A Happy Choice

How history teaching grew on me and made me smile

What draws us to history teaching? I didn't feel a born teacher when I started my PGCE in 1973 and I had no experience with school-age students. I made a slow, a very slow start, unlike today's trainees who have to go from 0 to 100 mph in the first weeks of autumn. In 1973 I was still sorting out the pedals on my penny-farthing at Christmas. There were moments of real doubt in my first couple of years but slowly I realised I'd made the right choice thanks to students, colleagues and the problem-solving nature of teaching.

I first thought of becoming a teacher during a Latin lesson with Mr Ford. I was about 12 at the time. Every week we had a vocab test and a homework and the following week we had to call out our marks so Mr Ford could write them in his mark book. It was that mark book I envied. Our marks felt like cricket statistics – and at 12 my waking hours revolved around the batting and bowling averages of county cricketers, working them out in my head to two decimal places. I didn't know there was such a job as a cricket statistician but that morning in double Latin I imagined a life spent working out the vocab and homework averages of generations of schoolboys. How great would that be?

Not that I was ever likely to be a Latin teacher. History had felt like home since I was 7. I've no logical explanation for this but History carried on being home as I gradually focussed in on the Middle Ages thanks to historical novels and became besotted with the mystery of the Princes in the Tower early in my A levels. When it came to selecting a university I chose Leeds because it offered the only detailed course I could find on Richard III. When results came out I could have stayed on for a third year for Oxbridge entrance but another year at school when all my generation had left seemed a lonely prospect. So off I headed for Leeds and Richard III (though possibly not in that order).

Three years later I applied for a PGCE but my reasons for doing so were no stronger than when I was 12. I had no experience of working with children, nor had I been into a school to test the idea. I suspect doing a PGCE seemed the least big step I could take into adulthood – I could stay with history and avoid the bigger decision-making that choosing another career would involve. The easy option – which shows just how ignorant I was about teaching. Fortunately the Education department

© Ian Dawson 2021

at Leeds had a big quota to fill (50 history trainees) and so didn't ask probing questions about my motivation. I remembered to wear a tie for the interview. I was in!

The shock of a school

Early January 1974 – my second day in school on teaching practice but I didn't get up at 6.30 and head for the station. I stayed in bed and hid under the blankets. I didn't move, didn't respond to house-mates' concern. I just hid.

What was going on? Looking back, I think I was suffering from shock. Until the previous day my PGCE hadn't required me to spend a single whole day in a school. We'd visited one secondary school for an afternoon during the autumn term but that was it. I had absolutely no experience of being in a busy school so on that first morning in school I couldn't cope with the shock that I had to do this for real, become an adult, take responsibility, risk failure, stand in front of those students and actually teach them.

At some point I realised that I would have to go in next day or admit failure, that I wasn't prepared to try … and then what would life hold? So I did go in next day and for the rest of that first week – and even later in the term after I had an anti-typhoid jab and my arm hurt so much I put it in a sling to avoid bumps in the corridor.

What now feels shocking is how poorly prepared I was for starting that school placement and that's why, nearly 50 years later, I feel envious of teachers starting out on their training today. During the autumn term I'd had just a handful of tutorials and lectures a week. The one deeply useful preparation for school came in the workshops on history teaching run by Bob Unwin but they felt isolated from the rest of the course and were the only times I felt I was making the transition from student to trainee-teacher. No wonder that, looking back, I feel that I was still sorting out the pedals on my penny-farthing when I went into school that first day after Christmas.

Modern training – tougher but better

What were the other major differences between training now and then? This list may make modern trainees feel hard-worked but it also helps explain why you're much better prepared.

There was so little to read about the teaching of history. In 1973-4 Teaching History had only been going for four years and each edition had fewer pages that the average modern TH article has footnotes. There were also very few books on history teaching and of course there was no deluge of

© Ian Dawson 2021

other ideas – good and bad – via twitter or websites which can make you feel that you can't keep up. Nowadays … well you know how much there is to read.

There was little material on how children learn and only the beginnings of material on the teaching of evidence, causation and other concepts. We discovered a little about using sources in the classroom but as yet work on evidence did not feature in O levels or A levels. Another thing we didn't spend time on was assessment which was still conducted in great secrecy. Teachers had no access to marking schemes unless they became exam markers which meant little time was spent in our PGCE on preparation of students for exams.

The relationship between school and university was often far less constructive in the 70s. If the teachers in school took to you (as mine did based on my helping with cricket and football teams) then the assessment process could become a two-sided rivalry – teacher and trainee versus the common enemy, the PGCE tutor. I had no sense of mentoring, teachers and tutors working together to help trainees. Classrooms were seen as teachers' own empires so observation was brief to avoid trespassing on teachers' space. Our observation of experienced teachers usually lasted only a couple of weeks – though at some stage of the term I did sit in A level lessons which had a great influence on my own teaching in years to come. That same 'courtesy' of privacy was also extended too rapidly to trainees unless noise from the classroom suggested things had got out of hand.

The range of teaching techniques and teaching resources in the 70s was limited, even allowing for the obvious absence of computers. We didn't even have access to photocopiers though we could use the banda machine (an education version of the crank in a Victorian prison) on which we churned out worksheets of our own devising. The hi-tech resources were slides and film-strips – and different coloured pieces of chalk. Clear writing in chalk was a highly prized quality. Textbooks were limited in variety with few tasks to offer ideas to build on. Nobody had invented tabards. So much therefore depended on your ability to explain clearly – a crucially important thing to learn of course – but the emphasis was all on presenting, hardly at all on how the students were making sense of what they were hearing and reading, why they might be struggling to learn about a topic.

One consequence of all this was that there wasn't a sense of training being the beginning of long-term CPD. Nowadays initial training is great preparation for trainees' continuing development as teachers, not something over and done once you've got that end of year certificate.

© Ian Dawson 2021

The eternal challenges of teacher training

Of course not everything was different back then. The challenges I faced are still challenges for most people today.

I discovered it was a test of my self-esteem and mental health, my self-perception, my identity – could I keep discipline, win the respect of students and of experienced teachers and engage students so they shared my passion for history?

It was a test of my stamina and fitness, adding the demands of travel to the many hours needed for preparation, reading, thinking – and we all have to negotiate the colds, flu and bugs that students generously pass on to help build up our immune systems. And now there's Covid.

I felt I'd plunged into a busy bubbling community where everyone seems to know everyone else – apart from me. I had to navigate people and buildings I didn't know, everyone and everything was new and that's very energy-sapping and nowadays, on most training courses, just when you've got the hang of your first school you have to change to a second and start again.

Even teachers who have been teaching just a couple of years appeared to be creatures of vast competence. They knew how to learn names, give clear instructions, when to vary their plan for the lesson because … well, they could feel a change was needed. They knew things I'd never thought about – that students respond differently according to the day of the week and time of a lesson, the lesson they've had before, the weather. All this just underlines how much there is to learn.

We all discover we know very little history. Even if we've done well in Finals it's likely we specialised in something we hardly ever teach. A lesson on Magna Carta? Well, you have heard of it but what did happen exactly, why was it important and it was sometime in the er … 1200s, wasn't it? History teachers carry a double load – you not only have to learn how to teach but you have to learn what to teach. Maths teachers have it so easy.

Your normal life feels on hold. Existing relationships can struggle because of work and stress. New relationships can be hard to establish when you need to put marking 28 Y7 books before anything.

And because everyone has a bad lesson occasionally that's the one you obsess over – it may be the only bad lesson you taught that week and it may not actually have been that bad but it's the one that keeps you awake and niggles away at you until you see that class again.

© Ian Dawson 2021

Happily, one continuity is the quality of the people who work as History PGCE tutors. They and the experienced mentors in schools are the jewels of the system, people who develop lasting relationships with their trainees, set exemplary standards of teaching and every year help a new cohort of trainees get up to speed with increasing confidence and competence. I still feel in debt to the amazing Bob Unwin who taught me creativity, professionalism, how to be passionate about teaching and many, many other things.

Why history teaching grew on me – and made me smile

I left my placement school that Easter. I'd survived. Then a few essays to write, more history workshops with Bob and they gave me a certificate saying I'd mastered my penny-farthing. It even said I'd achieved a grade 1 but there was still a huge amount to learn. When I started teaching in September 75 (after VSO in Aswan) I was at least a term in arrears compared to trainees moving into their first job nowadays.

So when did I realise that teaching really was the job for me? I think it took another year or two for me to be really convinced, the result of a combination of factors (which didn't include the adding up marks and working out averages!):

- the day to day pleasure of meeting so many decent young people who returned my efforts with their interest and hard work even if they didn't have a major interest in history. Working in a Wakefield comprehensive that was heavily creamed by two direct grant grammar schools there was never a large number of A level candidates but I learned that a C or an E was as much an achievement for one student as an A was for another.

- the pastoral satisfaction that came from being form tutor to C3/IGD (Year 9 to you) whose names I can still reel off over 40 years later. Then there were the after-school sports, the Duke of Edinburgh work, the outdoor pursuits trips, the invitations from students to awards of Girl Guides badges, the fund-raising walk round Yorkshire in Civil War costume etc etc

- the examples of colleagues throughout the school who were dedicated to the welfare of students but also that I could be myself as a teacher. I could learn from but didn't need to copy other teachers to succeed.

- the beginnings of contacts with a wider history teaching community in the region, partly thanks to the local SHP network. Such contacts were rare and hard to organise but I was

© Ian Dawson 2021

excited by meeting like-minded enthusiasts who shared the belief that teaching history was important.

- the realisation that so much of teaching was a problem-solving activity, a real mental challenge, working out what problems students had in learning about any particular topic and shaping teaching to help them learn more effectively. The satisfaction from this was enormous.

- the sheer joy of a lesson going as well as I'd hoped, of having an idea that worked, of students smiling, asking unexpected questions and simply saying 'thank you'.

All of that feels very obvious now but at the age of 22, starting my PGCE in 1973, I didn't know any of this. I had no idea how rewarding being a teacher and part of the teaching community could be.

Wow, what a good choice it was.

© Ian Dawson 2021