

Discussion Briefing Paper

Linking Research and Teaching in History: Some Issues.

In higher education generally, there is now a considerable literature (and debate) on the relationship between research and teaching. In History, by contrast, there is no such scholarly literature, and this in itself tells us a great deal - not least perhaps about our disinclination to research our own disciplinary practices. Yet while there is no strong research base on this topic, there is no shortage of personal and professional statements on the links between these two core activities.

In this short briefing paper, I want to use some of these statements about the research-teaching nexus to raise key issues and focus questions for subsequent discussion.

1. What counts as research

The conceptions we have of 'research' in our discipline will influence how we see the connection between research and teaching. In History, research is the foundation of what counts as scholarly and thus what is valued. Traditionally we have perceived research in terms of archival enquiry and its publication in monographs and monographic articles.

As the American Historical Association working group on scholarship noted:

"A traditional, hierarchical conceptualization of what constitutes historical scholarship, based on the German university model, continues to dominate and restrict our profession's reward structure ... the virtually exclusive identification of historical scholarship with the monograph is inappropriate and unfairly undervalues the work of a significant portion of professional historians." (AHA, 1993).

If we see research exclusively in terms of archival activity and the writing of monographs, then its link to teaching is likely to be conceived in fairly narrow ways. So,

- Should we continue to employ traditional formulations or rather envision research as including in a wider sense to include such activities as, for example, writing textbooks for students or design of computer software? Can we include classroom research?
- Indeed, might we see research as process as much as product? As discovery enquiry rather than a type of publication.

If we conceive of research more broadly, we might see more links with teaching, but however we proceed, how we define research will influence how we (and students) see its relationship to teaching.

2. Teaching and research as intellectual activities

“As a group, historians have tended to draw a clear and sharp distinction between ‘scholarship’ and ‘teaching’, believing that the former calls for our best methods, efforts and review and the latter what is left when we have finished ‘our own work’” (Calder et al., Historians and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2002)

“The truth is that many of us, even among those who prize teaching, still regard it as not only less rewarded but less sophisticated and demanding than scholarship - simply the easier thing to do, or otherwise less worthy of note” (Sherry, Journal of American History, 1994).

Clearly there is a question here about how far we should see ‘research’ and ‘scholarship’ as synonymous. But this aside, the principal issue is that of the perceived intellectual divide between research and teaching activity.

- Why is teaching so often regarded as a less intellectually rigorous form of academic activity than research? Why does it have a lower status?
- Is it to do with the processes of socialisation in the discipline? The focus of our interests as historians? The ways we teach? Is it because teaching is more difficult to assess? Or because as a profession we have not paid enough attention to how to assess it? What are the key factors?

3. Excellence in teaching as a function of research excellence

In the 1994 Teaching Quality Assessment Exercise, 16 out of the 17 ‘excellents’ given in History in the UK were to departments in pre-1992 ‘research-led’ universities. The History at the Universities Defence Group commented:

“In constructing their programmes, departments and subject groups draw heavily on the research interests of their members, believing that the achievement of excellent teaching is often best obtained by encouraging lecturers to bring together their research and teaching. This is borne out in the combined results in History of the RAE and the TQA” (HUDG report to the Quality Assurance Agency, 1997).

This strong positive correlation between RAE grades and TQA ratings suggested that excellence in teaching is dependent upon excellence in research. Of course, one could argue that what it demonstrates is that those departments with better staff-student ratios, more highly-qualified entrants and better library provision were judged superior because their resources were better. It might also be pointed out that some highly-rated research departments rated excellent in teaching received TQA reports containing critical comments on the rather passive nature of their teaching methods. However, even if we do accept that good teaching is dependent on good research, we need to address the following questions more clearly than we have traditionally done:

- What is it about excellence in research that results in excellence in teaching?
- Is the link automatic?

4. The relationship between teaching and research: a common formulation

How exactly we ‘bring together’ our research and our teaching as historians is often not clearly expressed. Too often the relationship is simply articulated in terms of saying that we teach on the areas we publish in. The following are typical examples.

“On my first year lectures I give three lectures on the medieval peasantry. I have written many books and articles in scholarly journals on this topic and am currently writing the late-medieval volume in the Longman History of Medieval Europe.”

(response to a question on links between research and teaching in Teaching Quality Audit 2001)

“The range [of courses] here is largely determined by the research expertise of staff; we believe that it is essential for students to hear it from the experts ... as research underpins teaching so much’ (response to annual survey of university history, History Today, 1997).

From these statements there is an assumption that simply *being* a researcher will result in students learning. There is also an underlying ‘transmission’ rationale for teaching and learning: ‘hearing it from the experts’ is seen as all that is necessary for effective learning. Yet, as we know from much research, including in history, students learn most effectively by involvement and constructing knowledge and understanding for themselves, and not by being talked at. So,

- What does ‘research-led’ history teaching mean?
- Does it mean the ability of the lecturer to teach their own specialism? And how often does this occur in practice?
- In the light of what we know about effective student learning, might it be better to talk about research-led learning - that in which students are involved in research-type enquiry themselves, as, for example, in project and dissertation work or some student-led seminars?

5. Does teaching demand research activity?

In History it’s often said that active involvement in research is essential for teaching, but as Peter Stearns points out:

“Many excellent teachers do not themselves do research. They must however keep up with the findings of leading researchers lest their teaching stagnate.” (Meaning over Memory: Recasting the Teaching of History and Culture, 1993). So,

- Does good teaching require scholarship rather than research - say awareness of developments in the subject rather than front-line research on the part of the teacher? And so,
- Can a non-researcher be a good history teacher - does a teacher have to be involved in historical research themselves?

6. A two-way link - connected by similar processes?

“I would not feel the same sense of active engagement with the material if I was not working actively in historical research myself, an engagement that attracts favourable comments on student evaluation of teaching forms. Moreover, I think that the relationship between research and teaching is not simply one-way; discussion with students has sometimes opened my eyes to new ways of looking at historical issues and raised new questions, since their relative lack of experience allows them to ‘think outside the box’ of conventional scholarship.” (response in teaching quality audit, 2000).

This raises several questions about the nature of the relationship between research and teaching.

- Is an important element in the link between research and teaching what the teacher gets from the student, rather than just the other way round?
- Does the link operate through what they have in common - that both are fundamentally processes concerned with enquiry, discovery, passion for the subject - and thus learning?
- Is the most important action then to engage students in ‘discovery-led’ or ‘enquiry-led’ learning’ which is akin to the process of historical research?

7. Is the link between teaching and research as much negative as it is positive?

Two responses to a survey of American historians, published in the *Journal of American History* in 1994).

“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.”

“[A negative effect of the current reward system is] the emphasis on research over teaching. To wit: Do you know of any ‘Teaching Chairs’ of American history with a 15 hour undergraduate class load and no research during the school year?”

Whilst one might argue that staff incorporating research into their teaching allows students to see the importance of research to historians, and can generate interest and excitement in learning the subject, does the pronounced emphasis on research in our professional lives also have negative effects? The RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) leads to a pressure to publish (and in certain forms). This, it could be argued, can lead to short cuts being taken with teaching, and a situation in which whilst students are in theory taught by leading scholars, in reality, and perhaps especially in year one, they often get taught by postgraduate and part-time tutors. Moreover, the increasing specialisation of research topics might make it less relevant to teaching, much of which is more general in nature. A preoccupation with the RAE might also have the effect of discouraging pedagogic innovation and research.

Conclusion

I am conscious that I have generated more questions than answers. The research on this issue still needs to be done for History. However, clearly there is no snug and simple fit between teaching and research in the subject.

In most statements from within our community, the dominant view is that active involvement in research is essential to good teaching. Equally, the available evidence suggests that the links between the two are more often assumed than clearly demonstrated or, often, explained. If the proposition that such links are automatic (that a high quality research output leads to good teaching) seems dubious, that is not to say that links between research and teaching do not exist - most obviously, for example, in the Special Subjects we teach. Arguably, the most important task is to consciously *make* the links between research, teaching and learning (and make them clear to our students), both from the point of effective learning and the health and future development of our discipline.

Perhaps the most practical, and inclusive, means of creating strong links is to promote a clearly thought out enquiry-led curriculum in which content, teaching methods and assessment are all aligned towards the goal of encouraging students to discover (research) for themselves and construct their own knowledge and meanings about historical issues and problems. Here, not all history teachers need to be involved in front-line archival research, but they do need to be aware of current research findings and have the experience of researching historical topics as a means of surely guiding students' in their own voyage of discovery, particularly at more advanced levels of undergraduate and postgraduate study.

If this permits a more inclusive, and productive, vision of the relationship between research, teaching and learning, it also raises a host of further issues, not least in relation to how the impact of such 'discovery-led' methods on student understanding can be measured and how important the research activity of their tutors is to history students. Whilst we currently possess no adequate answers to these questions, there are indications from other disciplines that such learning does help to produce the kind of understanding we value in History, and that students regard tutors' research interests positively in terms of bringing intellectual excitement and enthusiasm to teaching. The complex relationship between research, teaching and learning remains to be explored systematically in History, but it constitutes an important field of scholarly investigation for our subject at a time when government policy may result in a growing split between what are seen in our discipline as co-dependent activities.

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Research and Teaching: Some General Questions

- What are the benefits of a research-led model of disciplinary teaching?
- What are its disadvantages for teaching?

- In what ways does research enhance teaching and student learning?
- How can teaching benefit research?

- What differences and similarities are there between research and teaching?
- Should we see them as distinct, essentially the same or complementary?

- How does research affect learning as opposed to teaching?
- How can we get students to see their learning as research?

- How can we as history teachers, as departments and as a profession improve the relationship between teaching and research in our discipline?
- What are the implications for developing teaching? What would an enquiry-led curriculum look like?