

# Different battlegrounds, similar concerns? The “history wars” and the teaching of history in Australia and England

Peterson, Andrew

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**Different battlegrounds, similar concerns?**

**The “history wars” and the teaching of history in Australia and England**

Andrew Peterson, University of South Australia, Mawson Lakes, 5095, South Australia.

Australia. +61 8 830 26275. [andrew.peterson@unisa.edu.au](mailto:andrew.peterson@unisa.edu.au).

## **Abstract**

Debates about the purpose and content of history education in schools have been prevalent in most Westernised democratic nations over the last thirty years. At expense are essential questions concerning national identity/ies, competing narratives and the aims of history education. The impact of “history wars” have been felt within both Australia and England, as conservative commentators – including politicians and historians – have raised concerns about the depth and effectiveness of history education and have sought to make significant changes to the history curriculum for schools. This analysis examines the history wars in Australia and England, exploring the view that history education has been in danger and/or crisis and examining the curricular implications of a move toward greater recognition of national narratives. It raises some essential tensions that remain regarding two aspects of history teaching in both nations – (i) historiography and (ii) chronological understanding.

## **Key Words**

history education, history wars, narratives, historiography, chronological understanding

## **Introduction**

Though originating in the United States, the term the “history wars” has in recent years been used to characterise debates about the purpose, content and form of history education in both Australia and England. A key aspect of the history wars in both nations has been the interest that politicians and historians have shown in the shape and content of the history curriculum, as well as in the teaching of history in classrooms. At their heart, the history wars revolve around a number of often unhelpfully polarised distinctions concerning elements of history as an academic discipline. These include the objective-relativist dichotomy, the prioritisation of factual knowledge or historical skills, the teaching of a national narratives or a range of narratives, the structuring of the curriculum around chronological periods or significant themes, and the balance between teaching the history of the nation alongside that of other nations or regions in the world. The issues and tensions that have characterised the recent history wars in Australia and England are not specific to those nations, and have been mirrored across a number of jurisdictions (Green, 1997a; 1997b; Osborne, 2003; Vickers, 2005; Vickers and Jones, 2005; Evans, 2010; Chia, 2012; Taylor and Guyver, 2012). Nor are

the history wars new. Questions regarding the role place of history within the curriculum and its role in shaping national identity have been a recurring feature since the beginning of the twentieth-century (McIntyre and Clark, 2004; Cannadine et al., 2011). Moreover, and as Robert Parkes reminds us, education as a central battleground in the history wars represents a key element of wider debates concerning “historical consciousness”, the term used by some scholars to extend beyond historiography to include ‘individual and collective understandings of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors which shape those understandings, as well as the relations of historical understandings to those of the present and the future’ (CSHC, 2015).

While work on historical consciousness reflects the view that the past (including that relating to national identities) is “everywhere” (Lowenthal, 1996; Seixas, 2004a), the focus here is on the history wars in Australia and England over the last two decades with respect to formal history curricular. In this respect Australia and England provide useful comparative cases. Both are stable, representative democracies that share some important aspects of their histories. England is a constituent nation within the United Kingdom. Australia, as a former British colony, is a Federal Commonwealth comprising six states and two territories. Australia is a relatively new nation (certainly compared to England) established following Federation in 1901, while the land now known as Australia has been continuously inhabited by Indigenous peoples for at least 40,000-50,000 years. England has had a national curriculum, in various iterations, since 1990, while the first national Australian Curriculum has been instituted over the last five years. In recent times, and as part of debates concerning the nature and content of national curricular, conservative politicians in both nations have used history and history education as a political tool, critiquing the quality of history teaching in schools and positing the need for a renewed sense of the nation in history curricula and a “return” to the teaching of fact and chronology as a priority over the teaching of historical skills.

The purpose of the analysis presented here is to explore the recent history wars in Australia and England and to analyse the relationship between political rhetoric and resulting curricular policy and content. Following this introduction the paper comprises two main sections. In the first section it is argued that a central element of the history wars in both Australia and England has been the view that the teaching of history is in danger and/or in crisis. Drawing on this as a basis, the second section explores two inter-related issues that have been central to the history wars in both nations – the teaching of a national narrative and the relationship between facts and skills within history. With regard to these, two particular tensions for the teaching of history are raised – the extent to which historiography and

chronology are developed effectively within the current curricular arrangements, themselves products of the history wars.

To develop the analysis a range of texts relating the teaching of history in schools were considered. These included political speeches and related public discourse, policy and curricular documents, as well as theoretical and empirical educational research. It is important to note that while there is some evidence available in the English context (primarily from the school's inspectorate – the Office for Standards in Education; hereafter OfSTED) that provides an insight into the actual teaching of history in schools, very little evidence exists in Australia to highlight how debates at the level of policy and curriculum relate to what goes on in the classroom. This gap is significant given that the implementation and enacting of curriculum in schools may not fully align to the formal curriculum (Reid and Gill, 2010).

### **History education: a subject in danger and/or crisis?**

As indicated in the introduction, a condition common to both the Australian and English educational contexts is the sense that history education is either in *danger* and/or *crisis* (Ryan, 1998; Clarke, 2004a; OfSTED, 2010; Cannadine, 2011). While the terms are often used interchangeably in relation to history education there are important differences. The perception that history education is in danger is typically concerned with factors that prohibit or limit the scope of the subject in schools. A range of factors – including whether the history curriculum is organised as a discrete discipline or is integrated with other subjects, the time afforded to teaching history by schools, and the effect of other educational trajectories such as high stakes testing – have impacted on the extent of history teaching in schools. When the notion of crisis is invoked, the focus is predominantly on issues to do with history education itself, including the adequacy of the content and form of the history curriculum, as well as the quality of history teaching in schools. Over the last thirty years, and certainly within the two countries of focus here, the view that the teaching of history is in “crisis” has largely been voiced by political conservatives, including leading politicians, who have sought to advance agendas which question the extent to which history in schools is adequately providing students with an overarching and chronologically sound understanding of national history. The purpose of this section is to explore the discourse around history education as being in danger and/or crisis in Australia and England.

## *History education in the Australian Curriculum*

While England has had a national curriculum for more than two decades, the first national Australian Curriculum has been implemented in schools over the last five years. Prior to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, curricular structures and decisions were taken at the level of individual states. As a result, for most of the 1990s and 2000s only in New South Wales and Victoria was history designated as an individual subject discipline at secondary level. In other states, history was subsumed within integrated social studies subjects (such as Studies of Society and Environment), a process which one leading commentator has called ‘an unmitigated disaster’ (Taylor, 2012: 28; see also Taylor and Clark, 2006). Reflecting national debates at the time (considered below) history as a discrete subject was developed and implemented in the first wave of compulsory subjects from Foundation to Year 10 (alongside English, Science and Mathematics) and as the first of four subjects within the wider learning area Humanities and Social Sciences (alongside Geography, Civics and Citizenship, and Economics and Business). The development of history as a subject within the Australian national curriculum involved a number of stages (advice paper, national forum, draft and final shape papers and curriculum following open consultations) commencing in 2008 with implementation in schools from February 2011.

The rationale behind the introduction of history as a discrete subject, as well as its inclusion in the first wave of compulsory subjects, owes much to discourses surrounding a “crisis” in history education in Australia which has been evident since the early 1990s. The view that the teaching of history was in some way deficient was voiced by leading commentators in Australia through the majority of the 1990s and 2000s, notably by then Prime Minister John Howard who during his Australia Day address in 2006 launched a ‘root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in... schools’, suggesting that history in schools had ‘too often... fallen victim in an ever crowded curriculum’ and had ‘succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated’ (Howard, 2006). An Australian History External Reference Group was commissioned to produce a *Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10*. In the Guide’s foreword, Howard (DEST, 2007: 3) set out the connection between history education, citizenship and national identity arguing that ‘teaching young Australians about our shared past plays an important role in preparing them to be informed and active citizens’ and that ‘it provides them with a better appreciation of their heritage and of the national community of which they are a part’. Howard’s determination was for a “re-

balancing” of the curriculum toward greater recognition of western civilisation and Australian achievements and within which history was taught in a more “objective” way. Speaking on a visit to Gallipoli in 2000 Howard remarked that there had been ‘perhaps too much of an emphasis on issues rather than exactly what happened’ in history teaching in Australia (cited in Clark, 2004: 533). While the Australian Curriculum was developed and launched under the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, both avoided the sort of direct criticism of history education that characterised Howard’s approach (Taylor, 2012). Instead, Rudd and Gillard focused on the value of having common curricular content across Australian States and Territories as well as making general statements about the benefits for students of studying history at school, in particular the development of critical inquiry. That history was one of the first four subjects was significant, and reflected a view that the teaching of history had been heavily compromised by integrated approaches.

The contentious nature of history teaching in Australia, and indeed the re-ignition of the history wars, have resurfaced following the significant criticisms made of the Australian Curriculum for history by Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Minister for Education Christopher Pyne. Speaking before their success at the Federal Election of 2013, Pyne (2012) made clear his view that ‘the national history curriculum was certainly written by an ex-communist’, that the ‘offering was very left-wing’, and on this basis that the ‘national history curriculum fundamentally misses the point of teaching our young people why Australia is as it is today, which is because of our history of Western civilisation and our Judeo Christian ethic’. This view was reasserted following the Federal Election when Pyne (Hurst, 2014a) made clear that the curriculum should give greater recognition of ‘western civilisation’ and ‘important events in Australia's history and culture..., such as Anzac Day’. According to the Tasmanian education Minister, Nick McKim, Pyne was on a ‘brainwashing and propaganda mission’ (Hurst, 2014b).

Following the Federal election, the Liberal-led Coalition government established a review of the Australian Curriculum, to be led to two right-leaning public figures – Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire. In keeping with the trajectories of the history wars, the appointment of Donnelly and Wiltshire to lead the review has been identified as having an ideological basis (Taylor, 2014). Donnelly, for example, is head of the *Education Standards Institute* think-tank, and has previously made clear his criticism of the teaching of history in Australian schools over the last two decades. Writing in 2005 he claimed that ‘subjects like history and civics are rewritten to embrace a politically correct... view’ and that ‘across Australian schools, in areas like multiculturalism, the environment and peace studies,

students are indoctrinated and teachers define their role as new-age class warriors' (Donnelly, 2005: 56; see also Donnelly 2010). At the timing of writing, the final report of the Review has just been published. The Review asserts that the Australian Curriculum does not sufficiently educate students into an overarching narrative of Australian identity. This is returned to in the next section.

### *History education in the English Curriculum*

In England history has been compulsory for all pupils between 5 and 14 (13 in those schools in which there is a two-year Key Stage 3 course) in state-maintained schools since 1990. History in England is a recognised subject, having specific and detailed programmes of study at both secondary and primary levels (Burn and Harris, 2013). The most recent OfSTED subject report found that 'history was generally a popular and successful subject, which many pupils enjoyed'. In secondary schools visited 'attainment was high and has continued to rise' (OfSTED, 2011, p. 6), and there have also been positive trends in relation to participation rates in GCSE and A-Level history examinations (Burn and Harris, 2013). Furthermore, and in contrast to Australia where little specialist history teacher education has occurred outside of New South Wales, the education and training of specific, specialist teachers of history in England has been both extensive and influential. Indeed, according to figures published by the former Training and Development Agency for schools, pre-service history student teachers were the 'best qualified of all secondary trainees' with 78% holding at least a upper second class level degree in the subject (OfSTED, 2011, p. 22). According to OfSTED (2011), a direct line can be drawn between high levels of subject knowledge and high quality, effective history teaching, as well as between weak subject knowledge and less effective teaching.

Despite this, there continues to be a sense that history education is in either in danger or that it is in crisis. Reflecting on the teaching of history in English schools, for example, OfSTED (2012, p. 45) remarked that 'for over 40 years, historians and history teachers have claimed... that history in schools has been 'in danger'' (OfSTED, 2011, p. 45; see also Elwyn Jones, 2000). England, for example, is 'unique in Europe' in not requiring history to be taught after the age of 14, with around two-thirds of students opting not to take history beyond this (OfSTED, 2011, p. 8; see also Carradine et al, 2011). A further pertinent example of this sense of danger has been the trend in some schools, informed by curricular trends in the mid to late 2000s to develop cross-curricular links between subjects, to replace the



discrete teaching of history with the teaching of integrated subject themes. Similarly to the concerns raised in the Australian context, evidence indicates that when part of a cross-curricular theme, history is often taught by non-specialists and is less likely than discrete approaches to develop sufficient levels of historical knowledge and thinking (OfSTED, 2009; OfSTED, 2011).

The period since the 2010 United Kingdom General Election has witnessed extensive discourse concerning the importance, purpose and composition of history teaching in English schools – a period which Bowen et al (2012: 136) have referred to as a ‘crisis’ constructed by the now former Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government, Michael Gove, and supported by leading historians such as Simon Schama and Niall Ferguson to ‘obscure a demand for ‘celebratory history’’ in order to promote a particular national narrative within the history curriculum.

On entering office in 2010 Gove established a full review of the National Curriculum, making repeated reference to issues with the teaching of history, including the inadequacy of the history curriculum at the time and a lowering of standards in history teaching within English schools. In one speech, for example, Gove (2012) questioned the appropriateness of history teaching, citing resources that required students to depict Hitler’s rise to power in the form of a “Mr Men” story and those that required students to learn about King John by studying the Disney film *Robin Hood*. According to Gove (2012), ‘proper history teaching is being crushed under the weight of play-based pedagogy which infantilises children, teachers and our culture’. Similarly, writing in *The Daily Mail* (a right-leaning national newspaper) Gove (2013) made reference to ‘disturbing historical ignorance’ among young people. Gove’s concerns about history education were supported by leading historians. Simon Schama (2013), for instance, took issue with a lack of chronological clarity to the curriculum as well as an over-attention to skills at the expense of knowledge and narrative. Niall Ferguson (2011) went further, criticising the teaching of history in English schools, citing its unpopularity and decline while referring to the curriculum as focused on ‘junk history’. According to Ferguson the curriculum was to blame, a curriculum which he claimed had led to ‘widespread historical ignorance among school-leavers’.

### **National narratives and the relationship between facts and skills**

Fundamental to the arguments that history education is in crisis, and underpinning the history wars in both England and Australia, are a number of complex questions relating to the

subject's role in developing national identity. Should schools teach a singular national history based around a clear chronology or construct their curriculum around essential themes to give recognition to multiple histories and interpretations? Is the nature of historical knowledge objective or relative? Should the history curriculum emphasis knowledge and the teaching of facts or the development of historical skills, including an awareness of both historiography and historical consciousness? Each of the questions just cited is constructed around a particular binary. In reality, however, such extremes are rarely the locus of considered arguments. Few, for example, would argue that schools should only teach one perspective or should consider all historical facts to be contingent on interpretation or that history teaching should be based entirely on knowledge or skills. Moreover, and for example, a recent Eurydice (2010) study of European nations found that each paid significant attention to their respective national histories *alongside*, rather than to the exclusion of, international/world history. The interesting questions, therefore, are not whether to teach national history or multiple histories, or whether to teach fact or skills, but how these can be balanced in a meaningful and effective curriculum in order that teachers are able to mediate and interpret them effectively. The purpose of this section is to consider the ways in which these binaries have played out in political discourses and to analyse the curricular responses that have resulted.

### *National narratives*

Recourse to policy texts, curricular documents and research-based literature highlights the role discourses on national identity have played in constructing notions of history education in both Australia and England. In the Australian context debates concerning the teaching of a “national story” have centred on contestations regarding the “black-armband” view of Australian history. First used by historian Geoffrey Blainey (1993), the “black armband” view of history posits that too greater focus is placed on more shameful aspects of Australia's past – predominantly the experiences and treatment of Indigenous Australians – thereby underplaying positive aspects of colonisation. The term “black armband” itself derives from the wearing of black dress and black armbands by Indigenous Australians during key commemorative events (such as the bicentenary of James Cook's landing in 1970 and the bicentennial celebrations of the landing of the First Fleet in 1988) (McKenna, 1997). Blainey's refrain came in the context of historians, notably Manning Clark (1988), extolling the need to take the ‘blinkers off our eyes’ and to recognise the ‘great evils’ that the ‘coming

of the British' had brought to Australia, particularly in regard to its Indigenous population (cited in McKenna, 1997; Macintyre and Clark, 2004; Taylor and Collins, 2012; for a postcolonial reading of this context in relation to the teaching of history see Parkes, 2007). In setting out his critique of the black armband view, Blainey (1993: 10) argued that:

To some extent my generation was reared on the Three Cheers view of history. This patriotic view of our past had a long run. It saw Australian history as largely a success... There is a rival view, which I call the Black Armband view of history. In recent years it has assailed the optimistic view of history... The past treatment of Aborigines, of Chinese, of Kanakas, of non-British migrants, of women, the very old, the very young, and the poor was singled out, sometimes legitimately, sometimes not... The Black Armband view of history might well represent the swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favourable, too self congratulatory, to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced.

Blainey's view was used as a tool within John Howard's critique of the teaching of history in Australian schools. Speaking in 1996 Howard (cited in McKenna, 1997) made clear his contempt for the black armband view as a basis for teaching Australian history:

I think we've had too much... we talk too negatively about our past. I sympathise fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they are told that we have a racist bigoted past. And Australians are told that regularly. Our children are taught that. Some of the school curricula go close to teaching children that we have a racist bigoted past. Now of course we treated Aborigines very, very badly in the past... but to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we're all part of a racist bigoted history is something that Australians reject.

As highlighted in the previous section, these sentiments have resurfaced in the discourse on the current Australian Curriculum, most prominently in Christopher Pyne's assertion that the current curriculum is too 'left-leaning' and also in the Report of the Curriculum Review which recommended that 'whereas the history associated with Western civilisation and Australia's development as a nation is often presented in a negative light, ignoring the positives, the opposite is the case when dealing with Indigenous history and culture'. The review goes on to recommend both that the curriculum should 'better acknowledge the

strengths and weaknesses and the positives and negatives of both Western and Indigenous cultures and histories' (Australian Government, 2014: 181).

The importance of teaching a cohesive, fact-based national story within history in schools has also been a defining feature of recent discourse in England. Despite OfSTED's (2011, p. 6) claim that 'the view that too little British history is taught in secondary schools in England is a myth' the perceived lack of coherent teaching of national history was central to Michael Gove's critique of history teaching in English schools. Gove asserted a need to re-focus the teaching of national history to provide balance to the teaching of skills, arguing that it was necessary 'to make sure that there is room for people to explore subjects which in the past were neglected because of our approach towards our understanding of our own country' while encouraging 'critical thinking skills as well'. In emphasising the importance of teaching a national story, Gove's intentions were given support by the Labour Shadow Secretary State for Education (and historian) Tristram Hunt, who emphasised the teaching of a national story as an essential and necessary precondition for citizenship. According to Hunt (2013) 'in a multicultural society where civic ties are weaker, it is more important than ever to put British history above other national narratives'.

A much maligned draft curriculum that was published in 2013 contained a prescriptive set of largely English concepts, events and figures to study in chronological order through the Key Stages. A study by the Historical Association found that only 4% of respondents viewed the changes to be positive (Eales, 2013). Following public consultation and revision the strict content requirements and rigid chronological structure in the draft curriculum have been relaxed in the final curriculum to allow for some exploration of local history, wider themes and an element of comparative analysis between key figures from different historical periods (Evans, 2013; Mansell, 2013). According to Gove (TES, 2013) the final curriculum recognised the need to pay greater attention to 'world history', while also 'requiring all children to be taught the essential narrative of this country's past'.

### *Facts and skills*

Understanding the debates around the teaching of national narratives within history cannot happen independently of a clear framework for conceiving the relationship between historical facts and skills. Political debates about the relationship between historical knowledge and skills within the curriculum are not new within either Australia or England. It was the focus on skills, rather than on historical knowledge per se for example, that

underpinned the Schools Council History Project in England which aimed at ‘teaching children to use the tools, or skills, of the historian’ (Sheldon, 2012, p. 264). A similar skills-based approach characterised the integrated subjects such as Studies of Society and Environment taught within most Australian states and territories prior to the Australian Curriculum (Taylor, 2012). The emphasis placed by conservative politicians on the teaching of facts and national narrative can be seen, to a large extent, as a *reaction* to approaches which placed particular emphasis on skills. Given this context it is important that consideration is given to the relationship between fact and skills within history as a discipline and the relation of this to history education.

A vocal commentator concerning the relationship between facts and skills in history – and therefore history education – involved in the recent history wars has been Richard Evans, Regius Professor of History at Wolfson College, University of Cambridge. In defending the importance of historical skills as a necessary *conduit* to historical facts, Evans (BBC, 2013a) has suggested that ‘facts don’t have any meaning by themselves, they are always tied into interpretations and narratives’. This construction of the relationship between fact and interpretation is widely held within historical literature (for a different understanding of the nature of historical facts see Carr, 1967). In his influential account, Marwick explains that while historical facts exist, they do so on the basis of substantiating evidence. Historical facts may then be employed differently by historians, shaped by the ‘particular interpretation the historian is developing’ (1989: 196; see also Lorenz, 1994). As such, a focus on historical facts can be somewhat misguided in that it can obfuscate the extent to which particular interpretations are justified in relation to the available historical evidence. For Marwick (1989: 198; emphasis in the original) ‘the critical relationship which has to be studied... is not that between facts and interpretations but that between interpretation and *sources*’. This suggests that the study of history requires an understanding of the nature of historical facts and their use in given interpretations *as well as* the development of the analytical and evaluative skills required to examine and judge evidence.

On this reading the question as to whether historical facts or skills should take priority within the history curriculum is rendered a misnomer. The latter are needed – and indeed are a pre-requisite for – the former. Evidence indicates, however, that teachers of history engage students in interpretation in a number of different ways (Chapman, 2011). Drawing on a range of studies Barton and Levstik (2010: 36) argue that it is too simplistic to suggest that the best teachers of history ‘have a deep and accurate understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed, and how they represent that process to students’, particularly given

that a range of other factors – including behaviour management and the need to cover curriculum content – often impact on how teachers convey facts and interpretation. This raises certain tensions for history teachers in both Australia and England. There is not space or scope here to consider all of these, but two seem to be of particular significance given that they have been explicitly raised in the political and policy discourses that have shaped the history wars.

The first tension concerns historical interpretation and the extent to which students should be taught *historiography*. Over the last twenty years, historiography has typically been encountered explicitly within senior secondary curricular in Australia and within A-level specifications in England at the earliest. More recently, however, the need to develop a sense of historiography, albeit understood in general terms, has been included in the Australian Curriculum for history. Though the term historiography is not used *per se*, the curriculum requires that students are taught to understand contestability – that ‘particular interpretations about the past are open to debate, for example, as a result of a lack of evidence or different perspectives – and interpretation – including that ‘there may be more than one interpretation of the past because historians may have used different sources, asked different questions and held different points of view about the topic’ (ACARA, 2012). While in the primary years this focuses on the exploration and identification of different points of view, in years 9 and 10 the requirement progresses to identifying and analysing ‘different historical interpretations (including their own)’ (ACARA, 2012). Similar progression in understanding historical accounts is included within the history curriculum in England, in which at Key Stage 3, for example, the aim is for students to ‘understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed’ (DfE, 2013).

The history wars in Australia – and in particular the contestation over the “black- armband view of history” – demonstrate the difficulty of attaining common consensus over a singular interpretation of past events given that historical facts, and subsequent interpretations thereof, are always subject to perspectival understandings. A compelling illustration is provided by the highly contentious question of whether the landing of the First Fleet in Australia should be viewed as an “arrival” or an “illegal invasion”. This, again raises the question as to whether schools should teach a singular narrative or should engage students with a range of narratives.

In part examples such as interpretations of the First Fleet provide a basis for extolling the benefits of a critical, skills based approach to history education. That is, that given the

necessary contextual details and requisite skills, it is for students themselves to develop justified positions drawing on a critical appreciation of the interpretations available from the relevant evidence. To return to the English context, Richard Evans (2013) implicitly alludes to such an approach in relation to history's role in producing informed and critical citizens:

If we want young people to develop a sense of citizenship, they have to be able and willing to think for themselves. The study of history does this. It recognises that children are not empty vessels to be filled with patriotic myths. History isn't a myth-making discipline, it's a myth-busting discipline and it needs to be taught as such in our schools.

(Evans, 2013)

Yet the sort of critical, evidence-based, understanding that is required to be a 'myth-buster' or to reach independent and informed judgements about key historical questions is not easily educable, particularly in the curriculum context of limited time for discrete history lessons in both jurisdictions. The development of critical historians able to reach their own *informed* judgements requires, by definition, an understanding of the views held by leading historians on the period at hand – or as Schama (2013) has argued to appreciate the basis of historical narrative and counter-narrative – as well as what actually constitutes an historical interpretation (Chapman, 2011). Yet, the extent to which students should be taught an understanding of historiography remains contested. Drawing on research evidence from Project CHATA (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches) in England, Lee and Shemilt (2004) have demonstrated the need for students' understanding of historical accounts to be carefully thought through, particularly with regard to how such understanding progresses. In their analysis Lee and Shemilt (2004: 30) set out the following six stages of 'progression in ideas about historical accounts': (i) 'accounts are just [given] stories'; (ii) 'accounts fail to be copies of a past we cannot witness'; (iii) 'accounts are accurate copies of the past, except for mistakes or gaps'; (iv) 'accounts may be distorted for ulterior motives', (v) 'accounts organised from a personal viewpoints'; and (vi) 'accounts must answer questions and fit criteria'.

At the heart of this model of progression is the awareness that students encounter a range of accounts, including many from outside of the history classroom, including those conveyed in films and literary texts (Seixas and Peck, 2004). A key concern for history teachers, therefore, is not only to support students' engagement with *different* accounts of

historical events produced for *different* reasons, but also with the way in which differing accounts are produced by historians through sound (or otherwise) engagement with evidence. This requires an epistemological commitment, or for Levisohn (2010: 4) a ‘philosophy of history’, which understands historical knowledge as developed through a dialectical process of narrative and counter-narrative. On this basis the validity of interpretations are judged through the application of sound historical inquiry, including analysing claims in relation to the evidence (Wineburg, 1991; Carr, 1994; Levisohn, 2010). As Levisohn (2010: 17) argues ‘the answer to the question of what story we ought to tell resides in the successful negotiation among narratives’. A significant problem for both Australia and England is that neither curricular documents detail a specific epistemological foundation regarding the nature of history knowledge, leaving this question open for teachers to attend to or neglect – something which is particularly problematic in Australia given the lack of specialist history initial teacher education and professional development courses. Without a well-developed epistemological basis for understanding narratives – one that combines historical knowledge and skills – there is a potential that the unhelpful binary between a singular “true story” and relativism will surface and that students will fail to develop ‘serious epistemological insight’ (Klein, 2010: 615). The role and approach of the teacher in mediating student exposure to and engagement with narratives is crucial.

The second tension concerns enabling students to develop a sound and cohesive understanding of *chronology* and, as a central element of this understanding, appreciating the place of chronology within the wider historical thinking concept of “continuity and change”. The need for students to develop a sense of chronology has been a key feature of the history wars in both countries (this claim frequently sits alongside the claim that current teaching arrangements have been deficient in this regard). Writing in the English context Cannadine et al. (2011: 217), for example, explain that: ‘as the time allocated to the subject in secondary schools has been reduced, this has often resulted in an increasingly ‘episodic’ treatment of the subject, with teachers hopping rapidly from one topic to another, without providing chronological coverage and coherence’. According to Schama, the teaching of chronology is undermined by ‘not enough hours of teaching, not enough specialist history teachers, and... the unsatisfactory situation by which it is possible to finish an education of history at the age of fourteen’ (Schama, 2013).

The most recent policy response in both England and Australia has been to develop curricular that are predominantly chronologically based, particularly in the secondary school years. The Australian Curriculum, for example, adopts this sequential approach between



years 7 and 10. Students study the Ancient World (60,000 BCE-c.650 CE) in year 7, the Ancient to the Modern World (c.650 CE-1750) at year 8, the Making of the Modern World (1750-1918) at year 9, and the Modern World and Australia (1918-to present) in year 10. While the new Key Stage 3 programmes of study for history in England allow for some teaching out of sequential date order (a local history study and the selection of study that consolidates chronological study from before 1066 for example) the majority of the curricular content is chronological in its intention, though as the programmes of study are provided at the level of the Key Stage rather than by year groups the final decision regarding this lies with the school. The curriculum requires that students are taught Medieval Britain 1066-1509, the Church, state and society in Britain 1504-1745, ideas, political power, industry and Empire: Britain 1745-1901, and challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day.

Evidence suggests, however, that the belief that students will develop a sound understanding of chronology simply by studying topics in chronological order is mistaken (Dawson, 2004; Blow, Lee and Shemilt, 2012). Over the last decade the work of both Peter Seixas and Stéphane Lévesque on the nature of historical thinking has illustrated that grasping the sequencing of events over time provides a *basis* for interrogating the complexities of *historical continuity and change*, but that chronology is not an end in itself (Seixas, 2004; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas and Morton, 2013). As Marwick (1989: 235) reminds us, ‘a mere list of dates or events is chronicle, not history’. While ordering the curriculum in chronological sequence may be an important condition for such awareness it does not in and of itself constitute nor guarantee the sort of chronological understanding necessary for history, nor does it necessarily locate chronology within the wider historical thinking concept of continuity and change. To appreciate chronology beyond the basic understanding that different people lived at different times (the Romans lived before the Tudors for example) and that different events occurred before or after others (the Allied victory at El Alamein happened after their losses at Singapore, for example) needs an awareness of significance, cause and effect, and, crucially, continuity and change. In other words, while developing a sound understanding of chronology is important, the question remains as to what *ends* this chronological understanding connects to. Here the relationship between chronology and exploring continuity and change becomes paramount if students are to progress beyond the rote learning of sequential events in date order. Following Collingwood’s (1946: 215) conceptualisation of history as a ‘process of actions’, Lévesque (2008: 67) suggests that ‘in trying to understand or explain what happened and why, one has to look for the causes of the

change, as well as the consequences of the change for future actions and events'. In this way, chronology provides the *foundation* for developing historical understanding but is not the end in itself. With a meaningful understanding of chronology – again either within a given period or across periods – students are likely to be better placed to explore, interpret and evaluate the processes, causes and extent of change alongside conceptualisations of continuity (Seixas, 1996; Barton, 2001; Seixas and Peck, 2004).

However, the importance of locating chronological thinking within continuity and change, and thereby progressing from the simple sequencing of events, has been more clearly expressed in curricular arrangements in England than Australia, where there has been limited explicit recognition that chronology is a fundamental component of, and a prerequisite for understanding, continuity and change. The definition of chronology offered in the Australian Curriculum suggests that 'chronology is the study of time. In history, chronology involves the arrangement of events in order, as in a timeline'. The scope and sequence (ACARA, 2012) document that supports the curriculum evidences the progression in chronological skill that is desired across year groups. At Foundation to year 2 students are required to 'sequence familiar objects and events', while at years 3 to 6 this progresses to 'sequence historical people and events'. For years 7 to 8 the requirement is for students to 'sequence historical events, developments and periods', while at years 9 and 10 students need to 'use chronological sequencing to demonstrate the relationship between events and developments in different periods and places'. It is only in the year 8 descriptor for chronology that continuity and change are explicitly referenced, while in the other years chronology is predominantly restricted to the sequencing of events within a given period with some requirement of causal understanding (for example, the causes of migration over a given period of time).

In contrast, the curriculum in England places greater emphasis on the relationship between chronology and other historical concepts in the progression of chronological understanding. At Key Stage 1 the aim for students to 'know where the people and events they study fit within a chronological framework and identify similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods', while at Key Stage 2 students are expected to 'develop a chronologically secure knowledge and understanding' of the areas studied while 'establishing clear narratives within and across the periods they study'. This includes noting 'connections, contrasts and trends over time'. In this latter requirement the engagement with wider historical thinking concepts related to chronology are implicit, including cause and effect, significance and – crucially – continuity and change. These relationships are

strengthened further at Key Stage 3 where students are required to ‘identify significant events, make connections, draw contrasts and analyse trends within periods and over long periods of time’ (DfE, 2013). As Blow et al. (2012: 26; emphasis in original) suggest, working with chronology involves wider and more general understanding of ‘*chronological conventions* of clock and calendar’ as well history-specific understanding of a ‘*temporal concepts*’, such as period which involve interrogating evidence and interpretation. Evidence indicates both that an understanding of both chronological conventions and temporal concepts is necessary to developing effective narrative formation (including narrative about continuity and change), and also that ‘students who have mastered elementary chronological conventions and everyday temporal concepts do not always use them to select and order historical materials’ without an accompanying awareness of history-specific concepts (Blow et al. 2012: 29). In their present forms the curriculum in England attends to this recognition with greater clarity than its Australian counterpart. That this is so is not insignificant for the teaching of history in Australia, given that comparative research evidence suggests that while ‘young children know that life was different in the past than it is now... when asked why it has changed they often struggled for an explanation’ (Barton, 2001: 887). As such, given the disjuncture between chronology and continuity and change, questions remain regarding the extent the curriculum actually supports students in developing meaningful accounts of historical continuity and change.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis here has argued that a central element of the history wars in both Australia and England has been the view that history teaching is in danger and/or in crisis. A key component of this view – in its formulation, expression and implication on the respective history curricular – has been the notion that the teaching of national narratives must be strengthened through a greater focus on the teaching of facts and chronology. It has been suggested that by focusing on the latter, at times using unhelpful binaries, history curricular in both nations largely obfuscates essential tensions central to both history and history education, namely how the teaching of historiography and chronology are constructed. This condition leaves a good deal of interpretation to individual teachers of history, something which is particularly problematic in Australia given the lack of a developed and widespread tradition of history teacher education.

Reflecting on the highly contested debates over the content of the history curriculum in England, Richard Evans (2013) has suggested that:

What is striking about the history wars of recent months, however, is that the jingoists have not in the end managed to impose their views on the coalition government. The new national history curriculum is a world away from Gove's original list of patriotic stocking-fillers. The government is remaining neutral on the questions of how to commemorate Waterloo and how to mark the centenary of the first world war. That, in the end, is how it should be: its role is surely to allow British people to think about these issues for themselves, not to impose on them a particular reading of events.

In part, Evan's reflection is surely correct. It is difficult to justify the imposition of a singular interpretation of historical events on school children in a contemporary representative democracy. What remains less clear, however, is what it means to allow 'people to think about these issues for themselves', particularly in terms of history education. The response of recent reforms to history curricular appears to have been to answer this by determining that history education involves *both* facts and skills, that developing a sense of chronology is crucial, and that students should come to critically appreciate a range of often competing narratives. Such statements are at the same time essential yet superficial. While these may well be necessary components of historical understanding and inquiry is not clear that they will be sufficient if they are not accompanied by a well-developed and justified epistemology of historical knowledge. Such an epistemological basis is crucial if history educators and students are to make sense of what it means to say that there are such things as historical facts, that facts are intimately related to evidence and interpretation, and that to judge competing narratives requires an understanding of history and the possession of certain skills. At present, the curricular in Australia and England leave the epistemological basis of historical knowledge to chance, dependent as it is on the understandings of individual teachers. If we are to understand history, history education, and indeed the history wars themselves, working toward a shared understanding the epistemological basis of the subject may have some merit.

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