History education in a post-truth world: a view from the UK
What is it about the study of the past that makes it useful?

• To young people...
• To society/the state/the nation....
• To the wellbeing of the human race?

A collection of quotations about the purposes of school history:
https://archive.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/purposes/purposesquotesintro.htm
Proposition:
A history curriculum based around a progress narrative of the nation state misses out a lot of history that would be useful to young people, society, and the welfare of the human race.
• 'Why do all regimes make their young study some history in school? Not to understand society and how it changes, but to approve of it, to be proud of it, to be or become good citizens.'

• Eric Hobsbawn, 'To see the future, look at the past', The Guardian, 7 June 1997
•But this raises the question, what qualities, what values and dispositions are desirable to cultivate and develop in ‘the good citizen’, in the 21st century?
Should school history ‘change with the times’?

- Are the aims of school history ‘enduring’ (DfE, National Curriculum for history, 2007) (‘The canon...’).

- Or should they change to take account of ‘The challenges of our times’? (DfE, National Curriculum for history, 2013)
The ‘traditional’ view....

• ‘When it comes to history, surely the focus ought to be the national story and the national story hasn’t changed in the last decade or so (Woodhead, 2005).

• ‘Curriculum content should contain the classical canon of history.... We should pull back from seeking to make content more relevant to the contemporary concerns and lives of young people’ (Gove, 2010).
And then... (circa 2010 onwards)...

• The revolution in social media – changes in the way that people receive their information about the past (and the present)...

and the increasing sophistication with which information about the past and the present can be manipulated. (Wineburg, 2019 – ‘The internet is sowing mass confusion. We must rethink how we teach all school subjects.’)
How Americans live today - Shocking! North Korea describe USA society as hell in their documentary

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWodxp7wDcY
“In the relatively near future, it will be impossible to trust any picture, movie or soundbite. If this doesn’t frighten you, it’s because you haven’t really thought about it... There are people who believe anything.”

Other developments...

• New crises, challenges and problems facing the human race

• The ‘Post-truth Era’ (‘Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’ -OED).

• Information literacy and the crisis of democracy (Pomerantsev, Livitsky and Ziblatt, Runciman, Roger and Goodwin, Kakutani)

• Don’t these developments have implications for the way we teach history in schools?
Eric Hobsbawn, (British Historian), 2002.

•‘History is being invented in vast quantities... the world is today full of people inventing histories and lying about history.
Is it possible that sometimes knowledge of history does more harm than good?
Hey kids - keep yourself and society safe -

If you get offered history – just say no!
How have policymakers in the UK responded to these changes?

• **A return to traditional school history based around the transmission of a positive story about the national past**
• ‘Most parents would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England’ Michael Gove, 2010.

• **The stipulation that all schools and all teachers should promote ‘Fundamental British Values’ (DRIMT)**
  “Pupils should learn how we became the country we are today and how our values make us a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness.”

‘Schools must teach British values, says head of Ofsted.’ The Independent, 24 September 2017.
‘There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive, patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country’s historic achievements. Which is why the next Conservative Government will ensure the curriculum teaches the proper narrative of British History - so that every Briton can take pride in this nation’.

Some problems with the idea that a positive rendering of the national past will aid social cohesion

- The idea that a positive and celebratory account of the nation’s past will successfully bind the population together and act as a form of ‘social cement’ is an unexamined assumption (see Grever et al. 2008).

- There is some evidence that in open societies, young people do not find such narratives plausible or relevant to their lives (Barton, 2009, Clark, 2014, Rosenzweig and Thalen, 1998).

• The idea that national problems of equity, well-being and social justice have been eliminated after the march through history towards a perfect democracy, unblemished prosperity and social harmony is difficult to sustain given contemporary realities in most countries.
The values of liberty, tolerance and rational inquiry are not the birthright of a single culture.

• How can history educators respond intelligently to the stipulation that they must promote ‘fundamental British values, and teach pupils that Britain is and always has been ‘a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness’?
Pupils need to be exposed to ‘bad history’ on the internet and on social media

• And it should be explained to them why it’s bad, why it is deployed, how it achieves its affects.
Bad history...

- ‘This is yet one more example of teutonic arrogance’, adding pugnaciously, ‘My father, Reginald Francois, was a D-Day veteran. He never submitted to bullying by any German. Neither will his son.’

- (British MP Mark Francois ripping up a pro-EU letter on television)

https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=learn+our+history+the+reagan+years&view=detail&mid=DE778237982073AF0EFCDE778237982073AF0EFC&FORM=VIPE
And explain why it’s bad history, how it works, why bad history is constructed

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yWxAND5qB4
The importance of information and digital literacy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNEecWrRHgw
Developing pupils’ democratic vocabulary

**It’s no longer just about:**
- Secret ballot
- Rule of Law
- Separation of Powers
- The independence of the judiciary
- Parliamentary sovereignty
- Gerrymandering

**It’s also about:**
- Bots
- Astroturfing
- Polemic
- Dead catting
- Populism
- Trolling
- Demagogue
- Outsider groups
- The manufacture of consent
- Doxing
- Sophistry
- Playing the race card
- Chauvinism
- Exceptionalism
Implications of these changes for history teachers and teacher educators

• It’s not just about information/digital literacy (important though they are – work of Wineburg, Caulfield, Walsh etc)

• It’s also about morals/ethics/honesty. The importance of concern for truth, respect for evidence. These are dispositions, not cognitive abilities.

• (And pupils need to be taught to understand why there are pressures on veracity).
The importance of truth to history.... and to society

• The ethical importance of making an honest attempt to provide the most accurate explanation possible from the evidence available.
• Respect for evidence is of central importance to the discipline of history, and lack of respect for ‘truth’ and evidence is a major problem in many modern societies.
• (Lipscomb, 2016 –’You can’t be a historian and a liar’)
• Absolute rigour, integrity, scrupulousness
• A bit fast and loose with the evidence
• Tendency to look for evidence that supports point of view and not look too hard elsewhere
• Conscious elision of evidence that does not conform to desired hypothesis
• Prepared to manipulate and distort evidence without conscience in order to make evidence fit preferred hypothesis
Veracity: It’s not just about historians and politicians…

• A difference between good and bad historians..
• Between good and bad politicians…
• Between good and bad journalists…
• Between good and bad scientists…
• Between good and bad researchers…
• Between good and bad human beings?
‘Cognitive ethics’


• If we teach history as history, we will be handing on cognitive ethics (respect for evidence, respect for persons as sources of arguments and so on)... Historical understanding requires ‘rational passions’ like a concern for truth and respect for persons. Students who care nothing for the scope or power of an explanation, omit to ask if another account is equally valid, or are happy to ignore evidence, have simply not begun to grasp the discipline of history.
Teaching pupils that lies have consequences

- Hitler and the ‘Stab in the back’ legend
Exxon's climate lie: 'No corporation has ever done anything this big or bad'

Bill McKibben

The truth of Exxon’s complicity in global warming must to be told - how they knew about climate change decades ago but chose to help kill our planet.

By 1978 Exxon’s senior scientists were telling top management that climate change was real, caused by man, and would raise global temperatures by 2-3°C. Photograph: Pat Sullivan/AP
‘It’s Not About the “Heat” of the Rhetoric, It’s About Its Toxicity’
October 29, 2018 / mikecaulfield
Fox News host compares migrants entering US to Nazis

Todd Starnes of Fox Nation also called migrants a ‘rampaging horde of illegal aliens’ less than two weeks after El Paso attack

From Trump to Orbán, politicians are winning votes by stoking age-old hatreds. Where does this fear of migrants come from?

By Suketu Mehta

The west is being destroyed, not by migrants, but by the fear of migrants. In country after country, the ghosts of the fascists have rematerialised and are sitting in parliaments in Germany, in Austria, in Italy. They have successfully convinced their populations that the greatest threat to their nations isn’t government tyranny or inequality or climate change, but immigration. And that, to stop this wave of migrants, everyone’s civil liberties must be curtailed. Surveillance cameras must be installed everywhere. Passports must be produced for the most routine of tasks, like buying a mobile phone.
Teaching pupils about the use of history for the purposes of diversion

• Bismarck:’The Reich is in danger!’
• Fritz Fischer and the origins of World War One

• More recently:
  • ‘The great replacement’
  • ‘Migrants are destroying our society’ (UK and elsewhere)
MICHAEL WOOD ON...
DANGEROUS HISTORIES.

""We can all be prey to myths that set one group against another"

Myths of national exceptionalism
How many of our students understand the phrase 'playing the race card?
Many of the bad things that happen in the world are done by people who are very clever, who did well in history at school, and have high level and even degree level qualifications in history, and who are at one level, very skilful at handling evidence, in the sense of cleverly manipulating and distorting it for morally and ethically dubious political purposes. This has a very harmful effect on democratic societies and on life on the planet generally. (Haydn, 2017)
However, there are many powerful, intelligent and unscrupulous people who do not use evidence in the way that Keith Joseph suggested was important – (‘The teaching of history has to take place in a spirit which takes seriously the need to pursue truth on the basis of evidence).
The importance of developing pupils’ understanding of the factors which can compromise or militate against veracity

- 1. Parody/humour
- 2. Polemic
- 3. Money
- 4. To tell a ‘feelgood’ story
- 5. To tell a ‘heroes and villains’ story
- 6. Political use of the past for present day purposes
- 7. Fame, attention, publicity
- 8. ‘End justifies the means’ excuse
- 9. Simplification
Using evidence ethically (it’s not just about cognitive development)

• ‘Using evidence critically and with integrity...’ (Ofsted, 2005).
• ‘Authenticity presupposes a desire for truth and a respect for evidence’ (Centre for Holocaust Education, IOE).
• ‘Practical wisdom or the capacity or predisposition to act truthfully and with reason in matters of deliberation, thus with a strong ethical component’ (Aristotle, quoted in Oancea and Furlong 2007).
• ‘Moral agency plays a critical role in leading a good life’ (Sen, 2009)
School History and ethics, morals, values, ‘good and bad’

• Historians attempt to hold back on explicit ethical judgments about actors in the midst of their accounts, but, when all is said and done, if the story is meaningful, then there is an ethical judgment involved. We should expect to learn something from the past that helps us to face the ethical issues of today.

• Peter Seixas, n/d, http://historicalthinking.ca/concept/ethical-dimensions
Most voters think risk of violence against MPs is 'price worth paying' over Brexit

Research finds majority of both leave and remain voters feel violence acceptable to get outcome they support
Yesterday’s news in UK...

• Gina Miller (Anti-Brexit activist):

• Police probe fundraiser page ‘for hitman to kill anti-Brexit campaigner’ Page remained online for months before finally being reported to police.
Gina Miller’s response....

• Responding to the page on Twitter, Ms Miller said: “We need to heal our nation and my view is that the only way of doing that is to remember true British values of tolerance, decency, reason, civic duty, common sense and above all else honesty and kindness.”
Getting pupils to understand the importance of **agency** in history

“Pupils should learn how we became the country we are today and how our values make us a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness.”

‘Schools must teach British values, says head of Ofsted.’ The Independent, 24 September 2017.

(Another example of ‘Bad History’?)

• It does require some little imagination to realise what the consequences will be of not educating our children to sort out the differences between essential and non-essential information, raw fact, prejudice, half-truth and untruth, so that they know when they are being manipulated, by whom, and for what purpose.

•‘History, properly taught, can help men to become critical and humane, just as wrongly taught it can turn them into bigots and fanatics.’
What sort of citizens do you want?

- Stupid, docile and gullible citizens who are ‘easily led’?

- Or knowledgeable, critically aware and ethically principled citizens?
Given how things are at present in the world, in terms of history education’s role in “the good society”, and the health and vitality of liberal democracies, the inculcation of concern for truth and respect for evidence are perhaps school history’s most important contributions.
One last thing:

• ‘There is no evidence that school pupils translate their knowledge of the past into an understanding of the present unless the past is explicitly related to current circumstances.’

HISTORY MATTERS