

WHOSE KNOWLEDGE COUNTS? THE PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE IN A HIGH AUTONOMY CURRICULUM

¿DE QUIÉN ES EL CONOCIMIENTO? EL PAPEL DEL CONOCIMIENTO EN UN CURRÍCULUM DE GRAN AUTONOMÍA

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ABSTRACT: The non-prescriptive New Zealand secondary school history curriculum allows teachers who are intellectually confident in the disciplinary knowledge of their subject the opportunity to develop innovative programmes that address the interests of their students. Knowledge of particular historical events, personalities or themes is not required by the curriculum or the assessment framework. For teachers however who do not have a strong grasp of how the discipline of history operates the absence of knowledge-based content boundaries poses a challenge. The basis for choosing topics or themes may lack coherence, be largely arbitrary and draw on the limited experience of individual teachers rather than the specialist subject knowledge of researchers. This article examines the implications of a high autonomy history curriculum through the lens of knowledge. It argues that if young people are to have access to intellectually powerful ways of understanding the past, historical knowledge needs to be differentiated between disciplinary frameworks of thinking (that fosters a sense of criticality) and knowledge that does not require a critical dimension.

KEYWORDS: Historical thinking; curriculum; knowledge; autonomy; assessment.

RESUMEN: El plan de estudios no preceptivo de historia de Educación Secundaria de Nueva Zelanda les permite a los maestros que tienen una gran experiencia intelectual en el conocimiento disciplinar la oportunidad de desarrollar programas innovadores que aborden los intereses de sus alumnos. El currículo o el marco de evaluación no requieren conocimiento de eventos históricos particulares, de personalidades o de temas concretos. Sin embargo, para el profesorado que no tiene una comprensión sólida de cómo funciona la disciplina de la historia, la ausencia de límites plantea un desafío. La base para elegir contenidos o temas puede carecer de coherencia, ser en gran medida arbitraria y basarse en la experiencia limitada de individualidades en lugar de en los conocimientos especializados de los investigadores. Este artículo examina las implicaciones de un currículum de historia de alta autonomía con un enfoque basado en el conocimiento. En él se sostiene que, si los jóvenes deben tener acceso a formas intelectualmente poderosas de comprender el pasado, el conocimiento histórico debe diferenciarse entre los marcos disciplinares del pensamiento (que fomente un espíritu crítico) y el conocimiento que no requiere una dimensión crítica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pensamiento histórico; currículum; conocimiento; autonomía; evaluación.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the implications of a non-prescriptive curriculum on teaching and learning history in a New Zealand context. In particular it focuses on the challenges that a high autonomy curriculum poses for how young people learn to think critically about the past and develop an understanding of historical personalities, events and trends that are important for them in making sense of how the past and the present are connected. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) blends particular outcome based 'learning areas' (that do not prioritise subject specific knowledge) with generic competencies such as 'thinking'. The curriculum is designed to allow for school-based courses and allows for high degree of flexibility: 'while every school curriculum must be clearly aligned with the intent of this document, schools have considerable flexibility when determining the detail' (*The New Zealand Curriculum*, p. 37). It encourages 'individual and flexible pathways through student-driven learning' and for students to '... initiate activities themselves . . . [to] provide meaningful contexts for learning and self-assessment' (*The New Zealand Curriculum*, p. 38).

History is not a core subject in the New Zealand curriculum. It is only offered as an option in the final 3-years of secondary school (ages 15-17 years) as one strand in the social sciences learning area (*New Zealand Curriculum Guides*). In the compulsory curriculum (ages 5 – 14 years) history is subsumed in the integrated subject of social studies that does not prioritise historical ideas or historical thinking. At the senior secondary level there are no prescribed topics in the history curriculum. Learning is structured around six learning objectives (two at each year level) that are framed conceptually. For example, 'Understand how people's perspectives on events that are of significance to New Zealanders differ' (*The New Zealand Curriculum*, Level 7). Although the phrase 'of significance to New Zealanders' provides a guideline for what teachers may choose to study these are interpreted very loosely and allow for a wide range of historical topics to be studied (Sheehan, 2011; Enright, 2012).

Teachers have considerable autonomy in how they structure their history courses. Knowledge of particular historical events, personalities or themes is not required by the curriculum there is no prescribed content for the assessment framework. In this context teachers who are intellectually confident in the disciplinary features of their subject have the opportunity to develop innovative history programmes based in the core features of historical thinking that address the needs

and interests of their students. The nature of teaching and learning history in New Zealand has changed markedly in the last decade. This is evident in the emerging research literature in the history teaching community that is contributing to an increasing understanding of how young people from diverse backgrounds learn to think historically (Enright, 2012; Harcourt and Sheehan, 2012; Davison, Enright and Sheehan, 2014). However learning how to think historically is counterintuitive (Wineburg, 2001). While the disciplinary knowledge that characterises historical thinking provides a link for students to shift from understanding 'everyday' concepts to theoretical historical concepts, access to this knowledge can seldom be acquired purely from everyday experiences. Rather systematic instruction is required if students are to develop a cohesive understanding of historical trends and personalities and events, and develop expertise in historical thinking (Alexander, 1997). For teachers who do not have a firm grasp of how the discipline of history operates the flexibility of a high autonomy curriculum poses a substantial challenge if students are to develop the knowledge and dispositions of historical thinking.

This chapter examines the challenges of a high autonomy history curriculum through the lens of knowledge. It argues that if young people are to have access to intellectually powerful ways of understanding the past, historical knowledge needs to be differentiated between disciplinary frameworks of thinking (that foster a sense of criticality) and knowledge that does not require a critical dimension (Muller, 2012; Yates and Young, 2008; Young, 2008; Young and Muller, 2010). This chapter firstly considers the place of disciplinary knowledge in young people learning to think independently and to adjudicate between different versions of historical 'truth'. This disposition is central to both making sense of historical trends that have shaped the present as well as learning how to think critically about the past. Secondly it focuses on the internally assessed component of history courses (that make up half of history programmes and are marked by teachers) as this provides an insight into how a high autonomy curriculum operates when teachers are both 'curriculum makers' and 'curriculum assessors'.

A HIGH AUTONOMY HISTORY CURRICULUM AND WHY DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS

Disciplinary knowledge in subjects such as history potentially has the power to explain phenomena and is a central aspect of an education that equips young people to think independently (Muller, 2012; Yates

and Young, 2008; Young, 2008; Young and Muller, 2010). It is knowledge that has been developed by specialists (usually over many years) with a clearly defined focus and relatively fixed boundaries that separate their form of expertise from other forms (Young and Lambert, 2014). It is a framework of knowledge that is shaped by distinctive methods of inquiry, methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives and core concepts. It is also knowledge that is fallible and open to multiple alternatives rather than a fixed unquestioned narrative. In case of history what we would recognise as an interpretive historical perspective begins to appear with Herodotus and Thucydides over 2000 years ago while the emphasis on evidence (particularly the analysis of documentary sources) emerges in Germany with Von Ranke in the early 19th century (Curthoys and Docker, 2006).

Disciplinary knowledge does not feature prominently in the New Zealand curriculum (Wood and Sheehan, 2012) and there has been a declining emphasis on discipline-informed subjects over the last 20 years. In regards to knowledge the curriculum has been shaped around instrumentalist outcomes-based achievement objectives combined with broad based, key competencies (*The New Zealand Curriculum*). There has been little attempt to differentiate between different types of knowledge. The assumption being that traditional, disciplinary subjects are elitist and in the case of history this is simply a return to a chronological series of dates and facts as put forward by British Secretary of Education Michael Gove in his initiative to reform the history curriculum based on the work of E.D. Hirsch (Hirsch, 1988). Rather than disciplinary based subject knowledge it is argued that learning in the 21st century should be framed around generic, transferable thinking skills (Claxton, 2007). A generic approach to learning how to think however makes little reference to knowledge and as such it has little to contribute to young people learning to think critically about the past or learning how to think independently (Counsell, 2011). Thinking critically is contextual (McPeck, 1981; McPeck, 1990; Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989). It is always about something and it is most effectively developed within the disciplinary frameworks of academic disciplines (or the case of history through historical thinking).

The downplaying of disciplinary thinking in the education sector has been exacerbated in recent years by an increasing focus on assessment and government expectations for students to achieve measurement targets. This has tended to discourage innovation

in teaching and learning and is driven by notions of school improvement being aligned with measurement. It places schools and teachers under considerable pressure to lift achievement rates for students by concentrating on those areas of knowledge that are measurable rather than exploring academic knowledge that is typically abstract and teaches young people how to think critically. One (unintended) consequence of this policy is that many schools that cater for socially and economically disadvantaged students place a low priority on subjects such as history as they cannot typically draw on the resources or teachers to deliver disciplinary based programmes. Consequently, students in less affluent schools are often encouraged to study subjects that have little epistemological basis. Disciplinary based history programmes that prioritise historical thinking are generally a feature of the curriculum in affluent, prosperous schools and while there are exceptions (Houliston, 2012; Reymer, 2012) students of low socio-economic status are less likely to have access to disciplinary knowledge and acquire the foundations for powerful, intellectual ways of thinking (Young and Lambert, 2014).

TEACHING AND LEARNING HISTORY IN A HIGH AUTONOMY CURRICULUM

The lack of a prescribed curriculum is a bonus for those teachers who understand the way the discipline operates and are able to make this explicit for their students. For teachers however who are not intellectually confident in how the discipline operates the absence of knowledge-based content boundaries poses a challenge. The basis for choosing topics or themes may lack coherence, be largely arbitrary and draw on the limited experience of individual teachers and rather than the specialist subject knowledge of researchers (Young and Lambert, 2014). In the context of a high autonomy curriculum environment (that prioritises generic thinking skills) teachers need a firm understanding how the discipline operates to teach students how to think historically. If teachers are to prepare their students to think independently rather than simply learning a number of orthodox, officially sanctioned historical narratives, young people need learn how to make informed, analytical judgments about the past and adjudicate between competing claims to historical 'truth'. This is a core component of them being able to participate confidently in society as critical citizens (Johnson and Morris, 2010).

Learning how to think historically requires young people to develop a working knowledge of the disci-

plinary concepts of history (Seixas and Morton, 2013) and this includes the core methodologies that historians use to produce and critique knowledge (Levesque, 2008). It is through this process that the reliability of historian's claims can be tested. Historians are explicit about their methods and are critically assessed by their peers in the academic community as to the arguments they present. The ability to think historically, however, is counter-intuitive (Wineburg, 2001) and it is through learning to think in a structured disciplinary fashion that students shift from focusing on the superficial features of knowledge, to develop the habits of mind of experts who tend to 'think in terms of deep structures or the underlying principles of knowledge' (Gardiner, 1985; Bolstead *et al.*, 2012, p. 15).

To learn how to think historically young people need to look to experts to understand why there are different interpretations of the same historical event as well as to understand how to adjudicate between these. What makes historians experts in their field is not only that they have a vast knowledge of the details of a particular event or historical period. Rather it is the way that they use particular core historical concepts such as evidence and significance to examine and explain the past. Developing a grasp of disciplinary knowledge requires more than simply acquiring generic skills or learning a body of information. It involves developing an understanding of the disciplinary dispositions of experts in the field at this point in time. Subjects, through their link to a parent discipline provides a way of ascertaining that the knowledge provided is the most reliable available in particular field as well as providing a sense of identity for both teachers and students, as they become part of wider community of specialists (Young and Lambert, 2014). They learn these ways of thinking by mastering the intellectual tools that historians use when they produce and critique knowledge. In a classroom setting teachers need to expose students to a variety of different accounts of the past and to develop the "means to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of these interpretations" (Seixas, 2000, p. 25).

INTERNAL ASSESSMENT AND TEACHER JUDGEMENTS

We can get some insights into the challenges of a high autonomy history curriculum by examining how internal assessment operates in the senior secondary school arena, especially in regards to the judgements teachers make when they mark students work. In this context teachers are both curriculum makers and (as over half their courses are internally assessed) cur-

riculum assessors. Whereas the non-prescriptive curriculum is a relatively new initiative, internal assessment (with no prescribed content) has operated in secondary history classrooms for over 25 years (Sheehan 2014). In the senior secondary school the history curriculum is aligned with a criterion based assessment system that separates aspects of a wide range of subjects into discrete areas based around subject related skills. These units of assessment (called achievement standards) provide credit towards formal qualifications, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Each standard specifies the knowledge and skills that students must demonstrate to achieve credit but there is no prescribed content. In history there are six standards at each of levels 1, 2 and 3. Three of the standards at each level are internally assessed by teachers in schools and the other three are externally assessed by an examination.

To be effective in making judgements about students internally assessed research projects teachers need to understand the research process. However although academic disciplines and school subjects are aligned they are not the same. Researchers and teachers do different things. Researchers are primarily concerned with producing knowledge but the primary focus of teachers is communicating knowledge. In other words the primary role of school history is knowledge acquisition rather than knowledge production (Young and Lambert, 2014). In addition teachers are constrained by the amount of time they have to deliver the curriculum, their personal knowledge, the interests and academic abilities of their students and the resources that are available. Given the high stakes assessment environment of NCEA at this level understanding how the concepts of historical thinking drive teaching and learning at this level is a core factor in the ability of teachers to make accurate, consistent and fair judgements and provide useful feedback on students learning. In particular it allows them to have the intellectual confidence to mark holistically when this is appropriate and see the criteria based marking schedule as a guide.

The marking of internally based project work is seen by the history teaching community as a rules-based process that follows a clear set of protocols to ensure quality, accuracy, consistency and fairness. In the decade since NCEA was introduced teachers have become more confident in how they see the marking process and (like parents and principals) they are generally more positive about NCEA (Hipkins, 2013). In the history teaching community the implementation

of NCEA over the last decade has seen a range of professional development initiatives by the government body that monitors secondary school assessment (the New Zealand Qualifications Authority: NZQA) to ensure standardization in assessment. This includes the publication of moderator's reports and annotated exemplars of student work that differentiate between the awarding of particular grades. However while those involved in the examination process do their utmost to ensure their judgments' of students work are as precise and accurate as possible, for subjects that are largely qualitative in nature there is an element of the assessment process that is subjective (Elliot, 2013). This especially so in a subject like history where evaluating evidence of higher order thinking about complex historical problems is far from a straight forward process (Gill and Bramley, 2013).

In this context teachers understanding of how their discipline operates has an important role in how successfully curriculum and assessment is aligned when teachers are marking student's internally assessed research assignments. As markers teachers initially make judgments on students work on the basis of the extent to which they see a students' work as representative of a particular 'benchmark standard'. They then look for a base point (known as anchoring and adjusting) that allows them to then make adjustments during the marking process (Elliott, 2013). Given that markers typically make comparisons with previous work they have marked (and that their idea of an accurate benchmark standard is internalized) teachers who have sufficient experience with marking a range of students' work will have the advantage of a point of reference in making judgments (Crisp, 2013). However simply having experience in marking is not sufficient. At the core of being able to make authentic judgements about students' work is how well markers understand the disciplinary framework that informs their school subject. This was evident in a research study looking at internal assessment in New Zealand that demonstrated that teachers who had an advanced understanding of how the discipline of history operates were able to make holistic judgements about course work that reflected historical thinking. They typically used the marking criteria as a guide and had the intellectual confidence when marking to draw on a historical thinking framework and trust their own judgments about their assessment decisions they made (Sheehan, 2013). As one expert teacher commented:

When I am assessing broader questions around historical thinking and around other issues to do with

citizenship I have to look at those things holistically. I am not always going to find them in the criteria. So for example where I find a student was really getting somewhere with an interview with their grandmother and that this is really rich to read about, although I couldn't find the criteria dealt with historical detail or historical knowledge I felt Ok about treating that holistically. If I just looked at the criteria then there would be struggle ... Sometimes when we are marking it is not as quite straightforward and it just becomes a bit of a struggle as to where to place a student according to the criteria. Having the confidence to trust your own judgment is a great thing and I think when you are looking at a piece of work and the thinking that has gone into it, hopefully you are thinking about issues around historical significance and inquiry and how they are using evidence.

The same teacher noted that having a degree of confidence in understanding historical thinking was an important factor in how teachers negotiated the internal assessment moderation process. This was particularly important in how teachers justified their decision making with colleagues who wanted to closely follow the criteria rather than adopt a more holistic approach that reflected historical thinking.

We typically moderate maybe eight or nine assignments internally and then we will have one that goes out to either a school or to an NZQA moderator. They pretty much always come back with good feedback so we have been quite pleased with getting it roughly right. But one of my colleagues is much more focused on the criteria and is marking much more harshly than myself. Probably awarding more 'achieved' grades because they can't see the criteria being met ... Having an explicit historical thinking framework is pretty important when we are having these sorts of conversations.

CONCLUSION

The high autonomy nature of the New Zealand history curriculum offers a range of opportunities for teachers who are intellectually confident with how the discipline of history operates to structure their courses based on the needs and interests of their students. It has seen growing body of teachers in the history teaching community who are familiar with the historical thinking literature and not only able to teach young people how to think critically about the past but also make accurate judgements about students internally assessed project work. The non-prescriptive orientation of the curriculum however pos-

es a challenge for those teachers who do not have a strong grasp of the disciplinary nature of historical thinking and how the discipline of history operates. They are unlikely to ensure their students learn how to think critically about the past or emerge from their courses with an understanding of historical per-

sonalities, events and themes that are important for them in understanding how the past is aligned with the present. The effectiveness of the high autonomy history curriculum rests ultimately on the knowledge base of the teachers who deliver it.

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a442

Mark Sheehan