Body, Form, Spirit and Schema Theory: Some Reflections on History Education

Dr Arthur Chapman, Professor of History Education, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London.

Introduction: the Schools Council History Project and its legacies

In England, since at least the early 1990s, and the introduction of the new National Curriculum (1991), teachers have been used to the idea that learning history means more than learning bodies of knowledge about the past. The notion that history involved learning both a 'body' of knowledge about the past and a way of coming to know the past, or a 'form' of knowledge construction, can be traced back to the early twentieth century – for example, the work of Maurice Keatinge, and, more directly, to the Schools Council History Project (SCHP) of the early 1970s.[1] It is a conceptual opposition that has been expressed in numerous ways – including through the opposition between 'knowledge' and 'skills,' and the oppositions between 'substantive' ' and 'disciplinary,' and between 'first-' and 'second-order,' knowledge and understanding. What the National Curriculum did – by centring both 'knowledge and understanding' and conceptual matters ('interpretations of history' and 'the use of historical sources') – was generalise key aspects of the SCHP approach across the country, at least in the state sector and in state-maintained schools.[2] In this brief article, I discuss shifts in History education theory, policy and practice, drawing on my experience of these changes in the context of England, and offer perspectives on the development of thinking about what historical knowing involves and on how we might best develop it.

From 'either/or' to 'both/and'

Debate has continued, pretty much ever since, about which of these two dimensions of historical learning – substantive content or disciplinary concepts – should have priority, with disagreement burning brightest, perhaps, as changes were first introduced, and in the period since 2010 when the National Curriculum was dramatically reformed in England. The arrangements resulting from the National Curriculum consultation process were explicitly lamented by Margaret Thatcher, who regarded the documents as putting insufficient emphasis on 'memorising what actually happened' and on developing a 'chronological framework,' and too much emphasis on conceptual matters, or, as she put it, developing 'imaginative sympathy for historical characters and situations'; and Thatcher was joined by many other neo-traditionalists in opposing the role given to 'thinking' in the curriculum drafts.[3] Subsequently, in a period in which Conservative politicians were restored to power after long years in the wilderness under New Labour, and aimed to secure gains that Thatcher had missed, the government's initial proposals for History National Curriculum reform in 2013 raised so much opposition from teachers that they were withdrawn and reformulated.[4]

A high point for 'form' was 2007 when an iteration of our national curriculum was published (for teaching from 2008) that placed very strong emphasis on the 'concepts and processes' at the heart of disciplinary historical thinking: of the nine pages of the document, two dealt with historical thinking concepts and one with processes of enquiry, using evidence and communicating. Only two pages dealt with substantive knowledge.[5]

A high point for 'content' was 2013 when conservative advocates of a return to traditional approaches to History teaching were in the ascendant – something expressed in the publication of the final 2013 iteration of their reform proposals for the National Curriculum (for teaching from 2014), in which nearly three of the five pages focused on 'Subject Content' and disciplinary 'historical concepts' and 'methods of enquiry' merited less than half a page, under a broader heading of 'aims.'[6]

The year 2021 might be thought of as a moment of renewed equilibrium, expressed in the English government inspectors 'Research Review' on History education stressed the importance of both 'substantive' and 'disciplinary' forms of 'knowledge,' albeit in a way that put the accent firmly on the former.[7]

Framing these oppositions, as I am here, in terms of 'body' and 'form' (language used, for example, by Shemilt in 1983) sets up some rather useful metaphorical possibilities for critics of the way our debates have been framed.[8] Body without form is, after all, rather an incoherent notion – it suggests an inchoate mass, or 'blob' (if you will), to refunction a phrase popularised by the conservative right in England in the early 2010s.[9] Form without body is, perhaps, simply a ghost – a haunting where there should be a something.

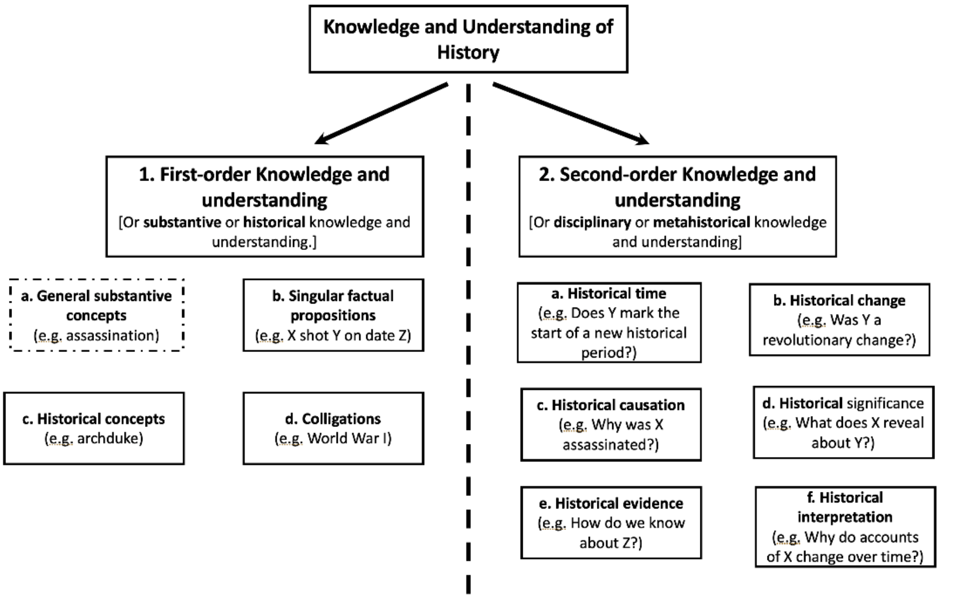
Whichever way one looks at these debates – in terms of form/body, knowledge/skill, or disciplinary/substantive – they are rather obviously two-dimensional and binary, and, frankly, therefore somewhat polemical, carrying the urge to assert an 'either/or' choice rumbling after them. It is a distinction that is ripe for collapsing also – we clearly need both poles of the binary in History classes, if we are to give 'body' to the 'form' of knowing that we develop through our teaching, and if we are to give 'form' to the 'body' of this knowing to help give it recognisable shape and meaning. Here, as so often, 'both/and' seems clearly preferable to 'either/or.'

Beyond binaries: knowledge, skill and conceptual understanding

Perhaps we need to go beyond that binary collapsing resolution, however, since ‘both/and’ does not push us beyond a two-dimensional analysis of what is involved in coming to know history. There are at least two major problems with this two-dimensional approach.

A binary approach homogenises what it categorises at both ends of the polarity it sets-up. Knowledge is a highly complex thing and talking about ‘facts’ or ‘knowing the story’ or one of the other neat little formulations that we often come across really is strikingly inadequate to the task of explaining what it means to come to know and understand things about people and periods in the past. Consider, for example the analysis of just what it means to have substantive knowledge of the past in the left-hand side of Figure 1 below – it involves knowing at least four different types of thing.

Figure 1. Dimensions of historical knowledge and understanding, 2021, from Knowing History in Schools (UCL Press), p.13. Copyright: Arthur Chapman[10]


Knowledge and Understanding of History
1. First-order Knowledge and understanding
[Or substantive or historical knowledge and understanding.]
2. Second-order Knowledge and understanding
[Or disciplinary or metahistorical knowledge and understanding]
a. General substantive concepts (e.g. assassination)
b. Singular factual propositions (e.g. X shot Y on date Z)
c. Historical concepts (e.g. archduke)
d. Colligations (e.g. World War I)
a. Historical time (e.g. Does Y mark the start of a new historical period?)
b. Historical change (e.g. Was Y a revolutionary change?)
c. Historical causation (e.g. Why was X assassinated?)
d. Historical significance (e.g. What does X reveal about Y?)
e. Historical evidence (e.g. How do we know about Z?)
f. Historical interpretation (e.g. Why do accounts of X change over time?)

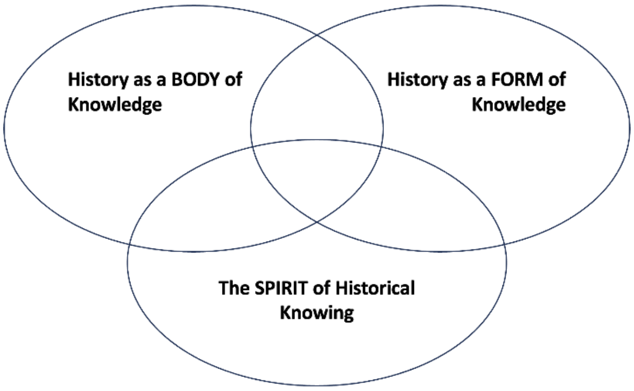
Similarly, to call everything else ‘skill,’ as Lee has argued, is an inadequate way of grasping the complexity of what goes on when we think with and cognitively process what we ‘know’ in order to answer questions about the past. The second-order knowledge and understanding that this processing involves (the right-hand side of Figure 1) is multidimensional and complex, involving many different concepts and types of reasoning. Understanding evidence cannot be reduced to knowing how to cross-reference sources, evaluate reliability, and so on. Understanding evidence involves conceptual content that one must come to know and understand if one is to be able to think about the relationship between what one might claim to know about the past and the warrant one can adduce for that claim using the traces of the past, for example. Epistemic notions are entailed here – and must be thought. Such thinking involves conceptual learning and is not simply a matter of mastering ‘procedures,’ and rehearsal/practise.[11]

We need at least a trinary here, then, not a binary: knowledge, skill and conceptual understanding.[12]

A second problem with a binary approach is its inadequacy at the level of aims and outcomes – as Lee has argued, learning history means, first, knowing things about the past (at various scales and resolutions that make that knowledge useable), and second, knowing things about the discipline of History (what counts as ‘evidence’ in history, for example, or knowing how a judgment of historical significance is made and how it differs from an argument about causation). There is more to say, however, since third, it also means acquiring certain dispositions (for example, a disposition not to play fast and loose with evidence, or a disposition only to make claims you can sustain with evidence, even if you would like to say more for other reasons).[13]

We could say, metaphorising Lee somewhat, that we need another trinary here – and that knowing history adequately involves learning to know and think with a body, a form and a spirit of knowledge integral to the discipline, and that one or two-dimensional approximations to this really do not measure up. History education should be squarely aiming at the centre of Figure 2, and at the intersection of all three aspects.

Figure 2. Aspects of Historical Knowing, 2024. Copyright: Arthur Chapman


History as a BODY of Knowledge
History as a FORM of Knowledge
The SPIRIT of Historical Knowing

Schemata, templates and prototypes

Cognitive science, of a generalist type, has had a dramatic impact on the education in England in the last fifteen years or so, as has been the case elsewhere. This has largely been a source for good, it seems to me. However, two negative aspects strike me when I think about it. First, the cognitive science invoked has tended to be generalist cognitive science – works like Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School?*, more than historical cognitive science embodied in works like Wineburg's *Unnatural Acts* and *Why Learn History?* books.[14] Second, where findings of cognitive science are drawn upon, they are often quite narrowly understood, as can be seen in the English appropriation of research on knowledge building and on schema theory.[15]

In relation to knowledge-building, there has been a tendency to regard this as a matter mostly of memory – and, therefore, to prioritise teaching and learning approaches that facilitate knowledge retention and recall, such as 'retrieval practice,' 'interleaving,' and 'spaced practice,' rather than other forms of cognition involved in knowing and knowledge building. We can see this clearly by comparing the kinds of approach just discussed within Chapter 5 of the US National Academy of Sciences open access 2018 research synthesis publication *How People Learn, II* (HPL II), which supplements the earlier *How People Learn* volume, published in 2000.[16] In addition to focusing on strategies to enable retention (retrieval practice, spaced practice, and so on), *HPL II* also foregrounds strategies to achieve knowledge 'integration', and the role that 'explanation' and 'inferential reasoning' can play in making connections between 'information' to 'organise knowledge for understanding' effectively.[17]

Schema theory, deriving principally from the work of Bartlett, posits that, over time, we build-up schematic (i.e., generalised) models for things we are likely to encounter: for types of social situation (e.g., a wedding); for scripts to follow in particular contexts (e.g., ordering a meal in a restaurant); and so on.[18] These enable us to interpret states of affairs we might find ourselves in (by categorising them) and to engage in appropriate behaviour (by selecting and following scripts). As I have said, schemata are often discussed in contemporary English History education but without differentiating within them systematically: the talk is pretty much solely of schemata, and, often, draws for the most part on Chapter 2 of Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy*.[19] Psychologists, for example, Mandler, have distinguished between schemata for 'stories,' for 'scripts,' and for 'scenes.'[20] Film theorists, for example Bordwell, have distinguished between 'template schemata', for plot shapes and sequences of actions, and 'prototype schemata', for types of agent, context, equipment, and so on.[21] Why, then, should History education theorising limit its understanding of the types of schemata and of the kinds of thinking and knowing that they can facilitate?[22]

If it is true that we can helpfully think of knowledge-building in history as involving work to develop schema, then it seems reasonable to make full and differentiated use of the concept and to model the range of types of schemata that we might want to develop in our students' minds: prototypes for the range of agents you might find in a medieval village, for the kinds of script that it would be thought appropriate to follow in an Elizabethan Parliamentary debate, for the prototypical equipment one might find in a nineteenth-century cotton mill, and so on. It also seems likely that students are going to need to develop schemata for the kinds of cognitive move frequently made by historians in their talk and writing – for example (from Figure 1) the colligatory moves, or binding together of facts through ideas, that historians typically make when periodising (positing entities like 'the Renaissance' that pull together and organise multiple details under them) and when trying to capture large-scale phenomena involving many different things, by tying them all together into large scale analytical nominalisations such as 'the Industrial Revolution.'

More importantly, perhaps, schema theory in contemporary History education has tended to have been restricted in its use to substantive knowledge building only – something that seems questionable given the presence of schemata for processes and for sequencing information one finds in other fields (scripts, template schemata, and so on). Why, one might ask, do we only need to develop schemata for 'What?' issues and not for 'How?' and 'So what?' and 'What next?' issues. Over time, surely, History education should be aiming to build-up schemata for how historical explanations work, how judgments of historical significance typically work, and so on, and schemata for what good historical writing about evidence, about causation and about historical change, and so on, might look like? The notion that the only kinds of knowledge that we need to build are substantive, and all else is just generic skills that can be left to develop by themselves, seems pretty hard to coherently state, let alone to sustain.

Conclusion

This article has been a 'think piece,' setting out some no doubt rather idiosyncratic perspectives on the development of thinking about what historical knowing involves and on how we might best develop it, drawing on my experience of working in an English history education context, in one way or another, for the last thirty-one years. It seems to me that we need to broaden our understanding of what learning history involves, to include dispositions ('spirit'), in addition to the usual (and often disputatious) suspects knowledge ('body') and disciplinary understanding ('form'). I think, also, that we could make a much broader use of key aspects of cognitive science than we currently do, in England, not least by, for example, pushing schema theory beyond a necessary and useful, but, nevertheless, narrow and undifferentiated focus on developing schemata for substantive knowledge alone.

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[1] Maurice W. Keatinge, *Studies in the Teaching of History* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910); Denis Shemilt, *History 13-16 Evaluation Study* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980).

[2] Department for Education and Science, *History in the National Curriculum* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1991).

[3] Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperPress, 2012), 595; Rob Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics* (London and New York: Continuum, 1998).

[4] Joseph Smith, 'Community and Contestation: A Gramscian Case Study of Teacher Resistance', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 27-44.

[5] Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *History: Programme of Study: Key Stage 3* (London: QCA, 2007), https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130802151252/https:/media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/h/history%202007%20programme%20of%20study%20for%20key%20stage%203.pdf (accessed 21 August 2024).

[6] Department for Education, 'National Curriculum in England: History Programmes of Study', (London: DFE, 2013), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c66d740f0b626628abcdd/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf (accessed 21 August 2024).

[7] Ofsted, 'Research Review Series: History', (London: Ofsted, 2021), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history (accessed 21 August 2024).

[8] Denis Shemilt, 'The Devil's Locomotive', *History and Theory* 22, no. 4 (1983): 1-18.

[9] Toby Young, *Prisoners of the Blob: Why Most Education Experts Are Wrong about Nearly Everything* (London: Civitas, 2014), http://www.civitas.org.uk/pdf/PrisonersofTheBlob.pdf (accessed 21 August 2024).

[10] Reproduced from page 13 of Arthur Chapman, 'Introduction: Historical Knowing and the "Knowledge Turn", in *Knowing History in Schools*, ed. Arthur Chapman, Powerful Knowledge and the Powers of Knowledge (London: UCL Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14t477t.6.

[11] Ros Ashby, 'Understanding Historical Evidence: Teaching and Learning Challenges', in *Debates in History Teaching*, ed. I. Davies (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 137-147.

[12] Michael Young makes similar distinctions in his account of 'Future 3' (or powerful) knowledge, as I argue in my introduction to *Knowing History in Schools*: *Powerful Knowledge and the Powers of Knowledge* (London: UCL Press, 2021), 1-31, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14t477t.6 (accessed 21 August 2024).

[13] Peter Lee, 'History Education and Historical Literacy', in *Debates in History Teaching*, ed. I. Davies (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 55-65; Lis Cercadillo, Arthur Chapman and Peter Lee, 'Organizing the Past: Historical Accounts, Significance and Unknown Ontologies', in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, ed. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 529-51.

[14] Michael Fordham, 'Thinking Makes It so: Cognitive Psychology and History Teaching', *Teaching History* [UK], no. 166 (2017): 37-42; Daniel Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions about How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009); Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Sam Wineburg, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[15] E.D. Hirsch's work is the principal reference on schema theory in much English work – see, for example, C. Counsell, 'The Fertility of Substantive Knowledge: In Search of Its Hidden, Generative Power', in *Debates in History Teaching* (2017): 80-99.

[16] M.S. Donovan, J.D. Bransford and J.W. Pellegrino, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000), https://doi.org/10.17226/9853; Engineering National Academies of Sciences, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2018).

[17] National Academies of Sciences, *How People Learn II*, 86-107, 93.

[18] Frederic Charles Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, 1995 reprint (Cambridge University Press, 1932).

[19] Eric Donald Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

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[20] Jean Matter Mandler, *Stories, Scripts and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Hillsdale, New Jersey & London: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1984).

[21] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); *Poetics of Cinema*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[22] I have recently made this case at greater length, in the context of a series of posts on 'narrative ethics,' in Arthur Chapman, 'Schemata, Prototypes and Templates: Narrative Ethics, Part Two', *The Camel's Back* (blog), 12 August 2024, https://thecamelsback.org/2024/08/12/schemata-prototypes-and-templates-narrative-ethics-part-2/ (accessed 21 August 2024).