

What do history students learn about people and the experience of living?

I used to make a bad joke about the difference between History teachers and English teachers – that in history we teach about real people but English teachers have to make do with second best - fictional people. Looking back, this wasn't only unfair to English teachers but greatly exaggerated how successful I'd been in teaching anything really worthwhile about people.

My students of all ages certainly did hear about a lot of people but most of the time their experience must have felt like sitting in a car travelling along a busy high street, catching sight of people on the pavements. There's Edward the Confessor ... and Harold ... and Duke William ... and ... and ... but does the car stop long enough for students to get out and get to know any of these people well? Individual people can feel like the supporting acts of the curriculum – the stars are the events. I now wish I'd occasionally given students time to focus on an individual and what I'll call the trajectories of their whole lives (not just the part when they're freeze-framed in relation to an event), with the aim of not only learning about that person and the period he/she lived in but also about human nature, how a life might feel from the inside and offering students the chance to reflect on their own experience of living.

The trajectory of a life

Let me tell you the story of one life, that of my grandfather, George Dawson, in order to illustrate this issue. Until recently I knew little about George as my Dad didn't talk about his family. What little I knew implied there'd been problems but I couldn't answer the questions that felt most important – how might my grandfather have looked back on his life – with regret, satisfaction, sadness? What were the major influences on his life? Having done some research, I hope I understand a little more.

George was born in Liverpool in 1876. His family was probably quite well off as his father was a master mariner but George's life changed dramatically at the age of 12 when his mother died. Over the next few years his father gave up the sea, George and his elder brother left school (George aged 13 to work as a servant), then his brother died and his father remarried and moved to Glasgow, taking George's younger brother with him. Then came happiness. In 1900, George was working as a clerk (had he been to evening classes to 'improve' himself?) and married Charlotte. By 1914 they had three sons, the youngest my Dad. Except that it wasn't unalloyed happiness as they'd lost two

other children who died before their first birthdays. Then came war. George was already in the King's Liverpool Volunteer Regiment so went straight into uniform and fought in 1915 at Ypres, staying with his battalion throughout the war though from 1916 away from the front line. I do wonder how Charlotte fared, bringing up their boys including another son born in 1917 – George, as a pre-war Volunteer, had the chance to come home in 1916 but chose to stay. Demobilisation was followed by the birth of their daughter, named, as was my Dad, after one of the infants who'd died young.

George was 45 in 1921. If I drew a graph of his life, of good times-bad-times or happiness-sadness or feeling settled-disrupted then the graph would ricochet up and down. And there was more 'down' to come including money troubles although work as a clerk was respected, white-collar work. His eldest son emigrated very young, perhaps linked to George's return after being away so long during the war, Charlotte died suddenly aged 57 in 1935 and two years later his second son committed suicide. The Second World War saw his remaining two sons abroad so in his late 60s George had 'just' his daughter on hand for company. Happily he lived long enough to play with his first grandchild before he died in 1950.

How might George have looked back on his life – with regret and sadness? It's easy to think so – tragedies leave a mark in the evidence while moments of happiness are lost – but I hope there was satisfaction in 35 years of marriage, bringing up his family to be good people, a sense of adventure (though more than he'd bargained for at Ypres). Did he have ambitions, dreams and were they realised? What did he see as the key moments in his life? What couldn't he have imagined as a boy? His life was greatly affected by events far away and decisions by people he never knew and he had no control over the fates of his family, vulnerable as we all are to ill-health and emotions.

Questions about lives in the round

If I'd used a life such as George's in the classroom I would have been used him to explore the period when he lived, the individual as a hook not the major focus, using questions such as:

How typical was X's life of the period when X lived? What were the similarities to and differences from the context of life today?

If I focussed on someone more famous I'd have asked something like 'What was X's role in event Z and was X's role important?'

That approach is important but I'm now thinking of additional questions which might have helped students think about human nature, the experience of living and how they might see their own lives. Here are some possible questions (in no particular order):

- What was the pattern of X's life? Was X consistent or inconsistent in what he/she wanted to do/was trying to achieve?
- What decisions did X take? Were they difficult and could X have known what the outcomes would be?
- What were the major influences on X's life and could X control them? Were there major turning points which changed X's life for better or worse?
- What mattered to X? what motivated X? Did he/she seem to care about doing good/morality?
- Was X ever uncertain and confused, torn between competing loyalties and pressures - and why?
- How might X have looked back on his/her life? Would X have been proud of his/her life?

Why spend time on such questions? I've always believed that history is essentially the study of people but I don't think I ever enabled students to study individual people in sufficient depth to prepare them for understanding their own and other people's lives – the unpredictability, the ups and downs, the confusions and uncertainties, the inability to do what you most want to do, the thoughts about what counts as success and as a good life. Looking back, it seems a waste that I didn't help students relate what they had learned to their own lives, to be better prepared for understanding themselves and understanding others.

Into the classroom

The questions outlined above can clearly be applied to all kinds and ranks of people but whoever you choose to focus on it seems important to select someone whose life saw swings of fortune, varied influences, moments of difficulty or helplessness, struggles and doubts.

What sequence of activities might you create for students?

- Introduce X with a little information, a picture – how would you describe him/her, do you think you'd like X and why?
- Set up the big question 'How might X have looked back on his/her life? Would X have been proud of his/her life?' – ask students for initial ideas about the answer.
- Ask students what smaller questions they want to ask in order to answer the big question and what kinds of sources might provide the answers. It's always good to have practice in asking questions.
- explore X's life in more detail, perhaps by telling students his or her story in stages or giving them source material to work on or a mix of the two
- the pure history questions – what have you learned about the period, the nature of the evidence, the typicality of this life for the period?
- Reflection - revisiting that big question – what might be the answers? – introduce more of the questions about how X experienced his or her life – maybe link to your life or those of students in whatever ways feel comfortable.

It will, of course, be difficult to be certain about the answers to many of the questions above but:

1. that's history – we're constantly trying to help students become comfortable with uncertainty
2. we are often too definite in our ideas and conclusions about other people today, believing we know what they're like as individuals – beliefs that are often proved wrong. This seems an important thing to learn and maybe tone down our own judgements about other people.
3. Many/most of us are unclear about ourselves, the patterns of our own lives etc but reflection helps and maybe students can begin to reflect more clearly and realistically about their own lives if they've practiced on the lives of others?

Conclusions

History is uniquely placed to help students learn about people as human beings and then help them reflect on their own feelings, ambitions, expectations, emotions and maybe come to understand those around them a little better. When SHP was set up in 1972, it expressed one group of its aims in terms of what were called ‘adolescent needs’. One of those needs was:

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

Looking back, I don’t think the way I tried to do this was explicit enough. We usually studied people in the context of a single event in their lives – zoomed in on them aged 24 or 47 or 65 in the context of that single event and then waved them good-bye. I didn’t explore their lives as a whole, the trajectories of their lives, their inconsistencies, their uncertainties, the variety of their actions for good and ill, the way they changed across the decades, their essential humanity.

And I didn’t then explicitly relate those discoveries and thoughts to the lives of students and how they felt about their lives. And without that kind of explicit link could they really get closer to finding their ‘personal identity’? It’s a risky and difficult thing to do but I wish I’d tried.