The Pleasures of Belonging to the History Teaching Community

For Helen

who embodied the history teaching community at its very best
through her breadth of vision, openness, creativity, happiness and joy,
sense of sharing and deep care and empathy for others

When I began my PGCE in 1973 I had no idea there was a history teaching community. Back then, of course, there were no websites offering resources, no social media discussions and it didn't matter that I had no access to a photocopier because there wasn't much to copy. The list of books on history teaching probably didn't fill one side of A4 and only nine editions of *Teaching History* had been published. I have no idea how today's teachers cope with the vast literature available to them.

I was lucky, however, that my PGCE tutor at Leeds, Bob Unwin, a one-man torrent of ideas, resources and enthusiasm, introduced us to the Historical Association, organised annual day-conferences in Leeds for history teachers and published an annual collection of articles and resources by local teachers and his trainees. I also met two excellent teachers at my teaching practice school who shared practical guidance and opened my eyes to the importance of thinking about how students learn rather than just about what I had to teach them.

My introduction to a wider history teaching community came two years later when my school in Wakefield started teaching the Schools Council History Project course. We joined the local SCHP group which met termly, chaired by SCHP staff (based nearby in Leeds) and discussed teaching, resources and assessment, not least the kinds of assessment activities to set for coursework which made up 40% of SCHP assessment. Those local meetings, together with marking meetings for CSE exams, was the start for me of discussing teaching with colleagues from other schools, an experience replicated across the country through SCHPs network of support groups, most working in tandem with local authority advisers, many of whom were History specialists.

Since those mid-1970s meetings, the breadth, depth and strength of the history teaching community has grown immensely but, you'll be relieved to know, I'm not going to set out the story of those changes. What I want to explain is why belonging to the history teaching community has been so enjoyable and important for me – so here goes …

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Generosity

It was my wife, Paddy (known to some as Pat), who put her finger on this central strength of the teaching community after her first visit (c2005) to one of my CPD sessions. What she said on the way home was 'It's amazing how much everyone shared with each other'. Until she said that, I'd taken teachers' sharing and mutual generosity for granted but Paddy had spent thirty years as a consultant engineer in a highly commercial environment. Our History teaching world was utterly different from hers, where commercial competition worked very much against sharing ideas and developments – unless a large fee was being paid. Our sharing and generosity was obvious to her. I was so used to it that I hadn't noticed it.

A shared belief

Less practical, perhaps, but just as important for me is the shared conviction that History has a particular and important role to play in the education of our students. This is about far more than the knowledge that students acquire. It's about how students' lives can be enhanced through an understanding of how History is studied and by using their knowledge and understanding of the past to better understand society today. (I do like the idea of an understanding-rich curriculum).

I've often felt that we identify this shared belief in each other even if we don't explicitly discuss it. It's a kind of fellow-feeling, a belief in the existential value of studying History, that's consistently helped sustain and re-invigorate my own convictions about why History is such an important part of students' education.

A communal endeavour

My first two points lead into this one – that the development of history teaching has come to feel like a communal endeavour whereas, as a young teacher in the early 70s, it felt an isolated experience. The HA and SHP played such important roles in this but their successes are essentially the product of the work of many hundreds of individuals who share this commitment to supporting colleagues and to improving the quality of History teaching for the good of their students. In part this strength comes from the diversity of interests – individuals contributing their expertise on curriculum, on developing resources and activities, on analysis of conceptual understanding, on assessment and many other areas of learning and teaching – and from the bringing together of intellectual ideas and theories with practical problem-solving and creativity.

Latterly, much of this has become so much more accessible, visible not only in the intellectual and practical majesty of *Teaching History* and in the wide-ranging content of HA and SHP Conference

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and CPD programmes but in so many other forums created by groups of teachers and by individual schools, all of which contribute to this sense of a communal endeavour.

Longevity and rejuvenation

Looking back, another great strength of the History teaching world is that it contains many people who continue to contribute ideas and provide support for others for 20, 30 even 40 years. They are a source of community memory and experience but, more importantly, provide support, encouragement and exemplars for new generations – and the quality of those younger teachers is just as high as in the past even though they're having to battle against external pressures that my generation was spared when we started out. The willingness of younger teachers to engage and discuss with older teachers and educators is also important – a product, I think, of the work and example of the many high-quality teachers who move on to work in teacher education and as HMI, modelling for new generations how a community works constructively and positively together.

Thank you

I started my PGCE knowing nothing about teaching and with no idea that such an entity as the history teaching community existed. Since then, I've been extremely fortunate to get to know and work with so many inspirational, caring, considerate and, simply, good people. I've shared many very happy and creative moments with those people and built friendships in all parts of the country.

Nowhere reminds me more strongly of those happy moments and friendships than the not terribly grand auditorium that's hosted the plenaries for the SHP Conference since 1989. For over thirty years, I had the privilege of standing – at some stage of each conference – at the front of the auditorium, looking out at the assembled mass of history teachers, often well over 250 people. Last year, 2024, I did so again for a few minutes – there were many new faces but beyond their physical presence I was deeply aware of the rows upon rows of teachers who had sat in those same seats in the past, a palimpsest of past audiences from 1989, 1990 and every year since – generation after generation of individuals, each of whom contributed to the development of History teaching and to the History teaching community.

Of course, there's sadness too. The faces, the presences I'm most aware of are the missing ones – Rob, Ian, Kate and Helen. To them in particular, but to everyone else I've met across the last five decades, ***Thank You*** for all the laughter, creativity, generosity and friendship. I couldn't have worked with a more inspiring and supportive set of people than the community of History teachers.

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