



## What Should School History Be? Reflections on the aims of school history and *Manifesto per la Didattica della Storia*

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### **Abstract**

This paper begins by elaborating arguments about the aims that history education should serve and by discussing practical arrangements necessary to support those aims. A case is made for history education informed by strong epistemic and disciplinary understandings and by developed understandings of historical narrative and the uses of the past. This optic is then applied to the evaluation of Centro Internazionale di Didattica della Storia e del Patrimonio (DiPaSt)'s *Manifesto per la Didattica della Storia*.

Keywords: History Education; Historical Epistemology; Historical narratives; Uses of past

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## INTRODUCTION

I have worked in history education for twenty-seven years now and have had, as a result, to think about the aims and purposes of history education on many occasions and in many different contexts during that time, for example:

- As a history teacher and head of a history department designing courses and explaining them to students (Chapman and Facey 2004);
- As a university lecturer work with trainee history teachers, helping them reflect on the purposes of the career that they are about to embark on (Chapman, Burn, and Kitson 2018);
- As a contributor to discussions about curriculum revision and pedagogic provision in school and higher education in a number of contexts, including national provision for higher achieving history students (Chapman 2006b), school curriculum reform in England, Kazakhstan, Armenia and a number of other contexts and as a contributor to discussion of the history curriculum for bachelors' degrees (Quality Assurance Agency 2019).

It was very interesting, indeed - and a great honour - to be asked to reflect on these issues again by engaging with Centro Internazionale di Didattica della Storia e del Patrimonio (DiPaSt)'s *Manifesto per la Didattica della Storia* (DiPaSt 2019a) as a virtual participant in the conference *Orizzonti della Didattica della Storia* in November 2019 (Chapman 2019). I approached the task, first, by reflecting on some of my own previous attempts to identify the aims of history education and the means necessary to achieve them (Chapman 2006a and 2009) and, second, by using these ideas to reflect on the DiPaST's approach. This paper develops that line of thinking, with reference to a revised version of DiPaST's manifesto (DiPaSt 2019b) in the context of our unfolding and deeply worrying present (Davis 2010 & 2020).

I will try and address two questions together. The first is a normative question - 'What should school history aim to achieve?' and, the second, a practical question, 'What does it need to consist of if it is to realise those aims?'

## WHAT SHOULD SCHOOL HISTORY AIM TO ACHIEVE?

### *Orientation in Time*

History is a discipline that attempts to understand human beings, the civilisations, cultures, nations and communities that they make and that make

them. History is about time because everything human has its time and time runs out: it is about change, development, coming into being and passing away and about understanding people in different times whose worlds are no longer and are no longer our own.

(Chapman 2006a)

We are often presented with polarities - between history 'for its own sake' and history for some wider social purpose (for example, to support citizenship education). This opposition does hold good to the extent that there can be a conflict between these aims, as Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt have pointed out (Lee and Shemilt 2007): one might, for example, wish to 'change the history' if it conflicts with the values that you wish to cultivate in future citizens, and our politicians, of course, frequently wish to do precisely this (e.g. Straw 2007). Nevertheless, too strong a stress on the academic integrity of history - to strong and insistence, for example, that it should ignore calls for 'relevance' or 'use' - can tend to distract us from history's core function of enabling orientation in time (Rüsen 2005). As I have argued elsewhere:

[A]s individuals and as members of interpersonal groups and collectives we are bound up in time and we cannot make sense of our present experience or act mindfully to shape the future without understanding something about our personal and collective itineraries in time.

(Chapman 2009:1)

History, then, has an inherent practical function and history education that fails to provide the intellectual tools to enable orientation in time across past/present/future fails in a foundational and fundamental sense.

As current events have very tragically served to remind us, making sense in time is also making sense in space - since the processes that shape our contexts for action and that condition the nature of our presents and futures are spatial as well as temporal. Although this has thankfully begun to change in recent years (Christian 2003, 2008, 2018; Harari 2014, 2017, 2018; MacGregor 2010), history has tended, since its origins as a school and university subject in the nineteenth century, to be bound closely to the restricted and temporally provincial structuring framework provided by the nation state (Berger 2017). In order to successfully serve its function of orientation in time, History needs to orient in both global time and space. It is urgent, for example, that we enable pupils to appreciate that the history of humanity since the dawn of farming in

the Neolithic was tied to the climate parameters of the Holocene (Christian 2003) and that we are now moving into a new era (the Anthropocene) that puts those parameters and our cultures, economies and civilizations in danger (Davis 2010). It is vital, also, to enable pupils to understand that the processes shaping our geo-political and civilizational life-worlds and our environmental presents and futures are global more than they are national (McNeill and McNeill 2003).

### *Understanding How Histories are Made*

Learning how to think historically means learning how to think in a disciplined way - learning how to ask questions about the past, how to think evidentially and contextually about the record of the past...

(Chapman 2009:1)

History is not merely *res gestae* - knowledge of events, persons and processes in the past - it is warranted knowledge of these events. One does not know history unless and until one understands how it is made, since without that knowledge one cannot understand the status of the claims that make up our knowledge of the past. Understanding how histories are made means understanding a number of things (Lee 2005). On the one hand there is an epistemic dimension - related to building warranted claims about what happened in the past: understanding how individual factual propositions about the past are arrived at and sustained means developing a concept of historical evidence (Ashby 2011). School history education must, therefore, include a focus on developing children's understandings of what historical evidence is and of how it is used to arrive at claims about the past. Students should have opportunities to work with historical source material to generate and test claims about the past and also opportunity to explore how historians, archaeologists and others have used evidence to develop accounts of past people, culture, events and developments.

Evidential understanding is not enough, however. Historical accounts and narratives do not simply consist of individual factual claims about the past. They are made up of narratives linking claims together in chronological sequence and arguments about causation, and about why things happened as they did, that link propositions together into larger patterns of determination and inter-relationship. Histories consist, also, of narratives and arguments about changes of various kinds - about beginnings and endings, about growth and decline, about rapid revolutionary rupture, and so on. Not only that, histories also aim to establish significance, making claims about which stories are the most important ones to tell, about which events, developments and

actors in those stories are the most notable and important to understand, and so on. Learning to think historically, then, entails developing a wide range of conceptual understandings that will allow one to understand what historical texts do and how they work and that will enable one to construct historical texts for oneself (Seixas and Morton 2013).

In addition, understanding how history works involves developing and understanding of historical enquiry - the logic of question and answer through which historical knowledge and understanding is developed (Collingwood 1939, 1994). Histories are always answers to questions and are shaped by those questions, which affect the archives that are examined, the themes that are explored and so on. To learn history, then, is to learn how to enquire into the past, to study examples of historical enquiry that historians have undertaken, to understand the ways in which enquiries have changed over time, and thus why the claims that historians make have shifted, and so on.

### *Understanding Historical Interpretations*

History is also about the stories that human beings tell themselves about time - about who they think they are, where they think they came from, where they think their past is leading them, and so on. It is also about the ways in which these stories themselves change with time and with the purposes of their tellers.

(Chapman 2006a)

Knowledge of *res gestae* and of historical epistemology is not enough for another reason, of course: to know history is also to understand *historia rerum gestarum* - the telling out of narratives linking past/present/future. Knowing history - an essential requirement for orientation in time - requires that we know a great deal about what has happened in the past, and that we understand how events and developments unfold in networks linking human life-worlds with the environmental contexts in which they sit. It also involves an understanding of history as narrative.

Narrativizations of the past/present/future are to be found in history books but this is only one of the many locations where they are to be found. Being able to orient in time involves being able to navigate the manifold narratives that populate and shape understanding of who 'we' are, where 'we' are going, and so on. It is not enough, then, to know about the past and to know how warranted claims about the past are made, it is also important to understand the multiple 'uses of history' (Nordgren 2016) that exist

in the present.

There are a number of dimensions to this. On the one hand, pupils need to appreciate that human beings tell stories about time for many different purposes - that they do so to ground claims about identity and belonging, to express or ground moral values, to express aesthetic values and experiences, and so on (Paul 2015). The analytical functions of historical narratives are merely one of the functions that past-referencing narratives express and many uses of the past serve different purposes and must be judged in different ways, in relation to their aims.

Teaching history that aims to develop understandings of the various 'uses of history' amounts to what one might call an education in the 'public understanding of the past' and this seems to me to be a necessary function of history education in the multi-storied world in which we inhabit. We live in a context in which narratives of different types vie for dominance and attention and in which many toxic narrative formations exist, often elaborating irresponsible historical claims without any evidential basis, and often structured in conspiracy theoretic narrative form, consisting of simplistic melodrama with clear heroes and villains. Children need to understand the various functions that stories about the past serve and how to evaluate such stories in terms of those functions but also in terms of disciplined standards of evidence and argumentative warrant. They also need to develop scepticism towards simplistic and polemical narratives and abuses of history, and this is something that they need to be taught.

## **RESPONDING TO *MANIFESTO PER LA DIDATTICA DELLA STORIA***

[N]owadays, the teaching of history cannot be limited to just following a sterile notional degree of knowledge of past events but it must be directed above all, at understanding the present and assuming knowledge and responsibility with the capacity to be deeply involved in a motivated fashion for matters concerning the present. Questions like... climate change; those involving limits and imbalances of economic development and the consequent migration flows; that of cohabiting both at local and international level; that of legality based on constitutional rules and regulations which have been extended to national and international level. In sum, it is necessary to abandon the traditional viewpoint about the past where the aim was to acquire notions in a prevalently mnemonic and bookish manner.

(DiPaSt 2019b:3)

I find much to agree with and to celebrate and agree with in DiPaSt's *Manifesto* - it aims to ensure that history education will enable children to meet the challenges of our complex and rapidly changing world and it argues forcefully for the modernisation of history away from its traditional image as a dry study of dead facts unconnected with the living present and towards an approach that allows history to become real for students in everyday contexts. I summarise the themes that stand out for me in DiPaSt's *Manifesto* in Figure 1, below.

**Figure 1: Key Themes in *Manifesto per la Didattica della Storia***

- Understanding the present and responding to unprecedented and threatening change - e.g. globalization and climate change
- Valuing local identities and heritage / patrimony
- Understanding both the global and the local and their interaction
- A focus on methodology in history in university
- Developing understandings of history and historiography
- Innovative and dynamic active learning - artefacts, sources, innovative presentation, using sources / Aim to cultivate student identification with what they are studying
- Working with heritage in practical ways - making history real / present
- Interdisciplinary studies - History/ Geography; Orientation in Time and Space
- Linking history to building general competencies

The *Manifesto* emphasises understanding the present and responding to unprecedented and threatening change in the present. This seems to me to be essential. We live in times of unprecedented change and challenge and history must be able to help us understand these challenges and navigate past/present/future. I have some questions about some of the challenges that the *Manifesto* identifies, however, such as:

[T]he... risk of a flattening of horizons, interests and cultures into an amalgam that appears to be lacking in distinctions and solid backgrounds. This is the result of that millennium process of the forging together of human destinies into a single planetarium panorama which we conventionally call 'globalization'. While those who derive most benefits are always almost exclusively the big economic monopolies... cancelling out all diversities in a generic and indistinct

scenario into a conforming culture and dominant interests.

(DiPaSt 2019b:4)

Whilst globalization can undoubtedly be a threat and whilst the capital flows and deregulation associated with neoliberalism are unquestionably a threat, for example, to the nation state's economic autonomy, globalization offers opportunities for liberation and contestation also (Hardt and Negri 2000).

Related points can be made in relation to your aim of valuing local identities and heritage / patrimony. "Safeguarding and protection of its environmental and cultural heritage" (DiPaSt 2019b:4) is undoubtedly of vital importance in a time of rapid change. It is also true that engaging with the past in one's local environment is undoubtedly a powerful motivation for historical learning and one that helps make the past real and present for pupils. However, it is also increasingly the case that hybrid identities are increasingly common and that our cities and schools are increasingly sites where multiple identities and identity narratives flourish (Burke 2009).

The Manifesto's emphasis on innovation in university and school history is something that I certainly applaud - it is vital that teaching keep pace with innovations in research and developing forms of history, including the histories of landscape, of material culture, and so on. I would want to argue for a fuller exploration of aspects of historical methodology, in line with the case I have made above for the importance of epistemic dimensions of historical learning, however. There is more to understanding these issues, I would argue, than the distinction 'between the objectivity of historical facts and the subjectivity and relativity of all forms of investigations' (DiPaSt 2019b:5). Firstly, this formulation seems to me to overstate the subjectivity of historical knowledge production, which is governed by a degree of interpersonal objectivity. One cannot just say what one wishes about the facts of the past, one has to develop compelling arguments, and these are subject to peer review, and various other interpersonal limits on subjectivity (Lorenz 1998; Megill 2007).

Similarly, I applaud efforts to develop innovative and dynamic active learning working with artefacts and sources and developing innovative modes of student presentation - indeed, I collaborated in a book some years ago arguing for precisely these kinds of engagements with the past (Cooper and Chapman 2009). However, as I have indicated above, there is more to historical learning than activity alone - there is a disciplinary-conceptual dimension involving reasoning about evidence, causation, change, and so on, which must be developed for meaningful activity to be possible. As

Richard E. Mayer has argued, in addition, one can be cognitively active in learning without needing to be physically active (and one can be physically active whilst being mentally passive) so swapping conventional classrooms for innovative environments and resources alone is no guarantee of innovative learning, per se (Mayer 2004). It is necessary, also, to develop understandings of the disciplinary logic that underlies 'doing history'.

Linking history to building general competencies is, again, something against which it is hard to argue - no one would argue, for example, that it is either bad for history or for children to use history to help them develop their ability to communicate or their ability to develop and use 'mathematical, scientific and technological skills', for example. However, I would be reluctant to focus on generic 'knowledge, skills and attitudes' (DiPaSt 2019b:12). without first stating and elaborating the disciplinary-historical conceptual understandings that give history its power and shape as a mode of enquiry and investigation, which gives it its cognitive power.

Finally, I think that there is a crucial element in the development of historical understanding that is not emphasised in the *Manifesto*, but which seems to me to be key to the development of students' abilities to understand both history and the present. It seems to me to be vital to develop students 'public understanding of the past' and their ability to negotiate and critically evaluate the many past-referencing discourses that they encounter in the present.

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