

Teaching Portfolio Extract

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Learning Outcomes and Historical Understanding

Introduction

Rewriting existing course objectives in terms of 'Learning Outcomes' poses particular challenges for the humanities who take a more holistic approach to learning. Humanities subjects are generally idiographic, recognising the uniqueness of the individual, both as subject and object of inquiry, a view which fits well with Gardnerian Multiple Intelligence theory and the related 'Teaching for Understanding' framework. 'Understanding', however, is something of a *bete noir* to advocates of Learning Outcomes, who see it as a sloppy shorthand which covers a multitude of sins of imprecision in framing good Learning Outcomes. In this paper I will explore the apparent incompatibility between these points of view, with a view to reconciling them, showing that there is a great deal in common between 'Understanding Goals' and 'Learning Outcomes' and that 'Historical Understanding', far from being a loose generalisation, is historian's swiss army knife, with a variety of tools for every level of the Bloom Taxonomy of Learning.

The practical ground for this reflection is a third year History Option, HI3003, Political Decision-Making and Public Policy in Britain since 1945. Throughout its development, the course has focused on 'high politics', looking at the choices made by political actors at the heart of government. In 1999 this was recognised by changing the course title and objective the explicitly refer to political decisionmaking. How and why historical actors make certain choices over others, based on the information which they had at the time, has always been a central interest of mine. In fact, I would suggest that most of the interesting parts of history arise because people make wrong choices which turn out badly – very few people care much about Henry VII, or Louis XV, or George II.

Historical Understanding – Disciplinary Framework

It is impossible to discuss the learning outcomes or understanding goals of an individual module without having some disciplinary framework. Classic reasons for the existence of history as an academic discipline in focus around avoiding repetition of mistakes in the past, or the argument that you cannot understand the present without knowing its past roots.

It seems commonsense that the historian proceeds by gathering evidence about the past, and finding patterns of continuity and change – historical understanding would thus be the set of skills involved in conducting this process of research. However, there is a fundamental debate amongst historians and philosophers of history as to whether 'history' has an existence independent of the historian, or whether it is merely a construct based on a set of literary norms. E.H. Carr, in *What is History* has memorably argued that history is a 'hard-core of interpretation surrounded by a soft pulp of facts'. In Carr's view, the mere facts about the past only become 'historical facts' when the historian uses them to support an interpretation of the past, interpretations which owe as much, if not more, to the

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historians choice of questions to ask about the past than to the past itself. That choice of research questions comes principally from the present-day concerns of the historian.

It is true to say that no historian takes up a particular research question unless they have some interest in the issue at hand – whether is it a particular problem or period (and it must be owed that there are a great many misplaced medieval monks or swashbuckling musketeers *manque* among the ranks of the discipline.). However, the argument advanced by Carr leads all too easily to the idea that the 'historian' can find evidence in the past to support any interpretation, and to the post-modernist ideas of Richard Rorty and Hayden White who suggest that history is no more than another form of literature with certain conventions of its own. The weaknesses of that argument are quickly exposed when the post-modernists are confronted with the harsh reality of the pseudo-historical writings of the Holocaust deniers, as was most recently done by Richard Evens in the Irving libel case and his subsequent book, *Telling Lies About Hitler*² which is a powerful restatement of 'old-fashioned' professional history.

It is clear that the patterns of continuity and change, the interpretations offered by the historian, are based on facts about the past which do have an independent existence, and that the arguments of the historian must be built on a 'hard core' of facts. That the facts of history will never be verifiable by experimentation in the same manner as scientific facts is accepted, but within that limitation, history aspires to be an objective discipline.

However, the protracted debate about the nature of history has led to reflection about the manner in which the historian constructs and presents interpretations. There is a consensus that history is fundamentally a narrative discipline, that indeed it must be a narrative discipline because man is a story-teller – we make sense of the world around us as a story or stories linked together in comprehensible patterns of causation. If you ask someone how they came to be in a particular place or why they did a particular thing, they will tell you a story. The story may often be a complex web of events rather than a simple linear A then B then C but it is a story. In Roberts words:

“The story will not just describe what happened but in the course of the narrative provide an explanation of the how and why of past events. Further, that explanatory content is not readily detachable from the narrative. The story is the explanation and the validation of the explanation is embedded in the very structure of the narrative.”³

Essay as a Performance of Understanding

In many respects therefore the history essay is a classic performance of understanding in history. The historian researches primary sources, collects facts, discovers the causal relations between them and presents the results in a comprehensible narrative. This history student does not enjoy the same direct access to primary research materials, but they do 'mine' their data from the contending interpretations offered by other historians, reconciling conflicting interpretations judging how well the different interpretations fit the facts and seeking to discover and present a balanced narrative. As

2 Evans, Richard *Telling Lies about Hitler*, (London, Verso, 2002)

3 Roberts Geoffery(ed) *History and Narrative Reader* (London, Routledge, 2001), p. 3

the student progresses, the extent of the performance of understanding increases from short essay to final degree dissertation to minor thesis, doctoral thesis and monograph.

These activities can readily be classified as a taxonomy which I called the RAW process – Reading/Research, Analysis and Writing. It matches in some respects to the Bloom Taxonomy, although the activities which the historian performs are not easily boxed in to discrete levels of that taxonomy – notwithstanding classic injunctions to gather all your facts before drawing premature conclusions, the reality is that the historian begins to evaluate the importance of bits of data and seek patterns in the facts almost from the start of the research process.

The key problem for history in the university is that this has always been viewed as a holistic performance of understanding, in which the student performs research, analysis and writing as intertwined strands of the same assessment. The Learning Outcomes approach requires disaggregating this performance into its component parts, and devising a range of assessments and assessment rubrics which will build towards the undergraduate history essay.

A common objection to the Learning Outcomes approach is that students may check off all the boxes enough of the individual learning outcomes to pass without being able to integrate the skills into a performance of understanding. This is a fair objection – For many people, breaking an complex intellectual task into learning outcomes sets off fears that when you put the motorcycle back together, it may not run very well.⁴

But in spite of that, it seems to me that the 'learning outcomes' approach is an essential part of the process – if we are to 'build the nations intellectual infrastructure'⁵ we must start with foundations and build the walls before adding the roof. Outstanding students have no problem grasping a discipline in a holistic way, but the vast majority of students proceed to a good final result in slow steps over time. In many respects, the sort of feedback we give students on written work in history addresses the different learning outcomes.

When I first had to grade essays as a tutor, the guidance I received from the course lecturer was very simple, and took less than 2 minutes to impart, and in my memory boils down to this: an essay that was purely a collection of facts could pass, and if it was very well written might get to the 2.2 bracket, but never higher without an argument. Some attempt to construct an argument would get between a 3h and a 2.1. depending on how well it was done. A first was, I was told, supposed to be publishable. Much and all as I was surprised at the brevity of this induction into the mysteries of grading, I must say that it does bear a strong similarity to the recently issued grade descriptors proposed by the NUI Senate.

It may very well be that while the advocates of learning outcomes seek to exclude the word 'understand' from the phrasing of any LO, understanding is an overarching goal within which the LO are contained; a goal which cannot be achieved unless the LO are achieved. For the outstanding student, the whole package may come as one, for weaker students it must be built up to, and in some cases a student who masters all the levels of LO may still not be able to 'get it together' to meet the requirements for mastery in the discipline. In history, historical understanding is what

4 Pirsig, Robert *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, (New York, Morrow, 1974) is the classic discussion of this view of quality.

5 The phrase is memorable but alas not mine – I heard it from Prof. J.J. Lee.

happens when the student can successfully satisfy the learning outcomes and demonstrating historical understanding by integrating those skills in a holistic way, reflective of the human diversity of the discipline.

Application: HI3003

Applying these theoretical reflections to the reality of teaching a particular course not always easy. The Course Objective for Hi3003 in the Book of Modules is given as 'To develop an understanding of how recent history interacts with political decision-making in contemporary Britain.' While the norm for History in the Book of Modules is for a one-sentence course objective, I felt it was useful to set out a more detailed breakdown in the initial course handout. I had a clear idea of what I expected students to do during the course. Telling the students what I expected from them, what they had to do to get good grades at the end of the course is a part of every first lecture, so writing it out as a set of objectives on the initial handout is a very logical step. Initially, the broad course objective was broken out into three aims:

- Survey the narrative of this period of influential period of history
- Study critical turning points in British politics since 1945
- Understand how the political process has changed since 1945

Around 2000 another was added:

- Enhance your understanding of how political decisions are made in a liberal parliamentary democracy

and in 2003 a fifth objective:

- Explore how the historian works towards professional, objective judgments about contemporary historical issues

The original trio are so basic to any history course as to almost go without saying. The first, at its most basic level is 'know the dates', and it can be read as such. In that respect, it fits well with the lowest level of Blooms Taxonomy – Knowledge. It represents the reality that the historian cannot make a house without bricks, and the bricks are the old catalogue of 'battles and dates'. There are two words in it with carry extra weight – 'influential' quite rightly draws attention to the importance of political developments in the period of the postwar consensus and the Thatcher years as models which were exported around the world. The term 'narrative' carries particular weight in history, for a historical narrative is more than just a mindless collection of 'battles and dates' but a story, a complex web of events and causation moving forward in time and propelled by human action, by human choices. There is a long and often bitter debate in history about the difference between a 'fact about the past' and a 'historical fact'. At even the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy, the knowledge that students need to know is filtered through a disciplinary lens of what is a 'historical fact' that is useful evidence about the past, and what is a 'mere' fact about the past that has no great significance.

The second and third are more straightforward issues of continuity and change. Continuity and change are central concepts in history – what stayed the same, what changed, when did it change and why did it change? If you peg out 1945 at one end of the course and 2005 at the other, what has changed between these two dates? These two objectives delimit the problem by limiting the critical

turning points, the moments of change, to the area of politics, rather than say society, or culture, and to the political process. This limitation was necessary to maintain some degree of coherence within the scope of the course – the aim was to develop understanding of political history rather than just provide a loose rag-bag of everything in Britain since 1945.

These objectives relate to higher levels of Blooms Taxonomy inasmuch as they involve evaluation, selection and organisation or synthesis of facts into a structure – a historical narrative – although for the historian those particular terms are not always used in the same manner as Bloom used them.

While the first three are easily assessed through the medium of an essay as a performance of understanding, the most recently added objectives are more demanding. The 4th, requiring some understanding of the general principles on which political decisions are made in a modern liberal democracy, involves analysis and synthesis from a range of particular decisions to develop a general model of the system. As such, these correspond to the 'Analysis' and 'Synthesis' levels in the Bloom taxonomy. It is not really possible to adequately address this outcome with an essay unless it deals with a range of decisions, rather than a dealing with a single decision in detail.

The last objective is particularly challenging and important – everyone has some opinion about how politics should operate in a liberal democracy, and what it should try to achieve. Many people have strong points of view about recent British political history – although for Irish students the subject matter is at a slight remove.

While the course has always referred to models of decisionmaking in politics, making use of classic works like Irving Janis' on 'Group Think' or Allison's *Essence of Decision*⁶, and some students have been successful in applying those general models to particular cases in the course, many have not really demonstrated a grasp of the complex interactions in the process.

Reflecting on this and on Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory, it seems to me that the historical actors who do best in collective decisionmaking – who 'wins' most often – are those with the best interpersonal intelligence. It also seems clear that there is a relationship between interpersonal intelligence and intra-personal intelligence, or one's sense of self in the world. The politicians who do best appear to be those who are good with people and have some clarity of purpose – 'the vision thing' as it is referred to in writing on leadership, and not necessarily those with the most complete grasp of detail. Extended periods in office do seem to lead to a shift away from interpersonal skill to intra-personal mission which leads to a Prime Minister who has lost touch with reality and had many key allies resign. In fact, many of the essays for the course in previous years had come to fall into the 'The Prime Minister is mad' category. It seemed clear to me that group dynamics are an important part of the political decisionmaking process, but that in history, which has no tradition of group work, students tend to view these in an abstracted way without any real experience of dealing with complex intellectual problems in an interpersonal context.

New Assessments

In 2005, in order to more effectively address these issues, I made a number of changes to the assessment in the course.

The old 1,500 word mid-term essay was replaced by a group essay, done in groups of 4 of about 6,000 words. The final 4,000 word essay was replaced by a 1,500 word policy paper and a 2,500

⁶ Janis, Irving. *Groupthink* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1982), Allison, Graham. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2nd Ed) (London, Longman, 1999)

framing essay which was to explain the thinking behind the policy paper. In an additional twist, the 1,500 policy paper was to be presented to the class in a policy formulation simulation and be the basis for negotiation on a composite policy platform. While the Simulation was not in itself graded, it was an opportunity to 'debug' the policy papers, and the students were told that good performances in the simulation would have a positive impact on marks (but poor performance would not be used to mark down the paper)

The mid-term group essay differed from the norm in that the students were given a broad area of government policy and told to write a narrative account of developments in that area since 1945, but they were explicitly not required to assess the success or failure of the various policies, nor were they expected to comment on how the decisions were made – in other words, the bar in terms of content was lowered. On the other hand, the students were told that this was done to allow them to focus more on the process of working as a group, both in terms of dividing research and writing, and in order to allow time for group editing of the final paper. Students were told that a paper which looked and read as a single integrated piece of writing, in a neutral voice, was the desired outcome and would receive high marks. On the other hand, a paper that was clearly 4 separate sections pasted together would not do well.

In some respects this was an effort to make the students look at the issue of objectivity, and to write a very neutral, non-analytic, account of a policy area. What the students were also being asked to do was to critique each others writing in a 'safe' environment; one in which the students were not criticising each others judgments or arguments about historical events. Of course, this was also an effort to make the students work on the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy, where they had to make evaluations about what was good and bad about a piece of work, and how it might be improved.

Students worked on different policy areas for the simulation. The mid-term papers were copied and circulated to the students working on those policy areas for the final and the simulation, in order to 'jump-start' their research. In other words, the 4 students who wrote a mid-term on the National Health Service were assigned to other topics for the final paper and simulation, and 4 students who had written their mid-terms on other area were assigned to the NHS policy area. (This plan was flagged right from the start of the course, and students were asked to state their preferences for topics for both the mid-term and the final, preferences which were, insofar as possible, accommodated.)

There were two reasons for this. One was to ensure that students did not work on one and only one area of government policy throughout the whole course. The other was to make the simulation more effective by ensuring that in the discussion for each policy area, there would not be a monopoly of knowledge in one corner of the room – the four people presenting policy papers on the NHS knew that there were four people in the group who had some 'experience' on the topic.

When the mid-terms were handed in and the groups shuffled, students were given a 4 page handout explaining what was required for the final and the simulation, and 2 sample Cabinet papers – A Central Policy Review Staff survey of policy from 1971 and a 1972 cabinet paper on prescription charges – as models for the policy paper. The simulation was to use two 2 hour classes, a week apart. The intention was that the students would present their initial policy paper in the first week, and lay out their initial positions with some discussion, they might revise their policy paper after the first session if they felt it was necessary, and in the second session the main focus would be on negotiating a common platform. Each student not only worked on an area, but was also required to argue from a particular party position

The 2,500 word essay which each student was to submit with their policy paper (a week after the second simulation session) was to :

“Explaining the rationale behind your choice of policy options, and your reasoning for 'costing' them as you do; in other words, demonstrating that your policy options reflect an understanding of the historical and political limits on what is possible

Reflecting on the reaction to your initial policy paper

Explicating the reasoning for changes between the initial and final versions of the policy paper

Reflecting on the process of the simulation and on how it has contributed to your understanding of the process of political decisionmaking.”⁷

For the final reflection, the second session of the simulation was stopped with a half-hour left in class time for a discussion on how the process of the simulation had gone, and what the students had learned from it. While the students had been introduced to the classic works on decisionmaking previously, it was only at this point that they were asked to relate that to their own personal experience of the simulation exercise. During this discussion, we reflected as a group on issues like the role of personalities in the policy formation process, and the difficulty of conducting complex policy discussions within a 'real world' framework of having limited time for discussion and debate and the problem of separating one's own views about what politicians should be doing from an objective analysis of what they actually did.

In retrospect, the new assessments did on their first outing, were successful in addressing the 5 explicit learning outcomes and the implicit question of the role of interpersonal intelligence in political decisionmaking. The mid-term group essay was better than expected, helped in part by careful monitoring of the groups during the process but also by the presence of a high proportion of visiting students with experience of group work. The essays were exactly what was required, and only one looked like 4 separate essays pasted together. In feedback, the most common issue the students has was that they felt that had not been able to devote as much time as they would have liked to collaborative editing of the essays.

The policy papers produced for the simulation were generally good – some were outstanding but a few completely failed to write in the desired neutral 'civil service' style and some produced policy options where reflected what they thought should be done in a policy area rather than the policy perspective of the party they were supposed to represent. Within policy areas, there was a high degree of consensus on what the major policy issues were across party positions, reproducing in the simulation the reality that what is possible in politics is often limited by the current political consensus.

Simulation exercises are never as successful as one hopes, but there was good student discussion, most students contributed to the discussion, there was a degree of engaged debate about policy options and in the end, the 'Prime Minister' was 'elected' by the group on the basis of his performance in the simulation, rather than his policy positions – and drew some support from students representing policy positions quite different to his own.

Initially I was disappointed with the final essays . Some students explained how their policy papers meshed with the position they were supposed to represent, but very few referred back to the background provided by the mid-term essays in order to locate their positions in historical context. Of course, on reflection, I realise that that failure is a reflection of the reality of political history – every generation of politicians do forget what was done previously and repeat the mistakes of the past. Somehow, I am sure I can turn that into a new learning objective for future years.

7 Cosgrave, M, *Simulation Preparation Handout* Hi3003, November 2005.