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NATIONAL CURRICULUM HISTORY: KEY CONCEPTS AND CONTROVERSY

The relationship between the key concepts and historical knowledge needs to be re-examined if the concepts are to be used effectively in the teaching and learning of history

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Although this article looks at all three pairs of key concepts — causes and consequences, change and continuity, similarity and difference — the main focus will be on causes and consequences.

There can be no doubt that these key concepts have been very influential and important factors in the teaching of history since the 1970s. The relationship between the three pairs of concepts and that elusive commodity 'historical knowledge' has surfaced as a controversial issue at two pressure points on the timeline of history pedagogy (i.e. 1975 and 1990). The present Dearing/SCAA regime (DfE, 1995), which will inevitably be temporary, has substituted 'reasons and results' for 'causes and consequences' and has added the element of 'factual information' to the assessment syndrome. Again, both the relationship between 'reasons and results' and so-called 'factual information', and the definition of these two categories, are problematic, but at least the juxtaposition of concepts and content does imply a recognition that you cannot have the teaching or learning of history without them both.

There is a kind of curriculum genealogy which must be traced and ancestors identified before a true understanding of the recent controversies can be reached. It is not surprising that the government which so enthusiastically enforced the letter of the law against Arthur Scargill and the miners, and waged war against General Galtieri and the Argentine, should have had strong views about the teaching of history when that aspect of the National Curriculum became part of its agenda. Mrs Thatcher, in the first volume of her autobiography, announces her distaste for the TGAT report (DES, 1988) which formed the basis of National Curriculum assessment. It was jargon-filled and far too complicated, but for some reason it was too late for her to stop it (Thatcher, 1993, pp. 594-5), and Kenneth Baker, the TES, the NUT and the Labour Party had all welcomed it! Kenneth Baker had a broader, ten-subject view of the National Curriculum, but Thatcher only wanted attainment targets to apply to the core. Her wish for a 70% National Curriculum was later all but realised (in theory, if not in practice) by Dearing.

Unaware of tensions behind the scenes, all members of the History Working Group were issued in January 1989 with copies of the TGAT report, and innocently perhaps, used the report when formulating attainment target titles, profile components and levels of attainment. When the History Working Group's final report was published, after a considerable delay, in April 1990, the issue of the assessment of historical knowledge was apparently unresolved (DES,

1990). The situation, caused partly by the government's lack of openness about the TGAT report, and by the History Working Group's inability to square the problem of historical knowledge with the TGAT ten-level system, was used as a political football by those seeking to orchestrate a return to more traditional history teaching.

The History Working Group recommended in their first attainment target (Understanding of history in its setting) progression in at least two of the three pairs of key concepts (causes and consequences, change and continuity) as a solution to the TGAT-levels question. The government and the Right saw this as an inadequate response, not least because of the title of the attainment target, which did not include the word 'knowledge'. There seemed to be an element of almost mischievous polarisation in the interpretation or misinterpretation of the final report. The National Curriculum, if it was to be anything at all, had to be a consensus view of what constituted good practice, even though such a consensus may not exist (see MacIntyre [1988, p. 400], who believes that there is a general failure to recognise the historical roots of conflicting traditions of enquiry). As a top-down imposition it would be a disaster. There had to be a strong element of political neutrality and philosophical sanity in it.

Because I was involved with the decision-making which led to the publication of the final report of a group which I thought had not included any extremists, I was surprised, indeed shocked, by media and pressure group reaction in April 1990. I was determined to do some research into the history of the key concepts which I knew were like tectonic plates on the fault lines of this particular earthquake. I am indebted to Professor Alan Blyth for giving me all of the information which I needed.

The Schools Council project team of the 1970s produced *Place, Time and Society 8-13 (Curriculum Planning in History, Geography and Social Science 8-13, Blyth, et al, 1976)*, a curriculum rationale which was based on the three pairs of methodological key concepts of causes and consequences, change and continuity, similarity and difference. There were also the four substantive concepts: communication, power, values and beliefs, and conflict/consensus. The key concepts philosophy of this project was evaluated by the philosopher, Elizabeth Kingdom (formerly Hindess) of the University of Liverpool's Institute of Extension Studies (Kingdom, 1975). Kingdom's Occasional Paper is a significant one in the development of the teaching of history because it anticipates by 15 years the controversy

which surrounded the birth of National Curriculum history, and unwittingly but coherently rehearses concerns which embrace both the problematic nature of the future TGAT structure and the difficult relationship between historical knowledge and key concepts.

The other significant figure in this investigation is Hilda Taba, an American whose work in the Contra Costa district of California had a considerable influence on Alan Blyth's team (see Taba, 1962). Taba's programme was formulated in the light of analysis of problems of curriculum construction over a ten-year period of development and local trial. Her curriculum model was then revised at San Francisco State College under a grant from the United States Office of Education. Ten school districts participated in this curriculum revision. The Taba Curriculum Development Project was completed in 1969. Unfortunately, by the time the project's findings were published (Taba, Durkin, Fraenkel, and McNaughton, 1971), Hilda Taba had died. Tony McNaughton, a member of the Taba team, spent the Lent Term of 1972 with the Blyth Project team. This extract from their foreword illustrates and summarises their ideas:

Originally, those involved in developing this curriculum design struggled with the conflict between the coverage, or the broadening scope, in the social studies curriculum and the demands for greater depth. From this struggle came the theoretical foundation for the new approach to curriculum development. First it became clear that the subject matter had to be seen as consisting of three levels of knowledge, each of which served a special function in curriculum organisation and learning:

1. the key concepts that serve as threads weaving through many grade levels;
2. the significant ideas that serve as focal points for the selection and organisation of the content and represent the fundamental learnings and
3. the specific facts and cases that serve as samples through the analysis of which students could arrive at the important ideas.

(Taba, Durkin, Fraenkel, and McNaughton, 1971, pp. iii-iv)

The second concern was for selecting and organising learning activities, and the third was a concern for teaching strategies and procedures, such as 'helping students move through "bite-size" steps to the basic ideas and aiding them in sequential development of the necessary intellectual skills'.

Kingdom analyses Taba's epistemology and identifies it first as consistent with the dominant mainstream educational epistemology, i.e. empiricism, and traces Taba's intellectual journey back to John Dewey and his particular brand of empiricism (pragmatic instrumentalism) in which 'facts' are used to illustrate ideas (and not the other way around) — indeed section 3, above, is an example of this (e.g. see Dewey, 1916). Kingdom criticises not the concepts themselves but the way in which Taba, and presumably later the Blyth team, either had used or envisaged using them. Kingdom stresses that Dewey's (and indeed any) epistemology is controversial and that in the teaching of history there are other epistemologies which could be considered. Certainly, whatever

else is apparent there can be no doubt of the American influence on the English history curriculum.

Kingdom names a range of alternative philosophies (rationalist, idealist, existentialist, materialist), refers to some of these and to two post-structuralist French historian philosophers (Braudel and Foucault), and illustrates their philosophies. She makes the important general point about the relationship of the key concepts to content, that although content should not be seen to dominate any chosen teaching method, even when teaching is organised through key concepts, content is obviously a necessary factor in them all.

Why does Kingdom challenge the way in which empiricism or pragmatic instrumentalism (Dewey's form of empiricism) might underpin or even dominate the use of key concepts? She reminds the reader that there many alternative ways of seeing history, and gives these examples. Dilthey saw history as memory, a form of autobiography — with a living, active, creative and responsive soul present in every historical situation, and every document representing this kind of presence (Dilthey, 1961, p. 67). Braudel stressed the plurality of social time and the creative tension between private time and social time (Braudel, 1958, p. 169). Collingwood (1946) saw the task of the historian as re-enactment, with historical knowledge as the act of thinking itself, rather than the object that was being considered. Acton argued that history was not 'the art of accumulating material, but the sublimer art of investigating it, of discerning truth from falsehood and certainly from doubt' (Acton, 1973, p. 26).

Empiricism holds that the human mind can only form a posteriori concepts, from experience, and that there are no a priori concepts. History, of course, in the sense of the past, could be seen as that which went before, indeed as a grand 'a priori'. Kingdom makes a reference in a footnote to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) in which Foucault writes: '... an a priori not of truths that might never be said, or really given to experience; but the a priori of a history that is given, since it is that of things actually said' (1972, p. 127). Foucault sheds light on the problem of the relationship between concepts and content. If causation is used as an example, and for the sake of this illustration it can be regarded as a 'rule', he deduces '... but these rules are not imposed from the outside on the elements that they relate together; they are caught up in the very things that they connect ...' (Foucault, 1972, p. 127).

Alan Blyth reminded me recently that Kingdom was writing just when post-structuralism was beginning to move centre stage. Since then it has become more prominent, but in the process it seems to have become increasingly remote from practical concerns in education. Perhaps at this point Kingdom could have taken her argument a stage further and suggested ways in which these ideas could be converted into substantive or methodological concepts for teaching. Foucault's thoughts are not necessarily easily translatable in this way, but they do provide an alternative to traditional empiricist views of history. However, there is unlikely to be a serious challenge to the traditional three pairs of key concepts from Foucault's menu of discursive practice and decisive thresholds, positivities and non-coherence, simultaneity and succession, overlapping and replacement (Foucault, 1972, p. 127)!

Of course these key concepts identified by Taba (1962), Taba *et al* (1971), and further developed by Blyth *et al* (1976), have a much longer history, and statements about, for example, causes and consequences, have been recognised as controversial or at least in many ways unsatisfactory, since early times. Herodotus, ‘the father of History’ as the hero of the film *The English Patient* (1997) reminds us, wrote in 450 BC that he wanted to investigate the causes of the recent war. Herodotus’ journalistic methods were subsequently criticised by Thucydides who said that some people were only too ready to believe the first story they hear. Hume anticipated some of the key concepts by two centuries. This can be found in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part 1, Section IV:

The qualities from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner conveyed from one idea to another, are three, viz. resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect. (Hume, 1748)

Hume however attacked the notion of a necessitating tie between cause and effect, although, according to Penelope Mackie, several recent commentators argue that Hume did not deny the existence of genuine causal necessity (Mackie, 1995, in Honderich, 1995, p.128).

The dangers of applying concepts to content were appreciated by Alan Blyth’s team in the 1970s, and the historian Conrad Russell, son of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, reminds the reader of some ground rules on causes and effects which should be remembered, in this case in the context of the Civil War:

In investigating causes, the first necessity is to match them with effects, and it therefore seems a logical priority to begin by trying to establish the effects for which causes must be found. If effects are wrongly postulated, the causes will be wrong also. If we discuss causes without any investigation of effects, we are simply indulging in unverifiable speculation. The title of this chapter is derived from Perry Mason, and while it does not pretend to offer results as sensational as tend to follow Perry Mason’s exclamation, ‘Your Honour, I object: the prosecution must first prove the corpus delicti’, I think the logical principle involved in Mason’s favourite rule of law is a very sound one. That is why this chapter is devoted to effects and not to causes.

The first point to emerge is that some of the supposed ‘effects’ for which we have tried to find causes were imaginary: we deduced the effects from the supposed causes. For a historian, this is back to front. For example, it has become clear that it is impossible to interpret the Civil War as the clash of two clearly differentiated social groups or classes: the fullest possible knowledge of men’s social and economic background, if it leaves out the preaching available in their home parishes, tells us nothing about their likely allegiance in the Civil War. (Russell, 1990, pp. 1-2)

This supports the view that a grasp of the facts of a narrative, or to use Rogers’ terminology, ‘contextual frame’ (Rogers,

1979), must be a prerequisite for any teacher, pupil, or historian attempting to make statements about causes or effects. Russell does not deny the existence or the importance of the ‘corpus delicti’ or body of facts (in Latin legal jargon) about a case. But he does stress the need to ‘prove’ the corpus delicti.

Two important associated points which have resonance with this investigation were made by Jack Hexter in 1971: ‘that in history credibility rather than necessary and sufficient causes provides the standard of adequacy of explanation’; and ‘that the exploration of truth values in historical discourse requires the examination of large historical texts and contexts and not just of minute fragments wrenched out of context’ (Hexter, 1971, pp. 367-8).

More controversially, the Whig historian Trevelyan, whom Elton (1967) described as an amateur, wrote this in his essay ‘Clio, a Muse’ in 1914, confirming at least his agreement with Hume about the uncertain nature of statements about cause and effect:

Even if cause and effect could be discovered with accuracy, they still would not be the most interesting part of human affairs. It is not man’s evolution but his attainment that is the great lesson of the past and the highest theme of history. The deeds themselves are more interesting than their causes and effects, and are fortunately ascertainable with much greater precision ... (Trevelyan, 1914, in Vaughn, 1985)

Why should Kingdom regard the key concepts themselves as endangering a multi-epistemological approach? She does not try to discredit the concepts but just the ways in which Taba had said that they should be used. There is no reason why the concepts themselves should be a barrier to effective teaching and learning if they are used and approached in a sensitive and sensible way. The key concepts then are necessary tools for teaching and learning, but they must go hand in hand with rigorously investigated content — meaning both sources and their wider contexts. The key concepts cannot be accused *per se* of supporting or condoning a single or inappropriate epistemology — they can be common to a variety of ways of viewing, teaching and learning history.

One final point: just as the pioneering work of John West, and its influence on National Curriculum History (especially at Key Stage 1) went unacknowledged in the final report of the History Working Group (DES, 1990), so too did the appropriation of much of the Schools Council Project terminology!

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* copies of Elizabeth Kingdom's paper are available at the cost of photocopying from Robert Guyver, University College of St Mark and St John, Derriford Road, Plymouth, PL6 8BH. Telephone: 01752 777188.

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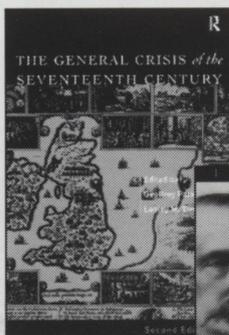
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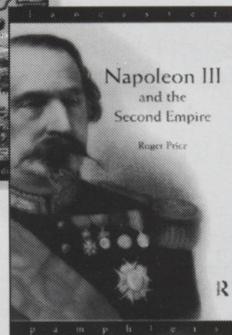
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