

Teaching History at University

ENHANCING LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING

ALAN BOOTH



TEACHING HISTORY AT UNIVERSITY

‘. . . knowledgeable and thought-provoking . . . blissfully free of jargon and rebarbative “education-speak”. Written by a National Teaching Fellow and one of the History community’s most innovative and reflective pedagogues, Alan Booth’s book sets a new standard for accessible guidance on how history students actually learn.’

Eric Evans, Lancaster University

‘This is a very stimulating book, by an experienced educator in history. The tone is tolerant and encouraging, while working steadily toward better teaching practice and offering, correctly, a central focus on historical understanding as the key goal. Discussions of student perspective, with some great quotes, complement attention to teaching approaches and assessment. I found myself jotting frequent notes about how to do this or that differently when I plan my undergraduate course for next semester.’

Peter N. Stearns, George Mason University

‘Alan Booth’s *Teaching History at University* is without question the definitive work available for university teachers of history. There is no other book like it. Scholars of historical pedagogy will begin – and could even end – with Booth.’

Peter Frederick, Wabash College

Teaching history is a substantive, intellectual task. As a form of scholarship it is as complex, challenging and creative as historical research, and it is vital to the future of the discipline.

Teaching History at University examines how high-quality history teaching and learning can be achieved in today’s universities worldwide. Alan Booth draws on a wide range of international research as well as the reflections and experiences of university historians, linking theory and practice. He provides a wealth of practical ideas and strategies for the classroom. The key to improvement, he argues, lies in understanding students and in reflection on teachers’ own educational beliefs, values and assumptions.

This is an essential resource for university teachers and all those who are responsible for ensuring the quality of teaching and learning policies and practices within their institutions.

Alan Booth is Reader in History at the University of Nottingham and Co-Director for History in the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology. His previous publications include *The Practice of University History Teaching* (Manchester University Press, 2000), co-edited with P. Hyland.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Active research and fresh historical insight are necessary to keep a history school and its teaching alive; but equally necessary is the realisation that the teaching of history is as honourable, as useful, as arduous, a task as historical research and the writing of history books.

(Kitson-Clark 1973)

For most historians in higher education, teaching is an activity to which they devote the greater part of their time and energies on a day-to-day basis. It is a task undertaken not merely out of contractual obligation; it also provides the opportunity to share a love of the subject and to see students develop as historians, learners and individuals. In a survey of over a thousand historians conducted by the Organization of American Historians in 1993, a significant number reported that interaction with students constituted a particular satisfaction. For many, the desire to teach had been an important factor in drawing them into the profession, and the 'joy in seeing young people come alive to history' and 'watching students grow and mature' was a principal source of personal reward (Thelen 1994: 945). Teaching offered the opportunity to help others to connect more deeply to their past and to themselves and develop both subject and life skills. As one historian put it: 'I hope that through my teaching I can open young people's eyes about our nation's past and encourage them always to ask, "Why is X the way it is? How did X get to be so?" If I can do that, I've helped train a generation of inquisitive, curious minds which will be able to pursue achievement in a variety of fields' (Shrock and Shrock 1994: 1098). Similarly, responses to an annual survey of university history departments in the United Kingdom since 1994, conducted by the

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magazine *History Today*, testify to the strength of historians' professional and personal commitment to high-quality teaching and learning (see, for example, Fitzgerald and Hingley 1996; Barker 1997). As one historian comments, reflecting the views of colleagues in all types of institution: 'Despite the RAE [Research Assessment Exercise] and our research mission, the bulk of our resources continue to be derived from and directed towards the provision of high-quality teaching' (Bates 1999: 56).

As the above quotation indicates, such surveys of professional opinion also reveal frustration at the distorting effects of recent trends within higher education. Thus one historian remarks that 'the academic reward system encourages historians to write for academic audiences, especially other historians, and discourages them from reaching out to multiple audiences. It also discourages them from trying to be good, effective teachers. They don't get rewarded to do this' (Thelen 1994: 939). Most criticism, however, is reserved for the subjection of history programmes to an accounting mentality in which everything is regarded as measurable and comparable, an approach widely linked in the minds of historians with a managerialism that runs counter to traditional academic values of autonomy, integrity and collegiality (see Ramsden 1998; Adams 2000; Newton 2000). The growth of student numbers on a dwindling unit of resource creates further resentment, not least because it threatens to erode the relationship between teachers and students considered integral to high-quality learning and teaching in the subject (Fitzgerald and Hingley 1996; Evans 2003). Thus W. Thompson (2000: 74) detects a trend throughout the Western world

towards the commodification of higher education and its subjection to managerial and quasi-market forces . . . tutors will be under intense pressure to accommodate the maximum number of students with the minimum expenditure of resources, and their mode of teaching and assessment will inevitably be affected – the tendency will indeed be to teach history as a finished body of knowledge to be absorbed mechanically, with only the most cursory gestures to the complexities of historical understanding, in a fashion that makes for ease of assessment.

In a system of mass higher education, history undergraduate students are more heterogeneous in terms of age, personal and cultural background and level of preparedness for study; they are also

commonly obliged to engage in part-time employment to fund their studies. The reduction in the time available for studying, the pressure to obtain employment in order to pay off accumulated debt and the prospect of a competitive employment market inevitably lead some to adopt a more strategic approach to studying. Though hardly a new phenomenon, the prioritization of effort towards assignments that count towards final grading, at the expense of preparation for non-assessed work, is widely perceived to be increasing. In addition, many students in history classes are no longer history majors, a trend intensified in modular programmes. In a meeting of representatives from the history departments of seven of the eight Indiana University campuses in 1997 to discuss the undergraduate programme, participants made it plain that their greatest concern was teaching non-history majors. 'From the smallest departments to the largest, most of the undergraduate students they taught were not majors . . . Most of the students in history classes are business or education majors' (Schreiber 1998; Bender 1994). Put starkly, history teachers can no longer count on their students possessing significant, if any, prior historical knowledge. Yet, whilst this suggests the need for greater attention to be paid to student learning, teaching increasingly competes with the need to demonstrate high-quality research output for career advancement, and with a proliferation of administrative tasks and paperwork associated with demands for quality assurance and 'transparency'. Throughout Western higher education, the academic workload is increasing rapidly, and the sense of personal control over work – once regarded as compensation for modest salaries – has all but disappeared (see Boys *et al.* 1988; Maassen and Van Vught 1996; Ramsden 1998; Knight 2002). Whilst historians can appreciate the need to ensure that undergraduate programmes are effectively managed and standards maintained, there is also suspicion that this represents a growing culture of compliance and control within higher education. From the complex paper trails necessary to introduce and monitor new courses and degree programmes to the mechanistic listing of skills outcomes, there is concern that administrative rather than educational goals have become the drivers of behaviour in the history classroom.

The practical consequence of such trends is that history teachers today are expected to design courses and teaching strategies that deliver high-quality learning to more numerous and more diverse students than ever before, in a context of multiple demands on their time. The challenges have never been greater. Moreover, if, as W. Thompson (2000: 75–6) maintains, 'keeping the principal aim and

purpose of a history education in view amidst the swirl and pressure of these impositions and distractions requires a considerable degree of resolution and determination', this task is not made easier by the fact that the objectives of a history education are themselves a matter of contention. The expansion of new fields and approaches since the 1960s, and related theoretical developments such as feminism, multiculturalism and postmodernism, have all challenged traditional historical epistemology and led to considerable curricular diversity of aims, content and approaches (see Novick 1988; Wilson 1993; Frank *et al.* 1994; Jenkins 1996; Lubelska 1996; Lewis and Theoharris 1996; Joyce 1998; Jordanova 2000). What subject matter (if any) is essential to an undergraduate history education, what constitutes the optimal balance between content and skills, what should be the role of teacher and students in the learning process and how historical knowledge, skills and understanding are best assessed are all contested issues. Ultimately, of course, what individual historians or history departments define as their key objectives and priorities, and thus how they choose to structure and deliver their courses, will differ according to their own particular circumstances and needs, and those of their students. There is no single way to teach history. However, whether the goal is to provide a broad, liberal education, to train future historians, to develop skills for future employment, to promote lifelong learning, or to foster personal or social emancipation, a commitment to high-quality student learning is vital.

How historians can foster such learning constitutes the principal focus of this book. It is founded upon several overlapping premises: first, that teaching history is an important activity, an endeavour which extends far beyond producing employable graduates and can change students as historians, learners and individuals in potentially profound ways; second, that teaching should be regarded as scholarly work, as intellectually demanding, creative and rewarding as research; third, that taking time to think about what is done in the history classroom is even more necessary in the context of the challenges faced by teachers of the subject; and fourth, that finding ways to bring history alive to students, whatever their background knowledge and interests, makes the experience of teaching and learning easier, more rewarding and more fun. Although it has a practical focus, the approach adopted in this book is founded upon some well-established educational principles which represent the results of at least three decades of educational research on student learning in higher education, and the findings of a growing body of enquiry into classroom experiences in history. Whilst these propositions are considered in the following

chapters, they are outlined briefly below in order to provide a sense of the approach adopted and of some recurrent themes.

High-quality learning is about changing understanding

In a history education, the acquisition of understanding is regarded as a principal objective and a key indicator of the quality of learning. Fostering the intention to understand has also been at the core of educational research and of development activities to promote 'deep' learning among students in higher education. Understanding and its associated analytical and interpretative skills are not easy to define precisely, and as a result have become suspect in the eyes of those who would reduce the complexity of learning to a list of precisely measurable learning outcomes. Yet for historians understanding is generally represented as a deep grasp of past situations and societies, a form of knowing that reaches beneath the surface of events and actions to reveal underlying structures, patterns and principles. In the process of deepening their understanding, students gain insight into their subject, themselves and the world around them by questioning established notions, considering diverse views and building independent judgements. Such learning is at once critical, reflective and imaginative, and enhances historical skills, employability and the ability to act purposefully in a world of rapid and complex change. Learning for understanding is both subject-specific and transferable to other situations, for when underlying structures and principles are understood, and an attentive approach to historical procedures developed, the chance of skills transfer is greater than if material has simply been memorized. Here the possession of information is necessary but not sufficient. Rather, understanding, as represented by history students and tutors, involves the application of knowledge to historical problems in a connective fashion: a process in which multiple pieces of information, ideas and personal experience are integrated, in ways congruent with generally accepted disciplinary modes of investigation, to form a mental representation of an event, situation or problem in the past that is satisfying in its perceived wholeness, if inevitably provisional. This sense of connected knowing is encapsulated by the following second-year history undergraduate reflecting on a course undertaken on twentieth-century Japanese society:

I felt the course really helped me to understand Japan in this period, especially by the end of the course when everything came together. There was a combination of all factors, social, economic and political, and I was able to pull all the strands together.

Understanding demands not only the acquisition of knowledge (as 'facts', historians' opinions or historiography), but the ability to structure it in increasingly complex ways. Nor is this perceived by students as a purely individual process. Rather, many feel confident that they really understand a topic when they can explain it to others. As one first-year student puts it: 'When I can talk about a topic to other people and can explain it to them confidently, then I realise I have understood it.' Understanding, then, involves a qualitative and progressive shift in learning, a change in how one sees events in the past, the nature of historical practice, the discipline itself and at its highest levels the relationship between subject, self and the world around. As understanding deepens, both subject and student are transformed.

Understanding is a holistic process

Understanding is an integrative process involving intellect and emotions, knowledge and the ability to apply it in increasingly sophisticated ways. Whilst some disciplinary conventions foreground detached approaches to the subject in the interests of dispassionate judgement, imaginative engagement is as essential to high-level learning as it is to serious historical writing. All historical material needs to be organized into meaningful patterns, and the incomplete and often fragmented nature of evidence about the past compels the historian to ask imaginative questions, intuit connections and follow hunches if an event or episode is to be adequately explained or represented, just as attempting to understand what motivated people in the past involves some empathetic engagement with their lives as a whole. The practice of history is therefore inherently creative, and, whilst the imaginative must be grounded in a critical and sceptical approach to sources, subject and self, it possesses a quasi-sensory dimension that can be seen, for example, when historians speak of a 'feel' for a period which is difficult to define precisely but goes beyond a purely cognitive engagement with the past.

Establishing a personal connection to past events is at the heart of many history undergraduates' rationale for studying the subject. For them, linking historical issues to their own concerns and values makes history relevant, inspires interest and generates the motivation that lies behind a deep approach to learning. It is no coincidence that the topics in the history curriculum most attractive to history undergraduates are those involving issues of civil, political and human rights, for these connect directly to issues of personal identity and provoke emotional as well as intellectual responses. Nor is it surprising that a 'passion' for the subject is regarded by many history students as a key characteristic of the effective history teacher. Although it does not feature in quality assurance documents, a love of the subject is fundamental to high-quality learning. So too, as all classroom teachers appreciate, feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, and emotions such as fear, anxiety and boredom, as well as excitement and enthusiasm, lie at the heart of student experiences in the history classroom. The creation of a supportive yet intellectually challenging learning environment conducive to self-expression is essential to motivation. In the history classroom learning is not compartmentalized; rather the emotional and cognitive are interactive.

Understanding involves active learning

Understanding is not something that can be done to students, but something they must work on themselves. One historian, commenting on the need to integrate content and skills in history teaching, underlines this:

What is the relationship between faculty teaching and student learning? If we assume a complex epistemology, where subjective processing of experience affects what people know at least to some degree, then what faculty teach is not identical to what students learn. There is no objective transfer of knowledge from the mind of the faculty member to the mind of the student. The data that faculty have reflected upon and transformed into knowledge, through their scholarship, can be experienced by students as a more refined data set – but it will not become knowledge until students transform it into knowledge themselves.

(quoted in Mentkowski 2000: 319)

Students must be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, reflect critically upon it and connect new experiences and ideas with what they already know, in order to construct their own historical narratives. This does not mean that they can or should be simply left to their own devices. Indeed, it requires teachers to fulfil a variety of roles, not least in devising the intellectual and social context and conceptual scaffolding that can support student progress towards more sophisticated conceptions of their subject.

Promoting active learning in history is most commonly associated with teaching methods emphasizing participation, collaboration and independence. These include activities in seminar groups, projects and research dissertations, all of which provide opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate a particularly wide range of academic, personal and interpersonal skills through 'doing' history themselves. Collaborative learning not only facilitates the development of qualities demanded by employers (such as the ability to communicate effectively, leadership skills, self-awareness and sensitivity to others), but also creates conditions in which students can develop critical skills and independent judgement by encountering a diversity of approaches, views and perspectives (see Matthews 1996; Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1994, 1998). As Barker *et al.* (2000: 63-4) comment: 'communication skills and group work can be seen as the basis for the development of critical abilities. Learning to debate informally with others; to pursue and complete demanding tasks collaboratively; and to select and present ideas formally with clarity and cogency will all contribute to the high order cognitive skills necessary for undergraduate study of history.' The variety of activities evident in active-learning classrooms also helps teachers to address the diverse learning styles, abilities, interests and backgrounds of students. Such methods can, however, be daunting for new undergraduates. Thus Shrock and Shrock (1994: 1094-5) observe: 'many students come to us from high schools that emphasize memorization and passive learning. Students are primed to take notes, to memorize, to ask only immediately relevant questions ("Will this chapter be on the test?"). They may be uncomfortable, unable to actively engage with the assumptions or argument of an author, and uninterested . . . Students are asked to master content, but we chiefly emphasize the appreciation of history as a distinctive way of knowing.'

Some historians are also uncomfortable with the perceived dilution of content implicit in active learning. Thus, for example, in role play some reduction of coverage in an individual class may occur due to the need to keep the topic manageable and the time inevitably spent

in students simply moving around. To take an example from one of my own courses, 'Britain and the French Revolution', the recreation of a meeting of members of the London Corresponding Society on the issue of political reform in 1795 does involve a narrowing of focus over what might be covered in a tutor-led discussion. However, through role play students often engage with the fundamental themes of the whole course – the conflict of ideas, the structures of power, the tensions between the forces of continuity and change, and the dilemmas of those seeking change as well as those attempting to preserve the status quo. Indeed, in many student-led seminars the use of sub-groups within the larger class can be used to address a range of issues at least equal to those covered in a more traditional class. Content is not inevitably reduced by the use of active-learning methods. Moreover, to equate coverage with learning is simplistic, for, if this were so, traditional, synoptic lectures would be the best means of promoting high-quality learning, and few believe this. If introduced and implemented carefully, active-learning strategies encourage involvement, intrinsic interest, critical engagement and, not least, fun in learning. They allow students to practise subject and transferable skills in ways that stimulate enthusiasm for the subject and encourage further independent exploration. Above all, they help students to see themselves as historians, engaged in making (more complex) meaning for themselves rather than acting as the passive recipients of the views of others, however well founded.

Connecting to student experience is the key to changing understanding

High-quality teaching requires not only the possession of subject expertise and technical skills, but also awareness of how to deploy these in ways sensitive to student learning in the subject. As Burke (1991: 6) remarks apropos historical writing, 'Our minds do not reflect reality directly. We perceive the world only through a network of conventions, schemata and stereotypes, a network which varies from one culture to another.' So too, when they enter the class, students are not *tabulae rasae*, but bring with them prior conceptions of the subject and knowledge more generally, and perceptions of what makes for effective teaching and learning in history. These perceptions, conditioned and refined through experience, powerfully influence their approach to learning in each class, and how they perceive what teachers are trying to do. Shulman (1989: 10) writes of this: 'we now understand that learning is a dual process in which, initially, the inside

beliefs must come out, and only then can something outside get in . . . To prompt learning you've got to begin with the process of going from inside out. The first influence on new learning is not what teachers do pedagogically but the learning that's already inside the learner.' This is echoed in the reflections of Frederick (1999a: 51) on a career spent teaching history in higher education:

The longer I teach and experiment with the learning and teaching of history, the more I firmly believe that our effectiveness depends more than anything else on an understanding of who our students are. Not abstractly, but who they are specifically, in my classroom tomorrow morning: what kinds of diversity exist in that classroom? What did we do yesterday and how well did it work? What's going on campus? What's the next text or topic we're struggling with right now? What mood are they likely to be in tomorrow? What's their readiness to learn what I have in mind as teaching goals? How much learning can I get away with before they shut down?

Whatever teachers try to convey, students' perceptions are the filter through which that communication passes. This does not mean that all that students say has to be followed slavishly, for some beliefs will be unexamined and may be misconceptions based upon past experience or habit, and helping students to identify and change these is an important and challenging task. Nonetheless, recognition of students' interests, prior knowledge and conceptions of learning (and teaching) in history, and how these can be effectively connected to course goals, content and methods, is essential in the creation of an environment for fostering complex learning.

Such an approach does not, of course, imply that traditional teaching qualities are redundant. Enthusiasm, subject knowledge and awareness of practical classroom strategies are vital ingredients of high-quality history teaching. Nonetheless, it is how these are deployed in the context of each class that makes the difference between success and failure, and here an understanding of student perspectives is essential. Ramsden (1992: 8) puts this cogently when he writes that techniques about how to lecture or run seminars 'are actually rather easily acquired; it is understanding how to use them that takes constant practice and reflection. And they are only useful in so far as they are directed by a clear awareness of educational principles – in particular, the principle that the content of student

learning is logically prior to the methods of teaching the content.' Thus the principal role of the teacher is not to discover the best methods of transmitting information, but to use information about students' understandings, and misunderstandings in order to create conditions that help them connect their experience, interests and values to key course-learning goals. Such a model of teaching involves a shift in the pedagogic role of the teacher from that of expert, guru or authority-figure to adviser, facilitator and co-learner. This does not downgrade the teaching function, but rather elevates the art of teaching history by emphasizing that, in addition to the possession of subject mastery, teaching demands attentiveness (to students, to context and to one's own assumptions) and the ability to respond flexibly and creatively to classroom situations.

Understanding teaching and learning involves reflective enquiry

If developing understanding requires students to re-evaluate continuously their ideas and experiences, it also demands that teachers connect critically with their own beliefs, values, underlying assumptions and conceptions of the subject, teaching and learning, and how these have shaped their classroom strategies. As Holt (1990: 42) points out, 'the historian's experience profoundly shapes the history he or she writes . . . What is important is that we be self-reflective about that craft, and that we make that reflection part of what students learn and puzzle over.' Becoming more self-reflective by exploring the relationship between personal values, experience and practice, and how these connect with teaching in one's subject and with student learning, need not be a purely individual exercise. Indeed, dialogue with others can be a powerful means of opening up new perspectives on practice. Whatever lens is used, however, reflection and action constitute part of a continuous process of professional development involving careful enquiry and experimentation. If investigation without action in the form of changes to practice is of little practical value, so too experience without disciplined reflection risks the mere repetition of mistakes.

Such disciplined enquiry about classroom practices also recognizes that history teaching is situated in departmental and institutional cultures, disciplinary norms and wider social and political contexts (see Church 1976, 1978; Frank *et al.* 1994; Soffer 1994; Quinlan 1999; Becher and Trowler 2001). All of these influence conceptions of teaching and what is expected of students, and historians are by

training well equipped to unravel such forces and how their influence changes over time. Thus, for example, not only does the departmental context powerfully influence whether students adopt a deep or surface approach to their studies, but disciplinary conventions about rules and standards of evidence, and scholarship more generally, have significant repercussions for what are considered appropriate means of delivering the curriculum. More broadly, as indicated at the outset, government emphasis upon efficiency, accountability and economic needs, and wider social forces prioritizing the individual as consumer, have influenced the ways in which the history curriculum is constructed, delivered and received by students. Adopting the same kind of scholarly approach to the practice of history teaching that is routinely employed in research can help history teachers to develop a more complex understanding of these overlapping contexts, and provide the means for devising effective learning strategies and environments.

This book is intended as a resource for all historians wishing to reflect in more depth upon their teaching and upon student learning as a means of enhancing both. It seeks to provide guidance and advice on a range of issues central to the teaching of history, to support those individuals and departments who wish to develop their teaching, and to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the teaching and learning of history in higher education. It is therefore at once theoretical and applied, research- and classroom-oriented, or, to express it in the language of the scholarship of teaching considered in Chapter 9, it involves the advancement of knowledge, the integration of knowledge and the application of knowledge. Whilst Chapters 5 to 9 provide a range of strategies to address common classroom issues and concerns and to help history teachers explore their pedagogic beliefs, values and experiences, there is throughout a deliberate effort to go beyond a 'tips and techniques' approach. For although tools for teaching are important to hard-pressed university history teachers, as Hutchings (2000: 23) remarks: 'if improvement stops with technique . . . teaching itself is diminished, for if teaching is mostly a matter of technique, it is not, after all, a subject for serious, scholarly attention – the very thing it needs for ongoing, real improvement'. Technique alone is too haphazard in its effects, too easily disconnected from the complex particularities of disciplinary and classroom context, and, particularly, from an understanding of the experiences of history students and teachers, of their conceptions of learning and teaching in their subject. Chapters 2 to 4, therefore, attempt to situate classroom practice within a wider framework of ideas about learning and

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teaching grounded in the perspectives and experiences of history students and teachers.

Throughout the text I have used the research, reflections and classroom experiences of historians in a range of countries, alongside the findings of those in other disciplines involved in developing and researching teaching and learning. In particular, there is a vast body of educational research on teaching and learning in higher education whose epistemology, methodologies and discourse can at first sight appear alien to the ways in which historians think and talk about their teaching, but whose research-based findings offer much of value to the understanding and promotion of high-quality learning in history. I have been particularly concerned to incorporate these findings whilst remaining true to the language, methods and standards of historical writing. This has been a fine balance to tread, for one person's jargon is another's disciplinary discourse, but I hope that I have succeeded in employing language that is accessible to all historians and in deploying my evidence in a manner that conforms to disciplinary standards of scholarship. I would like to think, however, that this work might convince more historians that the investigation of how history is taught and learned is a matter deserving serious attention, inspire them to research their own pedagogic practices and encourage them to contribute to the development of an exciting, intellectually challenging and potentially transforming field of disciplinary study.

2

LEARNING HISTORY FOR UNDERSTANDING

I know I understand a topic when all the arguments become clear and everything (well almost) fits into a framework in my mind – it sort of makes sense.

(First-year history undergraduate)

Understanding is regarded as a primary goal of learning in history and an essential objective for history teachers at all levels of education (see National Curriculum History Working Group 1994; National Center for History in the Schools 1996; History Benchmarking Group 2000). Thus the benchmark statement for undergraduate programmes in the United Kingdom begins its discussion of standards with the following principle: ‘We take it as self-evident that knowledge and understanding of the human past is of incalculable value both to the individual and society at large, and that the first object of education in History is to enable this to be acquired’ (2000: 1). Even at a basic level of historical thinking, knowing why an event happened is more satisfying than simply knowing that it happened, while making a personal judgement on complex evidence is more rewarding than the mere collection of information. Indeed, the distinctiveness of the discipline arguably lies less in its content (for the study of the past is clearly not exclusively the territory of the historian) than in the particular blend and interaction of knowledge and skills required for the attainment of a complex grasp of history. For students, to learn for understanding is to act more like a professional historian, and the motivation and confidence that flow from this stimulate further learning. Understanding also provides a platform for the development of independence in thought and action through the critical scrutiny of diverse evidence and the structuring of knowledge into a coherent personal account. Moreover, as Hvolbek (1993: 7) remarks: ‘to be