

**The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory**  
***Summary Final Report: June 2014***

**Description of project progression**

From the start, our project was designed to be as interactive as possible, focused on dialogue between the research team and teaching professionals. This was reflected in its structure, which alternated face-to-face interaction through regional focus groups and workshops with an online survey and reflection on progress in a number of academic steering committee meetings, as well as conversations via email with our teacher steering committee.

The project began with a two-day workshop attended by teachers, exam board representatives, museum education and outreach staff and invited academic experts from the disciplines of English Literature, History and Education Studies. The workshop was used to begin a constructive dialogue, discuss a first draft of the survey (as a paper version), and recruit a teacher steering committee that subsequently offered feedback on a refined second draft of the survey and assisted in publicising the finalised survey when it went live. The survey was launched on 21 June 2013 and remained open until 1 December 2013. During August 2013, we hosted three regional focus groups (in Exeter, Newcastle and London) where initial findings from the survey were discussed and interrogated in more detail with local teachers who themselves had completed the survey. On 17 May 2014 we hosted our 'end-of-project' event at the Institute of Historical Research for teacher participants and museum education officers, most of whom had been involved since the initial workshop in February 2013. This consisted of interactive presentations from academics working on issues related to the project (Political Science and English Literature), museum and heritage education officers (regarding their online resources for teachers), and an outline of the survey findings from the PI and CI of this project.

**Findings**

The project's Final Report was published, online (via the project website) in early June 2014. It is therefore freely available to anyone interested in the project's results. At just over 100 pages long, its findings are complex and nuanced. However, highlights include:

- The First World War remains a key topic for History and English Literature teachers and will continue to remain as part of the curriculum despite ongoing reforms to GCSE and A-level, although its presence in English Literature classrooms will continue to depend largely on school policy and/or teachers' individual preferences.
- Misperceptions exist amongst politicians and other commentators, and in the media, about the way the subject is taught. Our findings have highlighted the innovative and complex ways many teachers engage their students with the topic often in tandem with a variety of sources that seek to broaden understanding.
- In terms of History, there is clearly a relationship between popular perceptions of the war in Britain and the default topics that are taught – notably the Western Front, trench warfare and the origins of the war. Until these topics are varied by exam boards in their specifications there will be little change in the classroom, especially at KS4 and above, when the emphasis is on exam attainment. There is more freedom to teach other aspects of the conflict at KS3.
- For English teachers, teaching First World War literature poses a particular challenge in that it necessarily entails the teaching of cultural and historical context, and raises questions about subject remit. This point also on occasion causes friction between English teachers and their History colleagues. Important factors for choosing authors and texts to cover are availability and inclusion in exam board units on the one hand and appeal to students on the other.
- Problems surrounding the contextualisation of literary sources in English Literature lessons particularly highlights the need for more cross-curricular activities and coordination within schools. While cross-curricular approaches may often be hard to implement as part of regular teaching, our survey and focus groups flagged several examples of best practice where schools had utilised project

days or weeks and/or battlefield trips to engage in cross-curricular work on the First World War. The report identified a number of practical variables that impact on the way the First World War is taught. These prominently include time constraints, budget, type of school, type of teacher, geographical location, and pupil intake (i.e. pupils' social and ethnic background).

- Teachers do not necessarily want more resources on the First World War. Rather they want guidance on the best ones to use, and mechanisms to filter the overwhelming array of resources available to them already. Bite-size accessible pieces of academic research could facilitate such filtering by putting teachers in touch with the current state of research on the subject.
- There is further a clear need for linking up academics and teachers, especially in terms of providing high-quality, free Continued Professional Development (CPD), to help allow the latest research to penetrate into secondary-school classrooms.
- English and History teachers alike recognise the potential moral dimension in teaching about the First World War, and frequently use teaching about the war as an opportunity to build pupils' capacity for empathy. For History teaching, in particular, this raises the question of approaching the war as an historical and/or emotional event, particularly in the light of the emphasis placed on battlefield cemetery visits both by individual teachers, schools and the government (in its centenary funding).

#### **Completed and forthcoming outputs**

- *April 2013: co-authored initial report*

'The First World War in the Classroom: An Interactive Workshop – Post-Workshop Report'. Available via <http://ww1intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/>

- *April 2014: co-authored book chapter*

Ann-Marie Einhaus and Catriona Pennell, 'The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory' in *Remembering the Great War* edited by Bart Ziino (Routledge, Oxford, 2014).

- *May 2014: co-authored project summary*

Ann-Marie Einhaus and Catriona Pennell, 'The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory' in *The Western Front Association Bulletin* (July 2014).

- *June 2014: co-authored final project report*

Ann-Marie Einhaus and Catriona Pennell, 'The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory – Final Project Report'. Available via <http://ww1intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/>

- *June 2014: single-authored journal article*

Catriona Pennell, 'On the Frontlines of Teaching the History of the First World War' in *Teaching History* [Historical Association] (TH 155), pp. 34-40.

- *Summer 2014: single-authored journal article*

Ann-Marie Einhaus, 'Learning, Literature and Remembrance in English Classrooms' in *The Use of English* [English Association]

## Forthcoming outputs

- Two single-authored academic journal articles:

Ann-Marie Einhaus, Working title: 'Memory, Teaching and Contemporary Writing about the First World War' [for submission to *Literature & History* in the first instance]

Catriona Pennell, Working title: 'Learning Lessons from War: Teaching the history of the First World War in the centenary period' [for submission to *Theory and Research in Social Education* in the first instance]

## **Evidence of "reach" of our research**

In order to obtain as many survey respondents as possible, it was imperative to build a public profile of this project. We therefore made extensive use of the internet and social media. Our project website was launched in May 2013.

- Twitter followers and exposure: our twitter account has over 1,000 followers to date, and we have also been mentioned consistently in other people's tweets (researchers and teachers) as a key player in First World War research. Our followers include a large number of teachers and school departments, some of whom have begun to tweet us news of centenary activities and teaching ideas in return.
- Facebook "likes" and followers (108 "likes" of our page as of 25 June 2014, posts to this date have reached up to 310 individuals each)
- TV and radio appearances: Catriona Pennell appeared to talk about the project on BBC Spotlight South West (regional programme) on 21 June 2013, a TES podcast on 7 November 2013 (<http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/The-TES-Podcast-World-War-I-special-6373212>), and on BBC News 24 on 11 November 2013; Ann-Marie Einhaus spoke about the project on ITV Tyne Tees (regional news) on 13 November 2013.
- Coverage in print and online press: Following remarks made by Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, in January 2014 on the use of *Blackadder Goes Forth* as a teaching tool, Catriona Pennell was interviewed for HistoryExtra.com. The research team published a co-authored letter of response to Gove's comments in the *Guardian*. Media interest has heightened since the publication of our final report; we have been approached by journalists from *BBC History Magazine* and the *Independent* with initial enquiries. An article featuring the project appeared in the *TES Magazine* on 20 June 2014 ('First World War tributes are leaving pupils battle-weary', by Adi Bloom) and was immediately picked up by the *Telegraph* and the *Mail Online*. While all three articles unfortunately misrepresented the actual results of our project in a bid to 'spin' a more controversial story about 'centenary fatigue' among young people, the publicity generated by these articles did lead to greater attention for our report and an additional blog post (Educational Recording Agency blog, <http://www.era.org.uk/resources-case-studies/blog>) on the project. We also placed statements of clarification in the *TES* and *Mail Online*. This has led to further media enquiries to the research team to comment on the centenary, education and BBC programming.

## Evidence of impact

- The project is regarded by many in the teaching community as a portal for good practice. Via twitter, the research team have been approached for ideas and advice on teaching the First World War; the Teaching Exchange aspect of the project website is utilised by teachers and museum/archive outreach officers to discuss and share latest ideas and developments with regards to lesson plans and resources. An additional feature was implemented following requests at the focus groups, i.e. a list of 'Willing Experts' teachers could contact for advice, guest lectures, etc., which has led to some

enquiries from teachers already. Experts were recruited among colleagues in the project team's own institutions as well as via the mailing list of the International Society for First World War Studies.

- The research team are setting standards for other research projects. We have been approached for advice on working with teachers and schools by other AHRC-funded project teams such as 'Developing Historical Thinking' at Edge Hill University and the University of Exeter's Department of English (in relation to the forthcoming 'Being Human: Festival of the Humanities').
- The results of our survey has already been useful for other projects, such as the government-sponsored WW1 Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme (led by the Institute of Education) and the 1914FACES2014 EU-funded project, which is developing teaching resources.
- We have received a number of testimonials via e-mail from teachers following each face-to-face activity (workshops, focus groups and end-of-project event) outlining how the experience has reinvigorated their teaching, encouraged them to try new resources and approaches, and commending us on being one of the first centenary activities that brings teachers and academics together with clear objectives and tangible results.
- An article by one of our project participants, English teacher Susie Wilson, will be published in an upcoming special issue of *The Use of English* on First World War literature that outlines the author's rethinking of her teaching practice following the initial project workshop.
- Influencing the IoE WW1 Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme – Catriona Pennell was invited to sit on the Academic Steering Group for the programme. The findings of our project report feed directly into the configuration and development of this government-funded programme.
- E-mails and messages of support for the project following controversy over the mis-reporting of the project in the *TES*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* on 20 June 2014. These demonstrate how important teacher participants feel our research has been for them, particularly in terms of making the wider public and policy-makers aware of classroom reality.

### **Lessons learnt**

This project was in various ways a foray into new territory for the research team, particularly in terms of methodology and media engagement.

Both of us were new to survey-based empirical research and found ourselves confronted with the problem of how to reach the non-engaged teacher in particular. Despite extensive measures taken to publicise the survey, we were faced with teachers' notorious over-commitment and lack of time, and were competing for the attention of potential participants with a flood of communications from exam boards, the media, Ofsted, their own school and Local Authority, etc. As a result, the number of survey responses we received was a little disappointing to us compared to our initial aspirations. This disparity between aspiration and reality may partly also be a result of our having based our estimate of 2,000 responses on a shorter survey on a topic taught more widely across a greater number of subjects, namely the Institute of Education's Holocaust survey of 2008-11. More might have been achieved with a larger advertising budget and more run-up time, but we also realised that too much data can be problematic in and of itself, and that a smaller number of responses may make for a more useful snapshot of current practice. Related to the issue of recruiting participants, our project taught us the importance of ensuring varied opportunities to interact with teachers in particular: to ensure attendance at face-to-face events, one has to strike a balance between weekday and weekend, term-time and vacation dates.

Media engagement proved to be the other steep learning curve for us in the course of the project. In the initial stages, we were faced with a greater reluctance than anticipated to cover research in progress. By contrast, coverage of our results turned out to be more reductive and misleading than we had anticipated, and taught us a valuable lesson concerning the need for a clear and simple line to offer journalists (see also above under evidence of the reach of our research).

**Future plans**

- Dissemination at academic conferences: We will present results at a number of conferences over the summer (HEA 15 July, QMUL 1 August) and into the autumn (SOAS 18 September).
- Potential of following up with large grant bid: We are currently in discussion with potential collaborators about a follow-up large grant bid on the broader subject of 'Learning War'.
- Possible international case study via Catriona Pennell's developing links with the University of Wellington and the New Zealand's Ministry of Culture and Heritage.