-based activities framed around a specific historical problem that will enable students to assess a range of competing views.
2. Document studies should complement lessons that examine the contexts in which the documents were produced. Students need a firm understanding of the historical narrative before they can begin to make sense of more complex interpretations about particular topics.
3. It is worthwhile introducing students to some of the theoretical thinking around source material and the customs guiding historical practice. This allows opportunities to explore and challenge students' beliefs and misperceptions around historical evidence.
4. Keep source extracts brief and manageable, and encourage students to work in small groups to share ideas, noting down questions to follow up with further research. This also helps to overcome difficulties with meanings of language. Design sub-questions to guide students through the cognitive processes necessary for historically-substantiated reasoning and interpretation. The end of the task should see them beginning to formulate conclusions to the overarching historical question framing the exercise.
5. Include a mixture of primary and secondary source extracts within the selection, and encourage students to research the contexts in which secondary as well as primary sources were produced, and to consider questions of how authorship and motivation might have been shaped by this context. Encourage them to adopt this as a standard practice for all their secondary reading. Exercises which make students more conscious of the relationship between subjectivity, context and narrative, and its implications for historical thinking might be useful here. Peter Frederick starts his history courses by getting students to write a mini biography of another student, based upon individual reflections each student writes and exchanges (Frederick 1999). The activity is designed to give students a taste of what it means to think like a historian, to begin to

make sense of fragmentary sources, the role of selection and interpretation, subjectivity, context and continuity and change over time. Similar activities might be worthwhile in order to excite the enthusiasm of students who sometimes need convincing of the relevance and stimulation to be found in history.

A Questionnaire sent to 65 undergraduates taking the Making of the English Speaking World introductory history course in autumn 2013.

Historical Source Analysis Evaluation

I would like to hear your feedback about how useful you found the teaching on historical source analysis. I would like to know how you have experienced the first two sessions working with the historical documents, and what skills you feel you have learned during this third seminar that might help you during the remainder of the course. Please give honest answers. Your opinions will be treated confidentially and will be used to help improve future teaching on this course. Thank you for your time and effort.

1. What level of experience have you had working with historical sources before taking this course? (Please circle, as appropriate)
   a) A lot of experience
   b) Some experience
   c) Little or no experience

2. If you have previously worked with historical documents, please state when and where you did this. For example, at high school or researching family history.

3. What previous level of experience have you had in studying history? Please state, for example, what grade/year of school you studied history up to.

4. What kind of skills do you think you need in order to successfully complete this course? Please list up to 4 skills.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5. Before the seminar on historical documents, what did you find difficult about working with the documents during the first two weeks of the course (from the medieval period and the 16th century).

6. What did you find good about the teaching in the seminar on historical documents?

1.
2.
3.

7. What would you have liked the teacher to have done differently?

1.
2.
3.

8. Please list what you feel you have learned from the seminar on working with historical documents?

1.
2.
3.

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