

Research Proposal

Exploring Students' Conceptions of History

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“It [History] has changed a lot since I did it at school!” exclaimed the grandparent of one 13 year old student, as we discussed the activities and achievements of his grandson at a parent’s evening in early 2014. The worryingly familiar recollections followed; dull, rote-learned lists of Eurocentric facts about the great events, people and places that he was made to commit to memory, if not to heart as a boy. It was only later in life, he confessed, that he saw History as anything beyond this. His statement in itself is interesting. History, it can be argued, cannot change in any meaningful sense; events cannot be undone; wars unfought; mistakes unmade. Yet such is the nature of History education that it can be made unrecognisable in less than a lifetime. ‘[T]hough God cannot alter the past,’ Samuel Butler (2005, chapter XIV, para. 14), noted, ‘Historians can’.

History is then perhaps best understood in this context of this essay as an experience. In this experience, each student¹ creates a nuanced and unique impression of the past through exposure to, and the subsequent processing of, historical information. Educators, historians, rulers and the like can therefore alter the experience of History that a student receives, not only by controlling the material that they witness, but also through their construing of what it means to ‘do History’ and why such an endeavour should be undertaken in the first place. The rhetoric of the British ex-Minister for Education Michael Gove were exemplary of this, whereby he sought to rectify what he saw as a lack of nationalist pride and cultural cohesion within the History National Curriculum (cf. Gove, 2010) through the imposition of an Anglo-Centric ‘Island Story’ narrative of the past. Similarly, he attacked certain strands of discourse within the History community for perpetuating what he perceived to be ‘myths’ about Britain’s leadership during the First World War, claiming that revisionist (and arguably Marxist) interpretations were corrosive to national identity and pride (Gove, 2014).

¹ Although the term ‘student’ implies an educational setting in which this experience occurs, this is equally applicable to ‘casual’ engagements with the past.

In both instances, Gove sought to dictate both the content of History that students may experience, as well as limiting their critical exposure to peripheral or alternative interpretations. This is revealing of his perceived 'role' for History as a cultural-homogeniser and generator of nationalistic pride and subsequent loyalty. The potential for History to further behaviours and beliefs that propagate the position of the ruling elite are well documented. Yet History can serve to further a vast array of interests and fulfil a plethora of purposes; in his *History: a very short introduction*, Arnold (2001; 16 - 57) gives a fantastic overview of the numerous political roles History has served over the centuries that reveal that controlling people's access to the past has always been recognised as a powerful implement. Others since have proposed other potential purposes for the study of the discipline, and education in its entirety, as being socially transformative (cf. Apple, 2013; Korostelina, 2013).

Yet I do not wish to engage in this debate insofar as to propose a solution or necessary 'right' role for History to perform. The debate has, for the most part, been inherently 'top-down' – a focus on how school curriculum and pedagogy 'gives' students the experience of History. This is to ignore the vast presence of History in our day-to-day lives and everyday cultural experiences; the films, books, television shows and references that one necessarily engages with as part of a localised, regional or international culture. It also fails to recognise, in the constructivist view of education, students as active participants in their education, possessing prejudices shaped by *a priori* experiences of History. As such, what I wish to explore is what students conceive of as History and the associations it possesses for them; what 'History' they experience now, both as students and cultural citizens, and to perceive any patterns or trends in how the past, and the pursuit of the past, is construed.

Although there has been some recent research into student conceptions of History²,

² Similar investigations that I was unable to access include "*Conceptions about the nature of accounts in history: an exploratory study of students' ideas and teachers' assumptions about students' understandings*"

little on the subject has proven immediately accessible. Many books debate the philosophical and moral roles of the educator and propagator of History (cf. Tosh, 2009; Evans, 2001; Husbands, 1996; Husbands et al, 2011) and some even explore the views of educators themselves on their function (Sossick, 2010). Yet few have explored how students, through their exposure to both the formal study and a more general experience of History, interpret the experience. One piece that perhaps best mirrors the intentions of this inquiry is Peter Seixas (1994) whereby he discusses how his trainee teachers explore students' understandings of History prior to part of their education. Two articles by Rhys Andrews, Catherine McGlynn & Andrew Mycock (2009, 2010) also come close to through their exploration of student attitudes and History.

Andrews et al (2009, 2010) seek explicitly to explore students' attitudes towards History, and how this influences their world view. They attempt to measure the influence of 'self-identity' in 2009 and 'national pride' in 2010. As such, their primary method of data collection was through a survey conducted in 2006, distributed to university students through their placement of study. As participation in the study was remote and voluntary, the researcher has limited control on how responses were completed, and sampling was therefore opportunistic based on who completed the survey. Andrew et al (2009; 369, 2010; 303) do ensure that participants are aware of the purpose of the study, assured of the anonymity of their participation, and are not coaxed into participation through the use of rewards. In both instances, Andrews et al (2009, 2010) rely on the use of 5 point Likert items, with which they are able to generate quantitative data by which they attempt to draw conclusions about the attitudes of their participants. No indication is given as to how these questions were generated, or whether they were based on any previous research that guided their focus.

Data collected to measure the relationship between History and self-identity relied on participants giving 'background characteristics' (Table 1, Andrews et al, 2009; 370)

in Singapore" by Afandi, S. M. [Singapore] and "*Conceptions of 'history' held by a group of seventeen-year-old students in a Queensland school*" By Costin, V A [Australia]

consisting of age, gender, race and the like. However, participants were thereby requested to give a self-assessment of their position within groupings such as 'Social class' and 'Political orientation'. Such self-evaluation may be problematic given the fluid and ill-defined nature of these categories, and subsequently draw into question any conclusion generated through their use. However, Andrews et al (2009, 372) argue that these were sufficient to satisfy Anderson's (1983) requirement for an 'imagined community' that would pertinently shape their attitude towards History. These categories, for the purpose of measuring their influence, were coded in a variety of ways (cf. Andrews et al, 2009; 372) and applied to draw conclusions about what influences the participants' attitudes towards History.

Analysis conducted in Andrew's et al (2010; 304-305) study of national pride furthered this by categorising responses to the Likert items into two distinct factors through a principal component analysis. Titled 'traditional/conservative' and 'multicultural/liberal', Andrew et al al (2010; 304) state that this revealed 'important determinants' in the results and that such division correlates with previous writing in education (citing Evans, 1997). Open questions are also used to ask participants to list 'things that make [respondents] feel proud of their country... [and] ashamed of their country'. Asking for 3 responses for each group from each participant, Andrew et al al (Table 2, 2010; 305) generate a list of the 10 most common responses for each category. The presence of these responses was again binarily coded to allow them to measure the prevalence of such sentiments against other characteristics. In their analysis, Andrew et al (2010; 304-305) then correlate the prevalence of these responses with participants' 'background characteristics' to draw associational links between their attitudes and views on History.

The work of Andrew et al (2009, 2010) has limited implications with regards to my research. They have, as I intend to do, sought the experience of History from the perspective of students with a sensitivity to the wider cultural prevalence of History that shapes students' views. However, in both instances they have sought to use research to

verify a priori hypotheses generated by their specialised interest in the area (namely nationality). As seen previously with Gove (2010, 2014) such considerations are indeed vital to state curriculum planners, and of particular interest in the age of nation-state, increasingly mobile populations and near instantaneous cross-cultural communication. However, it is too specific an area in which to situate my inquiry, and places nationality at the heart of its concerns as opposed to the History itself. It is also at odds with what I perceive to be the role of the inquiry in exploring and generating theory rather than simply verifying theory in the positivist tradition (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; 28).

Peter Seixas' article (1994) is perhaps an unorthodox choice to explore. In his writing, Seixas describes a research task given by himself to trainee teachers under his charge at the University of British Columbia, Canada. The aim of the task is to make trainee teachers aware of students' preconceptions and a priori engagement with History to further their appreciation of how it may be improved in their role as educators. As Seixas draws his data from the work of his trainee teachers, it is not overly explicit in its outline of research methodology. The journal from which it was taken (*Social Studies*) also appears to be a now-defunct periodical aimed more at furthering the practice of educators than advancing research in the field. Nonetheless, its shared focus with my intended empirical field of study makes it highly valuable as an example of how an inquiry might be conducted into students' understandings of History.

Due to Seixas' role as 'meta-researcher' in the piece, drawing from his students' submissions, sampling strategies are not widely discussed. Seixas (1994; 92) makes it clear that all studies, excluding those that met 'insuperable problems' and subsequently cancelled, were conducted in trainee teachers' practice or 'sponsor' schools. No information is given about the schools or ages that the research was conducted in, although mention is made of the response of a Grade 10 (15-16 year old) student. Seixas (1994; 92) does however describe in some detail efforts to ensure ethical practice by his students, and subsequently himself, including the voluntary basis of participation,

anonymisation of participants, permission for access from those in a duty of care and conduct within an interview situation. The conduct of interviewing also receives significant coverage, noting particularly preparation of probing questions and the environment in which interviews should be conducted.

Sampling – presumably organised by each trainee teacher / researcher independently – is again not greatly discussed, although arguably opportunistic given the voluntary nature of participation. Seixas (1994; 92) does however note that in one instance purposeful sampling was employed to pursue relevant students who had responded to an initial questionnaire, and in another selective sampling was employed to compare students who differed ‘demographically or scholastically’. As the research task was set over several years, conducted by different individuals in each instance, there is no definitive data collection method Seixas or his students appoint. Instead, Seixas (1994; 92) presents a fraction of the vast array of data collection methods proposed and utilised by students, noting the use of small group and individual interviews, quantitative questionnaires, class discussions, visual and audio recording and researcher notes.

Similarly, Seixas’ (1994; 93-94) discussion of the analysis and findings of his students’ research is equally fragmented. He elaborates upon three ‘issue clusters’ (Seixas, 1994; 93) raised through his students’ work, suggesting coding or the identification of themes found in Grounded Theory (GT) or Phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 1998; 55). It is unclear if these ‘clusters’ emerge directly from a student’s research analysis, a culmination of several pieces or are his own application. In presenting his evidence, Seixas (1994; 93-49) provides small extracts to exemplify his clusters. However, in other instances, no data is presented to support his statements, such as the ‘overrepresentation’ of historical figures in students’ responses regarding characters from a recently released film in which caricatures of them featured prominently. The implications Seixas discussed are not arguably to further research or indeed historical

practice, but a more immediate and localised aim of improving trainee teachers' understandings of their new charges.

As such, although the aim and intended outcome of Seixas' piece may be very different from my own, his approach to the shared subject focus is enlightening. What it may not impart in methodological insights in comparison with Andrew et al (2009; 2010) is more than compensated for through it emphasising a number of key areas that must be considered within my own approach to exploring students' conceptualisation of History. Namely, it brings to light a large number of issues to be considered regarding the collection of qualitative data, including access, ethics and methodology; some consideration as to potential sampling strategies to be employed; questions as to how such qualitative data can be analysed; and lastly how it may be presented as to convey a convincing and pertinent argument.

My research is to be conducted in a non-selective, non-denominational North London Academy with approximately 1500 students on roll between the ages of 11 and 19 years. The 6th Form (16-19 years) Advanced-Subsidiary/Advanced-Level courses are however selective on ability. Student intake is mixed in ethnicity and ability, with a roughly equal gender divide. It has a higher than national average number of students receiving Free School Meals and, is in the highest quintile nationally for Special Educational Needs statemented or School-Action Plus students with recorded additional needs. The Academy was chosen out of convenience as my place of work, and the existing relationships that should make access to participants easier. Should it at any point be desired, contacts are maintained with a variety of different schools that could be utilised to collect additional data, including Junior/Primary schools and other secondary schools.

As the intended focus of the study involves interacting with legally-defined minors, access will have to be confirmed with those responsible for safeguarding. The Head

teacher / Principle will be notified in writing to request access, as will the History Head of Department, Humanities Head of Faculty, and potentially Pastoral Year Leaders as well. In addition, consent of the parent or carers will also be sought in writing inviting parents to 'opt-out' their child should they wish. Acting as a researcher with ties to the Institution of Education Master's course, clearance will also need to be agreed on the idea by a tutor or supervisor. Lastly, students will also be informed of the nature and purpose of the study, as well as assurances of their anonymity, and will retain the right to withdraw their participation up until the submission of the research. Access to samples presents the most likely instance of problems occurring in the research, and as such contingency measures including reserve participants can be utilised to ensure enough data is available.

The nature of the intended qualitative research to be undertaken also requires ethical considerations on my part as researcher. As seen in Seixas (1994), particular consideration must be given as to the sensitivities of interaction between researcher and participants. With reference to the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011; 4), the principles of respect for 'the person' (participant), 'the knowledge', 'democratic values' and implications for research integrity denoted by 'quality of educational research' and 'academic freedom' encapsulate considerations that must be taken. It is of particular note that, under section 17 (BERA, 2011; 6) it is '*the best interests of the child*' that must be the foremost consideration when dealing with minors. As such, although the intended field of research is not overly controversial, considerations must be made as to students declining to participate or share information –relevant or otherwise – that they may be uncomfortable with doing so, particularly as the study aims to explore aspects of their broader, private life. The article also covers other aspects previously mentioned (anonymity, right to withdraw etc.) Such considerations also apply to the context in which the interviews take place, as students may not wish for peers to know about actions taken outside of the school environment. My position as an established figure of

authority in a school context may also have implications, and consideration must be taken again as to the presentation, time and environment in which interviews are conducted.

As the aforementioned focus of the inquiry revolves around a student's experience of History that is not exclusive to the classroom, any student can potentially serve as a sample. However, within the Academy, all students study History as part of a compulsory Humanities education up until the age of 14. Between the ages of 14 and 19, History is then an optional subject which can be dropped. There is no intention of selecting by ability, race or gender (as it is felt that information collected would not be generalizable with such a small sample). Potentially, the study could direct itself towards assessing any discernible difference between students' perceptions of 'History' if they did or did not pursue the subject to 16 or 19 years. However, it is more likely that sampling will be conducted opportunistically initially based on an assessment on how cooperative and thus how much data of '*theoretical purpose and relevance*' [their italics] (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; 48-50) they may yield. As further data may be required once coding has started, theoretical sampling may be adopted to allow the freedom of returning to the field in attempt to conduct constant comparison and attempt saturation of any categories identified.

As I seek qualitative data regarding participants' own conceptualisations of History, data will primarily be gathered through open ended interviews, allowing participants' to explore their associations freely in the hope that they prove theoretically relevant. This method is most common in Grounded Theory (GT), and although other data may be noted about the participants, it may not necessarily be used, with quantitative data unlikely to be utilised at all (Creswell 2012; 85-86). Interviews will be conducted by myself in the role of researcher, and recorded to be later transcribed and analysed. I will also take notes and memos during interviews to be compared with transcripts and define categories. As seen in Johnston's (2008; 44-45) research, I intent to start the

interview using one large, open ended question, and attempt to control proceedings as little as possible, although prompting participants to further explore relevant avenues will most likely be necessary.

Analysis of the data, drawing upon GT, will be conducted as data collection continues, allowing me to develop a theoretical sensitivity to identify and attempt to saturate emerging categories and their properties – although unlikely given the limited time and resources available. I also intend to adopt elements from a Phenomenological approach to the data analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967; 37) suggest that all literature on the matter under investigation should be ignored prior to data collection and analysis as to insure the generated theory is not ‘contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas’. Sincerely believing that this is impossible due to my previous involvement in the empirical area, I consider adopting a Phenomenological method outlined by Creswell (1998; 53-54). This concept of the *epoche* involves the researcher ‘bracket[ing out]... [their] own preconceived ideas about the [phenomenon] to understand it through the voices of the informants’. Through this I hope to ensure that concepts are indeed generated by the data analysed, and not impositions of my own preconceptions.

It could be argued that at the point of data analysis that Phenomenological methodology is more suited to my intended area of research. Creswell (1998; 37-39) suggests that the suitability of each approach is best gauged by the intention of the researcher; the aim of GT being towards generation of a theory; and the purpose of phenomenology being to explore the experience of an event or concept. As such, if we are to consider History as our experience or concept, it is arguable that Phenomenology may be more beneficial. Certainly, an exploration of the meaning of History for myself (as a confessedly heavily-involved individual in the matter) would be beneficial to my awareness of preconceptions, as previously discussed (Creswell, 1998; 147). The generation of ‘clusters of meaning’ (Creswell, 1998; 147,150) also appear compatible with open coding.

However, Phenomenology is not without its problems for my purposes. Creswell (1998; 55) notes that Phenomenology principally seeks an 'essential, invariant structure (or essence)' of the phenomenon, divided into 'what was experienced' (the textual) and 'how it was experienced' (the structural). As I seek to explore the experience of History both inside and outside of the classroom, History itself is a variable concept *in its very essence*, unmediated by location, time or intention. Therefore, by my own admission, there is no *essence* to describe as such, merely a culmination of experiences. The textual and the structural therefore is, in this instance, a unique (although with identifiably corresponding elements, drawn from a shared culture) conception for each participant.

Yet Grounded Theory also presents challenges in its analysis. Drawing upon Strauss and Corbin's (1990; 99-107) Paradigm Model, it suggests that GT analysis necessitates the theoretical establishing of 'causal conditions', 'intervening conditions' and 'action/interaction strategies' that may prove problematic in analysis. Whilst Strauss and Corbin's (1990; 100) give the example of a 'broken leg' to illustrate how easily such connections can be constructed, I have reservations as the ability of my research to establish such links to such an ethereal notion as a student's conception of 'History'. This is furthered the problem of, given the limited time and resources available, my inability to effectively saturate the concepts generated through the initial data collection.

If this can however be achieved, the Paradigm Model may prove an effective way in which results may be presented. Creswell (Table 8.2, 1998; 49) notes that visual models are often deployed to illustrate such theoretical relationships generated. Like Johnston (2008), I will most likely employ the use of written descriptions of key emergent categories, along with quotes that may further illustrate their properties. Through this research, I hope to further my understanding on how students of History conceptualise exactly what they are doing, before they even walk into the classroom. As such, I do not expect to provide remedies or suggestions as to how the academic experience of

History can be improved, but rather provide a gateway through which I may at a later date pursue any avenues generated by the results.

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