How Historians Develop as Teachers

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HOW DO WE LEARN to be history teachers in higher education? And how do we get better at it? These are questions that professional historians have not much investigated. There are many reasons for this lack of attention. Some are located in historians’ primary professional interest in examining the lives and actions of historical actors or the dynamics of change over time rather than exploring their own professional lives (see Roper and Wickham, 2002). Some are rooted in the secondary role traditionally afforded to teaching in the professional life of the discipline, and the research choices (and career rewards) that stem from this. As Gerda Lerner reflects in her book Why History Matters (1997: 127), ‘most of us, for much of our professional lives, are teachers; yet this activity is the one we seem least to appreciate in ourselves’. After all, isn’t the PhD the pass certificate to a career as a university teacher (our certification of specialist expertise)? And isn’t teaching expertise something that just arises from experience – like steam from a kettle, as Edward Thompson once put it in his critique of established notions of class formation in The Making of the English Working Class? In short, the process of developing as a teacher has not seemed sufficiently noteworthy to be much remarked upon within the profession or regarded as an issue worthy of serious inquiry.

Most work on teacher identity and professional development among historians has therefore been conducted by educationalists: educational development specialists, higher education researchers, schools history researchers, sometimes in collaboration with professional historians. There have been insightful contributions by, amongst others, Quinlan (1999); Quinlan and Akerlind (2000); McLean and Barker (2004); Walker (2009); Nye et al. (2011); and,
further back, Kogan (1989). However, in researching issues of professional identity and development historians have generally constituted only a handful of interviewees, often among a range of discipline practitioners. What follows is based upon the narratives of a more substantive number of professional historians, most located in the UK but some working in North American and Australian higher education. I hope that historians situated in non-Anglophone systems of higher education will nonetheless find points of correspondence in their experience of learning to teach as well as contrasts.

Data and methodology

The principal data derive from two sources. First, a UK-wide online questionnaire distributed to historians working full-time in history departments which provided the material for an illustrative study of historians’ beliefs on teaching and the values and practices that they try to adhere to or emulate in promoting history teaching ‘at its best’ (Booth, 2014). The online survey elicited 205 responses from historians working in a wide variety of UK institutions of higher education (72 in all) and at various stages of their career. Many were experienced and committed teachers: two-thirds possessed over ten years teaching experience and there was a wide variety of levels of seniority within the profession with a rough gender balance among respondents. Together the sample represented around eight per cent of all those working in UK history departments as full-time, permanent faculty at the time of the survey.

The second source of information is a series of short filmed interviews about teaching with over 50 historians, mainly from the UK, US and Australia. Some clips from these informal, semi-structured conversations can be viewed on the website www.historiansonteaching.tv. These capture professional historians with a particular interest in teaching talking about what has most helped them to develop as teachers of the subject and the qualities of teachers who have particularly influenced them. Their responses to a question about the advice they would like to pass on to a historian beginning their career as a teacher, proved particularly helpful in
suggesting some general principles about the sort of pedagogic professional development that might be successful in terms of engaging and motivating historians to learn to become more effective educators.

This article, in short, examines how several hundred academic historians represent their learning journeys as teachers. It uses qualitative methods to explore the data, grounded in the thematic clustering of survey responses and interpretive analysis of interviews. The study is illustrative and indicative rather than claiming a representativeness that I would suggest is anyway inherently problematic. It is important to note that the experience of developing as teachers comprises only one aspect of broader membership of what Wenger (1998) calls a ‘community of practice’ with its particular, albeit shifting, legitimising norms and practices that together shape professional identity and what in this context it means to be a professional historian. Bender, Katz and Palmer (2004: 159) suggest a general framework to assist discussion of historians’ collective identity as professionals. They identify three broad areas of commitment and practice: history as a discipline; history as a profession; and history as a career. In terms of teaching, and developing as a teacher, we might frame the experience in similar terms:

1. *Teaching history as a discipline*: its role in engaging students actively in the discipline’s discourses and procedures – in the process of thinking historically.

2. *Teaching history as a subject in higher education*: its role in promoting higher learning and its place in a system of higher education.

3. *Teaching history as an academic career*: the role of teaching in the professional career as a historian and as part of a professional community in higher education.

Whilst teaching lives are not lived in such compartmentalised ways, these indicate the broad territory of ‘who we are’ as teachers and the parameters for the process of developing as a history teacher in higher education.
What follows focuses on how the historians in our sample describe how they learned to become teachers and particularly the factors they believe to have had the most influence on their (continuing) development. The data suggest four major areas of identity formation in this regard: learning from experience as a student and as a teacher; learning from students; learning from colleagues; and learning from training and scholarship. These are addressed in turn.

Learning from experience as a student and teacher

When they talk about what has shaped their teaching selves, a major formative influence is experience as a student and particularly examples of memorable teachers. Nye et al. (2011) in recent work in Australian higher education note the particular influence of postgraduate supervisors on the professional development of historians. However in our survey there was just as much mention of school and undergraduate teachers. These teachers are considered significant for a variety of reasons: as accomplished storytellers; as experts; for challenging student conceptions; because they made students care about history; because they treated students with respect and made them feel they mattered. There are a wide range of experiences that reflect the diversity regarded within the discipline community as a hallmark of good pedagogic practice.

Fundamentally, however, these teachers are represented as inspiring through finding ways to bring history alive to students: they have an enthusiasm for their subject and students that is engaging and, at best, infectious. Here are three examples from many similar comments:

I was inspired by the passion shown by the people who taught me at university; their sense that history mattered.

I keep coming back to the same word – enthusiasm. The one thing they [named university teachers] had above all else was enthusiasm for their subject. It was quite literally infectious.
There have been a lot of teachers who have inspired me. I think first and foremost it was an enthusiasm – a real interest in the subject. I’ve learned that the best way to convince students of the value of the subject matter that you’re using and working with is to convey that sort of enthusiasm. And if you’re enthusiastic, they will be too. I can also think of teachers who’ve inspired me for the wrong reasons in that they were completely underwhelmed at the prospect of having to teach loads of undergraduate students and therefore I think my own enthusiasm for that subject matter waned.

As this final comment illustrates, poor teaching can also influence learning to be a teacher. Whilst only a handful of the historians in the survey suggested that their own teachers had played no part at all in their development as lecturers, some were quick to note the influence of poor teachers on how they approached teaching. As one remarks:

The memory of my own undergraduate experience was crucial in shaping my approach as a teacher in that I probably went on to avoid the teaching styles that didn’t do much for me and to emulate those that did.

Experience as a student is complemented by accounts of ‘life experience’ (often whilst a student) more generally. Approximately one in ten of the historians in the survey sample make reference to the influence of previous employment, including teaching in other institutions and observing practice there, and part-time work in jobs outside the academic world, for example time-management and interpersonal skills they learnt in the commercial world. Some historians also point to the particular influence family – partners (often those working as school teachers) or parents – have had on how they have approached their work as teachers in higher education. A few further refer to leisure activities, pointing to performance and teamwork skills learned through participation in amateur theatre or sport of various kinds.

By far the most prominently mentioned influence on learning to be a teacher, however, is the practice of being in the history classroom. This ‘learning on the job’ occurs, it is suggested, through
facing and mastering everyday classroom challenges; becoming more familiar with subject knowledge and key historical concepts; trying out new things and reflecting on what happens; and gradually realising the complexity of teaching and that developing as a teacher is an ongoing process and the challenges do not diminish the more one knows but rather shift as understanding deepens. In this experiential learning, students and colleagues play a vital part.

Learning from students

Students figure prominently as an influence on how historians learn and improve as teachers. The learning arises from feedback from a number of sources. The most-often mentioned of these are listed below:

- close observation in class – of student reactions; misconceptions; difficulties students are facing;
- out-of-class advising – on student project work; in personal tutoring;
- student preferences/choices of topics e.g. for social/cultural history;
- end of module evaluation questionnaires – even though few enjoy the inevitable criticisms;
- informal surveys in lectures or at the end of a lecture, or mid-semester, about what has been learned;
- student assignments like essays, exams and presentations;
- former students. One interviewee recalls how a former student approached him in a pub to tell him he’d done a good job and the sense of affirmation that came from this.

Through whatever avenue it arrives, student feedback is regarded as vital in fostering ‘self-efficacy’: a well-founded sense of confidence and competence that is required to want to go on developing (Bandura, 1997). As one historian sums up: ‘students’ belief in me as a teacher has been particularly important in my own development’. Equally important is learning from colleagues.
Learning from colleagues

The historians who participated in the UK survey were keen to emphasise that colleagues had been a much-valued source of advice and encouragement. This was also the case in several of the interviews with North American historians, but amongst these (and especially those involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning in history) there was greater ambivalence, with more references to the continuing privacy of the classroom as an obstacle to substantive collegial conversation.

The influence of colleagues arises from a number of routes, formal and informal. The following are those most frequently mentioned in the UK survey:

- Formal peer-review of teaching schemes ubiquitous in the UK since the late 1990s;
- Mentoring schemes for early-career lecturers;
- Informal mentoring by experienced colleagues, including class observations;
- Departmental teaching seminars in which colleagues share experiments and innovations;
- Everyday conversations about teaching issues – in corridors between classes; over lunch; when team-teaching etc.;
- Community conversations beyond the department – at institutional events and at history conferences and workshops where experiences and ideas are exchanged.

All of these have provided reinforcement, generated new ideas and, for early career lecturers, reduced the sense of isolation often felt in new surroundings. Here are three illustrative comments on the importance of colleagues: the first two from the survey data; the final reflection from the interviews:

I was fortunate early in my career to meet a number of critical mentors. They opened my eyes to developing my own interactive style while taking on elements of what they were good at, such as storytelling, use of documents and simulations.
I find peer review a source of reassurance, even more than of ideas. I get confirmation I’m doing the right sorts of things and I see colleagues struggling with similar problems and realise there is no easy solution.

A lot of it [developing as a teacher] is about talking with colleagues. I think that’s something that can be very easy to underestimate. So the idea of saying “Ok, this is what I’m doing but is that working?” Or you know something’s not working, what are the alternatives out there? And I think the idea that we’re all trying to work through that; no matter how experienced a member of staff is, we’re all trying to evolve and change and improve and experiment with new things; that again is quite liberating. You can be someone who’s been teaching for ten or twenty years and they’re still sitting there thinking, “Well that didn’t work, let’s try something else”. And that’s fine; the fact there’s a sense of permission there to try and experiment. I think that’s a very positive thing, and it’s only really by talking to colleagues that you get that sense of those kinds of possibilities.

For some history lecturers this type of collegial conversation also arises from courses on teaching or from discipline-based communities of practice focused upon the scholarship of teaching and learning.

**Learning from training and scholarship**

The influence of these factors is far less frequently mentioned when the historians in our survey talk about learning and improving as a history teacher in higher education. But for some of the most committed teachers they have been very influential.

The most common use of the word ‘scholarship’ in terms of teaching relates to how an individual’s own subject research has impacted on their development as teachers. Reflections on this tell of how researching has generated a much firmer sense of competence and self-efficacy in a number of ways. Those fore-grounded embrace greater confidence in course design and in front of a class through the deeper subject knowledge research brings with it; enabling better advice to students on reading matter and strategies and on the range
of primary sources available; modelling the practice of being a historian and of historical thinking; and a sense of credibility and qualification to teach at an advanced level. And some lecturers reflect on how teaching has fed into their subject research by refining their thinking, making them clarify their ideas for an audience, and suggesting new lines of enquiry or, occasionally, new fields for research.

For a smaller number, what they sometimes refer to as, ‘reading about teaching’ has been influential: making them reflect more deeply on their own practice; prompting them to question traditional models of history teaching and assessment; providing them with new ideas for classroom assignments; fostering more complex conceptions of teaching and learning including familiarity with pedagogic theories and student-centred approaches; and encouraging them to experiment with more confidence. For these, the pedagogic literature has heightened their awareness of themselves as teachers and made them appreciate that teaching involves serious, ongoing thinking and rethinking. One experienced historian writes as follows in response to a survey question on advice for those starting out on their careers as teachers in higher education:

When I started I imagined that it was a skill that I would master after a number of years, or a professional competence that I could straightforwardly develop. Instead teaching remains a work-in-progress and some questions about teaching and learning become trickier, not more straightforward.

When they talk about the influence of this form of scholarship (the scholarship of teaching and learning), these historians often also mention institutional or national teaching initiatives they have participated in, and particularly project work that required them to read in the literature on teaching and learning – a literature at best infrequently visited by most historians. In almost all cases their primary point of reference in terms of reading is subject-based. As one remarks succinctly, ‘nothing else hits the spot’.

With regard to training programmes, especially those now routinely provided by universities in the UK for new and early-career
teachers, there is considerably more ambivalence. Those historians broadly supportive of such programmes – of what one calls ‘training in teaching’ – talk about the positive influence of advice on common activities like lecturing and seminars; introduction to diverse and alternative methods of delivery and assessment; awareness of more student-centred approaches; and gaining a basic introduction to theories of learning. More, however, are critical of institutional training courses; some markedly so. They cite particularly their often generic or abstract nature and over-emphasis upon technical delivery aspects of teaching or upon standards issues. This critical commentary has been long-running, since at least the wider emergence of ‘staff development’ programmes in teaching in the UK in the 1980s (see Cannon, 1989), and shows no signs of abating. But in pointing to the challenges of providing professional pedagogic development it leads directly into what our data suggests might be done to enhance this learning.

Implications for practice

What sort of professional pedagogic development activity is most likely to gain the respect of professional historians; engage and motivate them? What approaches best help to foster the will to learn, and keep on learning? These questions require a response (or better still an integrated set of responses) at all levels of our educational system (department, faculty, institution, discipline community, higher education policy). However, the data presented here has a number of implications for the provision of professional pedagogic development that might capitalise upon the desire among history lecturers to become teachers who inspire students to love their subject as they themselves do and make a difference to their learning and lives.

The most important of these is the need to situate pedagogy firmly in a disciplinary context. There is debate among education- alists about the generic or subject-specific nature of learning (see Jones, 2009). However our data underlines that historians are most likely to be receptive to schemes of professional development (and
literature) that view pedagogy as integral to who they are as historians: that takes into account beliefs about subject matter, the structure of the discipline, and its distinctive ways of knowing and procedures. Such activity must engage with and embody what Shulman (1986: 9) calls the subject’s pedagogical content knowledge: ‘knowing one’s content or subject matter, like American history, and knowing how best to organize and represent that subject matter so others could understand it.’ This involves awareness of the following: what makes some topics easy, others difficult; key concepts, whether in relation to causation or significance, or subject matter concepts like the Renaissance or the Enlightenment; historians’ ways of using evidence and argumentation and understanding subject modes of critical thinking and skills. Put simply, it demands an appreciation of the particular qualities of historical thinking and a history education more broadly.

The second implication follows directly from this. Pedagogic initiatives are received most positively when they arise from and are delivered within the history community. This is not to say that historians cannot appreciate what is to be learned from practitioners in non-cognate fields such as the sciences and mathematics and that these can facilitate reflection on their own, often taken-for-granted, educational beliefs and methods. In general, however, they are most likely to respond as educators to initiatives they set up themselves (and so confirm an important sense of agency and academic autonomy) or are provided by those with a historical training. In a discipline with a strong sense of kinship, collegial dialogue is especially important: sharing ideas and experiences with colleagues about what has worked for them and what went wrong and how they got round the problems; how others have taught topics like early modern Europe or seen it taught and so on. It is notable that several respondents to our survey reflected how much they had learned from working with colleagues in team-teaching or in collaborative projects investigating a particular issue for them or their department. This suggests a third implication.

Professional development activity for historians is likely to be most immediately engaging when it is firmly grounded in practical
matters. Whilst history as a subject (especially the dominant field of cultural history), is today increasingly theorised, in terms of developing as a teacher there is a marked preference for theory to be firmly situated in discussion of everyday classroom situations and problematic issues – grounded in the concerns ('the realities', one says) of everyday teaching of the subject. Conducting activities in a language with which historians are familiar (in the everyday corridor discourse of teaching) is important. Put differently, it is important not to overburden learning conversations with what are all-too-readily regarded (and so dismissed) as ‘alien’ educational discourses. Educational ‘jargon’ (a much-used and telling word) is unlikely to engage unless historians can relate it readily to what they do. One means of helping historians to connect with this ‘other’ discourse is suggested by Knupfer (2009). He argues for greater networking between professional historians and teachers of history in schools, the latter of whom have undertaken more systematic training in educational theory and method and how it applies to the history classroom, albeit in schools. More contact and collaboration between history academics in university history departments and education departments, especially in our leading universities, would also be beneficial; there is still too little conversation about teaching between academic colleagues who in practice have a great deal in common in terms of dealing with the challenges of teaching history.

So learning to be a teacher must, like all learning, connect to what teachers already know (or think they know). However, practical tips for the classroom, whilst useful, are by themselves not sufficient. Rather, learning must be carefully progressed and supported in ways that begin with immediate subject and classroom challenges but move on from this more comfortable context into the unknown. Here the unknown may be, for example, models of curriculum design or assessment or pedagogic theory, and also unexamined fundamental beliefs and values in all three of the areas of commitment mentioned in the introduction to this essay: teaching history as a discipline; teaching history as a subject in higher education; teaching history as a career. The issue of underlying values is complex but, put simply, historians’ beliefs about the discipline, about what
higher learning through history means to them, and their professional values as academic practitioners all need to be brought into the account and discussed. This collegial discussion should include common (and often under-explored) professional notions of ‘scholarship’, ‘community’, ‘autonomy’, ‘agency’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘love of the subject’; terms frequently mentioned in our data. It must involve scrutiny (and self-scrutiny) in relation to the whole notion of what it means to be a historian, academic and university teacher, and what developing as a teacher means. And the widely expressed ‘love of the subject’ – the attachment that historians have to their subject and the difference they feel, as well as think, it can make to student learning and lives – provides a further dimension to the discussion. It signals the emotional nature of the commitment to teaching that is fundamental to the will to learn to be an effective teacher and to go on learning about it.

The survey and interviews consistently underscore that how we learn to be history educators is an affective process as well as a cognitive one. If each student’s learning journey involves a roller-coaster of emotions, so learning to teach is also a highly emotional affair. This is rarely discussed and remains neglected in the burgeoning literature of the scholarship of history teaching and learning, though the importance of the affect in teaching and learning historical thinking is beginning to be recognised (see Middendorf et al., 2014). The affective constitutes a submerged language of development but one that lies only just below the surface of much of what we do: our reactions to a good and bad class; to student evaluations; to our whole task as teachers of our subject. This dimension of a teacher’s life emerges particularly strongly in our historians’ responses concerning the advice they would like to pass on to those starting out on a teaching career. These pieces of advice are often emotive: about the need for enthusiasm; respect for students; love of the subject; positivity in the face of current conditions in higher education. And, one urges: ‘Remember this. Most other history teachers feel as insecure about their teaching as you do. Try not to let it dominate you.’ The affective domain in learning to teach needs to be acknowledged just as much as the intellectual challenges,
and ways found of bringing it more openly and effectively to the conversation.

Conclusion

Teaching, our survey consistently demonstrates, constitutes an important part of historians’ sense of professional identity. There is no authoritative model of how best to develop as a teacher, any more than there is a single ‘correct’ way to teach the subject. How we each learn is inflected by a range of factors that include previous experience; institutional working environment; national context; personal political and social beliefs and values; and discipline-based patterns of socialisation. And this learning is ongoing and depends upon what each individual understands at any one time in their academic life by teaching (and by developing). These understandings change in the course of any career, sometimes dramatically. Teaching in the first year of the career is not the same as teaching after five years experience; nor is it the same as teaching in the mid-career years or towards the end of a teaching life, though unlike Quinlan’s (2000) study of historians in one US state university we found no obvious generational differences in conceptions of what it meant to teach history or develop as a history teacher. Indeed, one piece of advice seems to be held dear by many. As one historian puts it: ‘remember to keep on learning’; or another: ‘Be ready to learn and develop every time you teach a class’. And a third comments, ‘It’s a job where you never stop learning. You’ll find as your confidence grows your teaching will improve and you can then try more experimental material and methods to engage students.’

This article provides only a broad snapshot of how a range of historians learn to be teachers and get better at it, and more fine-grained research is needed to present a fuller picture of the richness of this dynamic, ongoing experience. However, what the stories of the historians represented in the data strongly indicate is that the opportunities most likely to motivate and engage them are those that begin with disciplinary understanding: that recognise their conceptions of what it means to teach history as a distinctive discipline, as a
subject in higher education and as a career. This does not rule out input from other disciplines but it does make the point that extra-disciplinary materials must be adapted carefully in subject-related ways. What is also underlined by our data is the need to engage with learning to be a history educator as an emotional as well as an intellectual experience. Here the first step is to initiate more informed, and more open, collegial conversations about how we learn to teach our subject and what we love about it and teaching it to students.

When I began to teach, as a postgraduate student in the 1970s, there was no pedagogic training required and very little serious public discussion of teaching in the discipline. It was customary to consider good teaching a function of being an expert in the subject; that excellent teachers were born not made; and that what happened in the classroom was a private affair. Today, these assumptions have largely disappeared. Teaching is in many systems of contemporary higher education regarded as something you can (and are expected to) learn to do well, and there is considerably more opportunity and willingness to talk and learn more about it. There remain significant challenges to overcome, many at a systemic level, but as one senior historian who committed passionately to teaching throughout his career pointed out in interview: 'For all the obstacles there still are to developing teaching and teachers, it’s important to remember that we’ve come a long way'. It seems a suitably positive final message: a reminder not only about yardsticks and perspective but also possibilities. And it prompts us as historians to use our training to historicise the history curriculum in all its aspects as a means more effectively to understand, talk about and shape our identities as teachers and as a community of educators.
References


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