

What's the Point? Pupils' Perceptions of the Relevance of Studying History and Geography to their Future Employability

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This article draws upon the findings of an ongoing inquiry into pupils' perceptions of the relative usefulness of studying history and geography. A questionnaire survey of over 1400 Year 9 pupils in ten East Midlands' comprehensive schools was undertaken in the summer term 1999 and follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same cohort of pupils at the end of Year 11. The findings suggest that their understanding of the relative usefulness of both history and geography in their future lives is in the main limited to naïve reference to forms of employment. There is a clear lack of understanding of the unique contribution the study of these subjects can make to pupils' future employability. It is argued that pupils will only begin to appreciate the career relevance of these subjects when the issues of historical relevance and geographical complexity and topicality are made explicit in the teaching of these subjects.

Take-up and perceptions of subject usefulness

Although the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) had insisted that the school curriculum should be 'balanced and broadly based' (OFSTED, 1995, p.18), the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed a steady decline in the number of pupils opting to study history and/or geography after the age of 14 (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1996; Department for Education and Employment, 1999). Clearly part of the problem lies with restricted option choice post-14 and with the attraction for many pupils of studying subjects newly available to them at this stage in their school career (e.g. sociology; economics). The introduction of GCSEs in vocational subjects will obviously exacerbate this problem. However, a questionnaire survey of over 1400 Year 9 pupils in 10 East Midlands' comprehensive schools (conducted in 1999) and follow-up small group interviews with Year 11 pupils in 2001 also revealed unfavourable perceptions in the minds of pupils about the usefulness and career relevance of both subjects.

There is a long history of evidence that perceptions of subject usefulness in relation to intended careers are important factors in option decision-making (For example, Reid *et al.*, 1974, Pratt *et al.*, 1984, Stables and Wikeley, 1997, Lord and Harland, 2000). There is evidence also that the connections pupils make between subject choice and career

intentions are often ill informed. Ryrie *et al.* (1979) noted that '... not infrequently the supposed usefulness of particular subjects for particular jobs was somewhat doubtful or unrealistic' (p.54) and Stables and Wikeley (1997) concluded that 'The naïve linkage of school subjects to careers ("there is no point in doing art unless you are going to be an artist") not only betrays a sadly narrow view of education but is also essentially problematic in its assumptions' (p.402).

Dubious career links

The East Midlands' questionnaire survey has revealed also that for both history and geography most Year 9 pupils try to relate study usefulness to career intentions but that the nature of this relationship is often extremely unrealistic. In history, commonly expressed dubious career links saw study of the subject as useful preparation for jobs such as paramedic, nurse, pharmacist (because of the study of 'The History of Medicine' as part of the GCSE syllabus in many schools) and receptionist. Others felt that history *would be useful* if you wanted a history-related career (e.g. as a history teacher, museum worker, archaeologist), although few expressed the intention of seeking such careers. In geography, usefulness was related to employment in the travel industry or the armed forces or to everyday situations such as being able to read a map so that you did not get lost when travelling! Very few pupils were able to identify any aspect of the intrinsic value of studying either subject.

The follow-up interviews with Year 11 pupils showed that by the end of Key Stage 4 there were some pupils who could identify the distinctive contribution history and geography made to their learning. In history, some saw the relevance of knowing about and understanding past events:

'You have to explore the background to things, the reasons why something happened, and you can relate that sometimes to real life'; and

'It gives you an inside view of why things are the way they are in the world today'.

Others stressed the importance of the skills they had developed through the study of history:

'Like all the election stuff that's going on – It's all propaganda... If you listen to what the political parties are saying, a couple of years ago I would have believed it all but having done history you start to sort out what's fact and what isn't'; and

'When you are doing sources you have to analyse it rather than just take it for what you see... seeing things for more than what they appear on the surface'.

Some of the connections now being made between subject relevance and future career were more realistic, especially in relation to careers in law:

'I want to be a lawyer, so - arguing cases and putting forward a well-presented argument and looking at things and maybe not taking it at face value. Like the provenance of sources - That's really useful, and weighing up the evidence and being analytical'.

However, for many pupils there was still no real understanding of the purpose of historical study in relation to knowledge, understanding or skills, and unrealistic subject-career connections remained:

'We're never going to use the history of medicine unless we go into medicine'; and

'Other than writing there isn't really many skills in it'.

For geography the term 'useful' was applied by pupils in the Year 11 survey in a range of different ways. Some appreciated that geographical themes relating to the study of people and places provided them with insights into real events, patterns and process that they might not otherwise have understood. This was particularly true of development themes where pupils could see that geography presented them with the opportunity to *understand* the nature of difference and to value such difference.

'It gives you greater knowledge of the world and what's happening...you learn about different countries and their way of life;' and

'When you're doing development it gives you a different perspective on the world and you see it in a different light.'

One or two pupils did elect to study geography at Key Stage 4 because they believed it could contribute in some direct way to their chosen career. One pupil decided to opt to study GCSE geography because he wanted to be an astrophysicist. He thought that the physical aspects of geography, particularly geomorphology, climatology and hydrology would provide him with the necessary skills and understanding which would enable him to recognise and interpret landscapes:

'...in the future I want to be able to do something with astronomy and astrophysics and I want to be able to recognise land features as in the physical side of geography... I now know and recognise a lot of land features which helped with job prospects. Others could see that some aspects of geography, such as industrial location, could be useful to pupils who saw themselves opting for some sort

of business career. However, they were hazy when it came to being more specific than this. For some students, even after two years of studying the subject at GCSE level their ability to articulate why geography might be useful to them was superficial and related to general interest rather than anything specific.

'I just thought it would be interesting - I liked earthquakes and volcanoes'; and

'I just thought that generally it would be helpful and I was interested in the physical aspects.'

The fact that pupils opted to study the subject just because they found it interesting may not be a specific problem. It is quite refreshing that some pupils opt for subjects at this level because they are interested in it rather than because they have a specific career aspiration.

However, what is worrying is the difficulty many seemed to have in articulating the usefulness of geography, a discipline which claims to be relevant, topical and 'all around us', to their development as active and concerned individuals with an increasing sense of responsibility for contributing to current issues and debates.

The role of subject associations

Both the Historical Association and the Geographical Association are contributing to attempts to raise the status of their respective subjects in schools. The Historical Association's major contribution has targeted Year 9 pupils who are about to make their option choices for GCSE. Each year it produces materials (e.g. posters, CD-ROMs, flyers) that attempt to illustrate the relevance of historical study. The main purpose of these materials has been to show that people with a background of history study occupy a very wide variety of occupations: the 2001 flyer depicts twenty men and women working in jobs ranging from speech therapist to maintenance engineer; from special effects technician to actor; from cabinet maker to marketing manager. The Geographical Association is equally busy. It too produces a support pack outlining the links between geography as a school subject and possible career links. There is also a new position statement for geography in which the geographical association identifies what it perceives to be the key outcomes for geographical education. Here reference is made to the links between geography and the world of work:

'geographers with their skills of analysis and synthesis are highly employable.' (GA: 2002a).

In another recent publication, *Developing the case for geography* (2002b), there is explicit reference to geography graduates being among the most employable in the country.

Too little? Too late?

Useful though these contributions are is it too little, too late? If more pupils are to continue with the study of history and geography post-14, they need to begin to appreciate its usefulness well before Year 9, and they need more than a late reassurance that people who have studied history or geography have gained employment in many different occupations.

For history a key to this lies in the teaching of historical significance - In essence, an understanding of how past events affected people's lives, and an appreciation of how this contributes to an increased understanding of life today - something that is much neglected in history teaching at present. Such *understanding* is developed through both the content and the processes of studying history. It is this *understanding* of key concepts and human motivation and conduct that serves to open up such a wide variety of occupations to those with a history background. For pupils to want to study geography post-14 the evidence from the pupils themselves seems to suggest that they need a much

earlier understanding of the purpose of the subject and this needs to be more clearly articulated by teachers in the classroom.

Topicality is a key aspect of relevance in geography and is clearly part of the challenge of teaching the subject. For pupils to see real purpose in studying geography they do not necessarily need to see direct links between geography and a specific career path. What they need is to understand that geography is 'topical' and that it helps them to understand real places, real people and the complex interrelationships that bind them all together.

Until history addresses historical significance and geography complexity and topicality pupils will continue to ask: 'What's the point in doing this?' Until they understand the point, there is little hope of increasing the number of pupils who opt to study history or geography beyond the age of 14.

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