INTRODUCTION

Building Knowledge, Building Connections

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The Linköping conference and the scholarship of teaching and learning

The Linköping conference on History Teaching and Learning in Higher Education took place at the campus of Linköping University on 20–21 May 2014. It brought together history educators in Sweden with international participants to share findings from their pedagogic and classroom-based research and to think through recent developments in the broad area of history teaching and learning in higher education.

The planning for the conference was guided by core principles in the scholarship of teaching and learning in history: a focus on learning and how it can be understood and enhanced; an emphasis on practical classroom situations and strategies; a rigorous approach to the evidence grounded in the accepted scholarly standards of discipline enquiry; and a commitment to the public sharing of findings within the community of historians and educators. In short, the intention was to embody a collective commitment to constructive dialogue about teaching and learning grounded in evidence and argument and with a practical emphasis.

In the last two decades, history educators in higher education have increasingly embraced the concept of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and the practical tools for inquiry that have grown up around it to examine and investigate what happens in the history classroom and how student learning can be reliably enhanced (Booth, 2012). History SoTL, as a term and a practice, has
gained a notably strong currency in North America where the following areas of investigation have received particular attention:

- How to foster ‘historical thinking’ and the difference between experts’ approaches to the subject and those of students;
- How to teach problematic issues such as the Freshman history survey course;
- How to foster ‘learning by doing’ – strategies for student active engagement whether in the classroom or the local community and by traditional methods or using new technologies.

But there has also been significant inquiry by history educators in a number of countries, including the UK, Australia and the European mainland, on issues of practical concern to teachers in higher education such as critical reading and thinking, active learning, transferable skills development and employability. A bibliographic guide to the literature of History SoTL is available at: http://www.indiana.edu/~histsotl/blog/?page_id=7. Since the 1990s historians in higher education have also attempted to build a discipline-based community of practice around teaching and learning at a national and international level. Major initiatives include an annual international conference convened in the UK since 1998 and an international society (History SoTL) founded in 2006 and led from Indiana University. In Scandinavia there has been a History SoTL conference in Uppsala, Sweden, in 2010 (Ludvigsson, 2012) and subsequent themed sessions held at the meetings of Swedish and Nordic historians.

The scholarship of teaching and learning, its advocates suggest, provides significant benefits to teachers in higher education. It can aid reflection on teaching; guide inquiry into classroom situations; help teachers to get a firmer grip on a troubling classroom problem; and act as a framework for collaboration, connecting work done in one institution or country with that in another. And more broadly, it enriches student learning, provides for an evidence-based bottom-up approach to teaching and learning, and contains the potential to
transform the academy into an effective learning organization. Even its supporters, however, question how much traction it has to date gained in the disciplines, and there is awareness among historians involved that more needs to be done to establish it firmly in the mainstream of discipline activity and scholarship (see Brawley, Timmins and Kelly, 2009). There are certainly obstacles still to overcome. These include academic reward structures; entrenched discipline notions of scholarship and research; the socialisation and training of early-career historians; and limited outlets for discipline-specific publication.

Nonetheless, in the last two decades history educators have made great strides forward. They have built firmer knowledge and understanding about the ways students learn in the subject and the sorts of strategies and history curricula that lead to effective learning. They have learned a great deal about how historians can go about investigating their work as teachers in ways commensurate with disciplinary expectations of scholarly activity; and they have increasingly recognised the importance of building discipline-based networks to support the advancement of teaching. Despite this progress, many important issues in history teaching and learning require further investigation and elaboration, amongst them new technologies and their implications for history teaching (in mass systems of higher education); the perennial (and growing) challenges of student transition to and within university history; the goals of history education beyond ‘critical thinking’ and ‘employability’; the development of pedagogies that truly foster the creative capabilities needed for 21st century ‘innovation societies’; the neglected emotional dimensions of teaching and learning history; and the ongoing professional development of historians as teachers. Generally speaking, there is a need for substantial empirical studies. There is still much to be done, and this makes History SoTL a field of endeavour full of possibility and potential for discovery.
The conference programme and outcomes

The Linköping programme consisted of eleven discussion papers and a roundtable discussion of the value of the notion of signature pedagogy in history teaching in higher education. The present volume collects together eight of the papers delivered. They address a range of issues of relevance to all history educators in higher education. These include the supervision of student dissertations and the possibilities and pitfalls of current practices in continuous assessment and (Ekcrantz, Parliden & Olsson; Hammarlund); the value of enabling students to become co-producers in the learning process (Twells); and the challenges of fostering the critical reading of monographs and textbooks (Neumann; Sokolov). There are also discussions of wider policy matters through insight into the formation and development of the European Tuning qualification framework process and investigation of how historians learn to become teachers of their subject and the implications of this for the provision of ‘training in teaching’ (Nováky; Booth).

Whilst the delivery of these papers provided the formal framework of the conference other more indirect but equally important outcomes deserve mention.

First, the conference bridged a number of boundaries or, put differently, brought closer together several often separated spheres. It involved contributions to discussion (whether as presenters or participants) from history educators working in a number of contexts: academic historians, schools history teachers, educational development professionals in higher education, teacher trainers, and educational researchers. It was a fundamentally collaborative event, all the more important as discussion across these (often unhelpful) boundaries remains too infrequent yet is vital to a fundamental shared goal of improving student learning in our subject.

Second, it brought together history educators from a range of countries, including Sweden, Britain, Australia, Germany, Russia and Cyprus. The resulting cross-fertilisation of ideas generated new perspectives on teaching for many of us, challenging our whole notions of ‘pedagogy’ and ‘didactics’ and emphasising the differing traditions that inform and inflect current practice in the broad world
of university-level history. It reminded us forcefully of the importance of context and traditions (both institutional and national) in history teaching and learning, and so the variations and contrasts in our community of historians but also the commonalities. Some things (like national higher education imperatives and the organisation and delivery of teaching) were clearly different, but others (the broad pedagogic challenges of student transition to university history, the rising tide of bureaucracy around teaching) seemed fundamentally (and often frustratingly) similar. And whilst all those present were deeply committed to values such as the fostering of critical thinking and helping students to develop as active citizens, how this was (and could be) translated into practice differed according to state and institutional contexts.

Third, there was productive discussion about history’s ‘signature pedagogy’ whether in the formal roundtable allocated to this topic or in corridor and break-time conversations. This has been a sensitive issue in the SoTL world, and the discussions reflected the debate and uncertainties around it. However airing views did bring into focus some important issues about what are historians’ pedagogic and professional values. Several participants reminded us that pedagogy is not just a matter of methods but of deeper norms and structures within the discipline. Others argued that what makes history education unique is the use of evidence and argumentation; whilst some maintained that there is no single ‘signature pedagogy’ for history but several, including one for the survey, one for the dissertation etc. (cf. Calder, 2006; Westhoff, 2012). The question was also raised of whether trying to find something or some things truly distinctive or unique to history really matters in educational terms or is rather a sign of a need to preserve place in competitive contemporary higher education systems. One interesting line of argument was that we should perhaps see the notion of signature pedagogy in terms of history’s social practice (of teaching) – that what makes history pedagogy distinctive is the ways that (often generic) learning principles are shaped and reshaped in our social practice as educators and historians. In short, the discussion raised more questions than answers but it nonetheless stimulated active
debate and provided interesting lines of argument and pointers for future discussion.

Finally, the conference illustrated in action the many ways in which history educators can approach the investigation of teaching and learning in the subject using the wide array of concepts, tools and literature available in the humanities and social sciences. Whilst qualitative approaches to data dominated, as one would expect, a diverse range of literature and perspective was brought to bear. This variety is in our view a strength of recent writing on history teaching and learning, though it does raise questions, still largely unanswered, about the (proper) place of theory and whether some methods are more appropriate (and deserve to be more valued) than others in the investigation of classroom practice and student learning in history.

In sum, the Linköping conference provided a productive platform for building knowledge and connections towards the continuing task of advancing history learning and teaching. It offered a constructive collegial space for history educators committed to enhancing history pedagogy to come together to share findings, ideas and experiences and discuss possible future collaborations. The opportunity to do this is still rarer than it should be, given the considerable strides made by the scholarship of history teaching and learning in higher education in the last two and a half decades and the importance increasingly accorded to teaching in the rhetoric of the higher education policymakers, institutions and the discipline. We hope the constructive experience and outcomes of this conference will therefore not only contribute to a growing body of knowledge but also encourage other colleagues to build their own connections and share findings and practice in their own ways. For the more we talk as a (global) community of history educators and the more informed that conversation is, the greater the chance of teaching effectively, producing successful learners and graduates and demonstrating to others the value of our subject as an educational medium.
References


