Abdelsebhor, Aswan and why I think it's important to teach history

In the 70s SCHP gave me a rationale for teaching history, based around adolescent needs and the discipline of the subject. Fifty years later I've tried to update those needs with a lot of help from Abdelsebhor and my students in Aswan.

I spent nine months in 1974-75 teaching English as a Foreign Language as a VSO in Aswan in Egypt. That short period has gifted me a fund of stories that I've re-told too often – the hazards of sharing a very small ferry boat across the Nile with a water buffalo, its owner and the ferryman (at least two people or one buffalo too many for the space); the shopkeeper who couldn't understand why no-one ever bought a second pack from his stock of Rowntrees jelly (answer – he sold it as ideal for cleaning floors and no amount of explanation from me, even in Arabic, could convince him that jelly was for eating); shopping in the souk taking hours because I was offered tea or coffee in every single shop; my head of department, worried about the look of the marks, passing me exam paper after exam paper with the instruction 'Find him another mark from somewhere'.

And then there was Abdelsebhor. The five of us VSOs in Egypt had been warned about boys accosting us in the street with big grins on their faces while swearing at us extensively in Arabic for their own amusement. We were taught a good range of swear words in the local vernacular so we could recognise such moments. Fourteen-year-old Abdelsebhor had a big grin, didn't seem to pay much attention in class and kept coming up close to me between lessons, smiling broadly and muttering words I couldn't ever understand. What was going on?

It took a few weeks but one day I finally picked out one of the words Abdelsebhor was saying to me. It was 'Bobby' … and then all the rest made sense. 'Bobby Charlton, mister, Bobby Moore, mister', even 'Franz Beckenbauer, mister.' Not swearing but making friends, footballers as a means of communication. And it wasn't long before I visited Abdelsebhor's home and family in his village outside Aswan, no water, no roof (there was only 20 minutes rain in the nine months I was there), no electricity but he always had a pen for school. That wasn't the only home I was invited to – there was Ahmed whose family lived in a house built for one of the British engineers who'd built the Old Dam around 1900, Eman whose father gave me a series of his own paintings of the Nile at Aswan – and there were those I only knew at school, Khairaya who chattered in English at every opportunity and had the most infectious grin, Mariam with the ever so slow to emerge broad smile, Sherif, Soaad, Nadia, Mervet, Tahany, Alao and all the others.

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What have any of these memories got to do with teaching History? At the time the thing I knew I was learning was that people are no different the world over, regardless of religion, nationality, whatever. Those children in Aswan, their parents, the people in the shops, were welcoming to a stranger, one of only two native English speakers in the city. They were decent people, as kind as I could hope to meet anywhere. It was Abdelsebhor who took the risk of trying to welcome me in his own way when it would have been easier for him to ignore me and play football with his friends. Of course there were others who didn't meet that description but that's people, not nationality or religion at work.

It took a while, several decades I fear, to make a connection between that lesson about people and the reasons why I feel that teaching history is worthwhile. In recent years I've focussed on teaching about the Middle Ages, a period when in popular myth people were very different from ourselves, always fighting, failing to survive plague, living dismally and incuriously, never showing kindness or a sense of community. The trouble is that the Middle Ages of myth is very different from that depicted by historians. Historians know that to understand the actions, choices and beliefs of people in the Middle Ages we first have to respect them, appreciate that they were as intelligent as ourselves, as capable of positive emotions and behaviour such as kindness.

That's why, when I edited Exploring and Teaching Medieval History for the Historical Association, I found my experiences in Aswan coming back to me. I related the respect that historians have for the people of the Middle Ages to the respect that I'd built up for the people of Aswan, a place and culture that seemed very different on the surface to my life in England but which had so many similarities based on the humanity of the people. This respect for those we aren't familiar with seems so important in a world where too many people regard those who seem different from themselves as a threat, as inferior, as not at all worthy of respect – and that led to me setting out this aim that I hope can be fulfilled from teaching about the Middle Ages:

> *If students can respect people of a time as different from our own as the Middle Ages, then perhaps there is more chance of them respecting people from different cultures today rather than instinctively interpreting difference as being inferior or a threat.*

Respect for others, of course, is not just a lesson to be learned from studying the Middle Ages but what makes the period such a good vehicle for this aim is the dominating misconception that this was a cruel, unintelligent age full of people who do not share our humanity.

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All of which is a very lengthy introduction to the question of why it's worth teaching history in schools. In my 20s, I was enraptured by the Schools Council History Project because it had an answer to the question 'Why do we have to do History, sir?' SCHP wanted to help students to understand that they could use both their knowledge of the past and their understanding of how history is studied to understand and interpret their own world. 'Their own world' – that interaction between past and present was the key for me. In order to translate that very broad aim into specifics SCHP linked that aim to five adolescent needs in the 1970s – some of these 'needs' don't look all that specific but they were more closely analysed in the Project's guide A New Look at History:

1. The need to understand the world in which they live.

2. The need to find their personal identity by widening their experience through the study of people of a different time and place.

3. The need to understand the process of change and continuity in human affairs.

4. The need to begin to acquire leisure interests. [There was a belief in the 70s that computers would lead to everyone have lots more leisure and far less work.]

5. The need to develop the ability to think critically, and to make judgments about human situations.

As I've explained in another of these retrospective essays, I don't think that SCHP succeeded to any great extent in achieving the aim of helping students appreciate the value of studying history for their own lives. Despite this I still believe that SCHP was entirely right to have this aim and that it's just as important today as it was fifty years ago. So how might I re-visit those adolescent needs for today, albeit very hesitantly, given that at the age of 70 I'm not exactly in touch with the needs of anyone who could be remotely described as youthful? Here are three categories of suggestions, again very light touch descriptions. I haven't set out what might be relevant content as not only are there too many possibilities but it's also distracting from the elements of the aims themselves.

1. An understanding of human ideas and behaviour which students can use to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, situations and potential

a) understanding of what mattered to different peoples in the past

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b) awareness of similarities and differences in people's emotions and feelings

c) respect and tolerance for people who lived different lives from ourselves

d) respect for human achievements and struggles across a variety of cultures (people behaving well as well as behaving badly which tends to take up far too much curriculum time)

e) understanding of individual people as human beings – varied experiences, problematical choices and dilemmas, and the varying trajectories of the lives of people in the past.

2. Ways in which the discipline of History can help students navigate challenges in their world

a) becoming more comfortable with uncertainty e.g. through appreciating the limitations of evidence for answering questions about the past

b) developing the ability to think critically and make their own judgements when encountering interpretations and viewpoints about events past and present

c) expecting complexity, not simplicity or easy answers in relation to causes and consequences, dilemmas, choices and decisions

d) appreciating the escalating pace of change while also identifying continuities e.g. in human needs and emotions

e) learning to use the process of enquiry to plot their way through problem-solving, including identifying their preconceptions about topics and how to test them against evidence.

3. Developing a sense of perspective on the present through knowledge of past events

a) understanding the history of important themes in human history and how these help to explain situations in the world today

b) understanding why some events in the past continue to have a resonance and importance in determining attitudes and decisions today.

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I expect I've missed loads of things that I should have included but whatever aims you feel are important one thing is of paramount importance – those aims need to be **communicated to students as clearly as possible** and discussed explicitly so they understand why it's worth their while learning about history. One of my regrets about my time with SHP is that I didn't develop ideas for explicit teaching and discussion of such issues – it would have been the ideal use of the website or a Conference plenary.

Returning to Aswan by way of conclusion, you won't be surprised to know that catching a train to school in Wakefield never matched walking to school along the east bank of the Nile, looking out over the deep blue of the water to the high sands of the hills on the far bank and the equally deep greenery on the islands in the midst of the river – the only visible figures a handful of boatmen and farmers leading their laden gamoosa (water buffalo). Another experience I never repeated was going to the local government offices in Aswan each month to pick up my pay cheque. Every month I was given a coffee as I waited for the cheque to be written. Every month I began to look at my watch, aware that I was teaching again in 30, 25, 15 minutes and always came the same comment 'Never mind, have another coffee, teach that lesson 'bada bocra'. Nobody ever suggested in Wakefield that I postpone a lesson until 'bada bocra' – tomorrow, sometime, never.

Shokrun, Abdelsebhor – and shokrun to Ahmed, Eman, Khairaya, Mariam, Sherif, Soaad, Nadia, Mervet, Tahany, Alao and everyone else who welcomed me to their city.

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