

The First World War in the Classroom: An interactive workshop

Post-workshop report (April 2013)

A collaborative event organised by Dr Catriona Pennell (University of Exeter) and Dr Ann-Marie Einhaus (Northumbria University) on 18 and 19 February 2013.



THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN THE
CLASSROOM:
CHANGE

<http://www.intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk>

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Introduction

Between 18 and 19 February 2013, a unique symposium – led by academics from the University of Exeter and Northumbria University – took place bringing secondary school teachers and academics together to discuss the teaching of the First World War in History and English literature. The location, Senate House, was kindly provided by the Institute of Historical Research, London, and the event generously supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Higher Education Academy, the Royal Historical Society, the English Association and the Historical Association.

Almost fifty delegates from across the UK engaged in a dialogue about their experiences of teaching the First World War and the implications of the forthcoming centenary on their practice. Along with English and History teachers and academics, delegates represented Education Studies, museum learning and

outreach, and two major exam boards. The two days comprised of three keynote addresses by leading experts in the fields of First World War and Education studies, a session on the use of new digital resources, and a variety of breakout sessions. These interactive sessions – which included an initial round table on expectations and questions, and a summing up at the end of the workshop – saw lively debate and many exciting thoughts on how to address challenges to teaching practice with regard to teaching First World War literature and history. Throughout the symposium, the emphasis was on dialogue and interaction across sectors and subjects. We hope to have captured the essence of the two days in this report.

The symposium was also the launch event of our AHRC exploratory award 'The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory' which runs until early 2014. Governed by two Steering Committees consisting of teachers and academics, it addresses how the First World War as a seminal moment

in British history forms part of current (and future) cultural memory formation through its transmission in classrooms at secondary level. Our research will be based on an online questionnaire, on follow-up focus group meetings with teachers and researchers, and an extensive survey of press coverage, literary writing and documentaries in the run-up to the 2014 centenary anniversary of the First World War. The hub of this activity is our project website: <http://www.intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk>

We were both overwhelmed by the positive energy produced by the symposium and are inspired to continue this project in the spirit of cross-collaboration and dialogue. It would have been impossible without the enthusiastic contributions of all our delegates, to whom we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks.

**Catriona &
Ann-Marie**



Section I: The keynote lectures

The First World War in history and memory

(Dan Todman, QMUL)

In recent decades, First World War studies have shown a marked tendency towards internationalisation and cultural history. Cultural historians think not just about military or economic aspects of the war, but research its actual experience by a multitude of people and the motivations underlying war and participation in war.

One important reason to take into account motivations and meanings at the time is to save the British Tommy from accusations of stupidity: If the war was that dreadful and so little supported, why did men keep signing up and fighting? Fighting front and home front can't be seen as separate, as what happened on the home front crucially influenced morale and motivations on the fighting fronts. All soldiers did not hate everyone on the home front; on the contrary, there were ample connections between the two spheres. One example is that of a South London regiment raiding German trenches on their own initiative after a German bombing attack on Lambeth, leaving behind a sign telling the Germans they would "teach them to bomb Lambeth". We need to get over our preconceptions of an army led by stupid generals, and look much more closely not just at soldiers' own motivations for fighting, but also at the war's organisation and financial management. One of the major yet neglected links between the First and Second World Wars is that Britain

was fighting both wars as an industrial superpower, with more men working in factories than in the infantry in either war.

Unfortunately, teachers of the war at any level, but particularly in secondary education, are shackled by the curriculum, and there is necessarily a disparity between what teachers want to and have to teach. With the approaching centenary, teaching of the First World War will be taken over by political agendas, focused – in line with recent government proposals – largely on commemoration of the "glorious dead" in a deplorable extension of Remembrance Sunday. Fortunately, the redesign of the Imperial War Museum's First World War galleries (undertaken in a spirit of friendly collaboration with historians) promises to be an informed and exciting development that strives to transcend the government tokenism reflected in the new history curriculum (which includes Edith Cavell as the token woman at war, and "token black man" Walter Tull), as well as doing away with the reductive emphasis of tragedy over victory.

While certain myths can be important in helping to explain and understand the war and its moral implications, we also need to provide new narratives for change. The war dead, on whom all centenary events are likely to centre, can help us focus on certain aspects of the war, but can also stand in the way of understanding the whole story of the war. To do justice to the war's experience, we need to consider soldiers' actions, their act of killing, side

by side with their perceived victimisation, as blind and sanitised reverence can be a serious obstacle to students' understanding of the war's complexity. Consequently, while our remembrance of the war cannot be entirely lacking in emotion, it also needs to move us beyond tears to critical thinking. Rather than focusing exclusively on those who never came back, we need to challenge depictions of the hallowed dead to think about post-war changes in the light of living survivors.

The most particular challenge to the teaching of the First World War is the fundamental question why we teach the war at all. Do we teach the war's history for moral reasons (to demonstrate that war is bad, unless it be fought against the Nazis), or because we want to train young people as historians? The value of history lies in teaching us how to deal with complexity, and as such our key objective in teaching the First World War should be to stimulate questions rather than to force-feed answers. One example of such a question-based approach could be an interrogation of the Battle of the Somme, the losses of 1 July 1916. If students could be encouraged to move on from horror and sadness, and be made to ask the question why fighting continued beyond those casualties, this would constitute a first step in the direction of dealing with such complexity. What is needed to this end are useful resources for teachers to help them help their students to answer critical questions, rather than just providing a fixed set of answers.



Teaching and research beyond the canonical war writers (Jane Potter, Oxford Brookes)

There is a disconnect between academic research and public perception about the Great War. What is being shown by work undertaken in universities and by independent scholars is very different from what is portrayed in television adaptations such as *Downton Abbey* or in films such as *War Horse*. The school curriculum seems to focus on Owen, Sassoon and more contemporary writers such as Sebastian Faulks and Pat Barker – all of whom are often lumped together in terms of the ‘tragedy’ they portray. There is still a tendency to see the war through the lens of years of conditioning about its waste, pity and horror. This is not to suggest the war was not tragic, but not everyone saw it as a waste and those that did often did so in the wake of severe economic conditions in the post-war world.

Current academic research, including my own work, has moved beyond the canonical texts and literary writers to consider out-of-print works, popular fiction, short stories, poetry, memoirs and ephemera, all within a larger context of the history of the book and publishing culture. Scholars are working in an international context, considering issues of race and empire, and viewing the war’s truly global scope. The war on the Western Front, the trope of mud and mutilated corpses, the tragedy and sorrow are some of the

defining perceptions of the public; but academic research has for some years now been emphasising other fronts, other reactions, other interpretations. The canonical writers continue to be touchstones, points of reference, but are put in their proper context.

Thanks to technology, there are resources that allow students to see and study material that had previously been the domain of university academics or antiquarian book collectors: the First World War Poetry Digital Archive, the Internet Library, and the **Reading Experience Database (RED)**. Projects like RED (www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK) demonstrate the wide range of literature read by soldiers and those on the home front, including popular fiction such as romance novels and stories, that served to reassure and comfort readers at home and abroad. To illustrate the sometimes surprising discoveries to be made in popular wartime texts outside the established canon, we need only look to nursing memoirs, which often offered shocking descriptions of physical injury and mental trauma, but which were also meant to sustain the war effort on the home front. Similarly, the *Bookman*’s article “Poets in Khaki” in its Christmas Special for 1918 (edited by A. St John Adcock) highlighted both misery and endurance, and included many poets no longer known besides Owen and Rosenberg (whose own reputation was almost entirely posthumous). In fact, only five of Owen’s poems were published during his lifetime,

including “Song of Songs”, which was entered into and published as part of the *Bookman* poetry competition in May 1918.

Contrasted with the great variety of now forgotten texts read at the time, Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy described the canonical war poetry we read today as an unfortunate but effective “vaccine” against other poetic views, and I, along with other scholars such as Vivien Noakes, have stressed the selectivity of what is taught in schools. Ideally canonical and non-canonical writers would be taught side by side wherever possible, as on the one hand poets like Owen or Sassoon are valuable cornerstones of FWW writing, but on the other hand cannot on their own represent all there is to the literature of the war.



Teaching and learning about First World War in school – some thoughts (Paul Bracey, University of Northampton)

Why should we teach the First World War?

The war clearly had significant 19th century precedents while its impact on the 20th century goes beyond the rise of Hitler to a range of national, European and global developments. Arguably the war needs to be seen in the context of a broader historical canvas making comparisons with warfare over time, and examining the underlying changes in technology and industrial changes that made it different to previous conflicts. The war also needs to be set in a broadly based spatial context – possibly comparing the Western Front with other theatres of conflict both within Europe and beyond.

What resources can we use?

Online resources made available during the last decade present a major shift in the opportunities for teachers to explore both local and national sources. Abbott and Grayson (2011) recommend the use of www.Ancestry.co.uk as a source for First World War service medals and records; the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website to find records of those who died in service; The Long, Long Trail to explore where battalions were located; the National Archives to find war diaries; and the National Inventory of War Memorials to find the names of those whose names are recorded alongside local sources to be found in local libraries and museums. In addition, it is of course possible to visit or obtain locally produced resource packs from county record offices.

How can we provide focus in a vast topic like the First World War?

A combination of enquiry questions, depth studies and diversity provide opportunities to relate individual experiences to their wider context. Philpott, and Guiney (2011) explored diversity by starting with a detailed study of the life of an ordinary soldier by the name of Chris Brunton. Lyndon (2008) and Claire (2008), for example, have produced freely available resource packs based on Walter Tull, the first black officer in the First World War. Tull's experiences were in some respects atypical but provide a basis for comparison with the experiences of other soldiers involved in the war from different backgrounds and contexts.

How is the war represented?

The burst of literature produced at the time, such as war poetry, novels and letters, provide a major opportunity for this. However, in recent years the war has also provided inspiration for writers producing fiction. The essential issue is that we need to appreciate limitations as well as the strengths of a particular novel and how far it relates to evidence. Could this provide a rich opportunity for creating links between History and English teachers?

Commemorative events: National perspectives?

Is there a danger that national commemorations of the First World War could encourage anti-German attitudes? What about different national perspectives? Winter and Prost (2005) argue different nations look at the timescale of the war differently. In France historians relate it to the period 1871-1914, 1939-1940 and 1944; in Germany it terminates not in 1918 but 1933 or 1945 while Russian and American chronologies accept 1917 as a turning point. They argue that perceptions of the war have differed markedly: defeat being denied in Germany; it being considered a painful victory in France; and a mixture of futility and victory in Britain. Could these dates and viewpoints provide the focus for an enquiry into how the past is interpreted? Alternatively, would it be possible to create a pack of events cards which pupils could group to explain the perspectives of different countries? A final consideration is who should be included in any national perspective? Arguably this needs to include both civilians and soldiers from Britain and its empire and include both those who supported and those who challenged notions of national unity.

Teaching and learning about First World War in school – some thoughts contd.

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Digital resources for teaching the First World War

(Kate Lindsay, University of Oxford IT Services)

Oxford's digital collections came into being with a 1994 grant to digitise a number of Wilfred Owen collections worldwide, making available letters, diaries and manuscripts as well as images. In 2007, a new grant allowed an expansion of the digital Owen archive into *The First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, which now includes 8,000 primary sources relating to poets for whom copyright could be obtained, including (next to Owen), Vera Brittain, Isaac Rosenberg and Edward Thomas.

Apart from the poetry archive, the digital collection also houses a photographic archive (sourced from the IWM collections and a selection of modern photographs), an audio collection of interviews with veterans and academic podcasts, short film clips and propaganda films. There is a variety of uses for the documents contained in the archive. For instance, teachers of English may work with the Owen collection of drafts and manuscripts, using the free Wordle software to analyse poetic language and rhetoric. The archive's own Path Creation Tool and Interactive Timelines Tool can also be invaluable for educational activities, either prepared by teachers or given to students as an independent learning task.

The University's *The Great War Archive* is a later addition, a publicly sourced archive in which all items were submitted by members of the public, both through online uploads and roadshows. The archive drew 7,000 contributions in 12 weeks in the UK, and the concept was subsequently picked up for the *Europeana 1914–1918* project, and expanded to other countries. Seven roadshows in Germany in 2011 yielded an overwhelmingly successful 20,000 items and further expansion into Slovenia, Denmark, Ireland, Cyprus and Belgium together with an open invitation for anyone to submit via the website has released over 65,000 items for use in teaching, learning and research under a Creative Commons Licence. With Italy, Romania, France and others scheduled from 2013 onwards this online archive will become an important resource to bring together First World War European histories and experiences.

Europeana 1914–1918 as a multi-national project is selected entirely by the public and offers an incredible potential for researchers in terms of comparative experience of the Great War. It can provide materials for a wide range of school projects, and offers an excellent multi-lingual search engine that makes it easy to access submissions from different countries through one search. It is

also possible to search for specific localities, not just countries.

Plans for Oxford's latest project, *The First World War Centenary: Continuations and Beginnings*, include a community blog, audio and video talks (with a collection of recently recorded academic podcasts already proving extremely popular), and a resource library of worldwide resources gathered through Europeana 1914–1918. Other related initiatives include a Twitter campaign in which the 95th anniversary of the Battle of Arras was re-enacted through live tweets.

References

First World War Poetry Digital Archive:
www.oucscs.ox.ac.uk/www1lit

The Great War Archive:
www.oucscs.ox.ac.uk/www1lit/gwa

Europeana 1914-1918:
www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en

World War I Centenary: Continuations and Beginnings <http://www1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk>



Section 2: The interactive sessions

Roundtable I: Expectations

The first interactive session of the workshop was dedicated to establishing the reasons that had prompted participants to attend the event, and to identifying issues and interests in teaching relevant to teachers and academics.

Chaired by Dr Santanu Das (KCL), the session yielded first insights into classroom practice and problems faced by teachers and academics alike. Das established as key links between the days' presentations by Todman, Potter and Lindsay the attempt to move from sentimentality to genuine understanding, from the dead to the living, and to delve beyond the binaries of patriotism and protest in looking at everyday experiences and motivations of nations at war. He further expressed the wish to see teaching move from current reductive views of the war to a much more nuanced and complex understanding of the period, before opening the discussion to the whole room.

It emerged that an important motivation for teachers to attend the workshop was the need to adapt one's teaching practice to a variety of constraints, ranging from too little time to cover more than a few token texts to the rather different quandary of having to teach FWW history across Years 8, 9 and 10, a challenge in terms of sustaining both the students' interest and the teacher's own enthusiasm. As history lesson time is being cut back to as little as one hour per week, and given the tight constraints

of preparing pupils for assessment as well as university, teachers need to develop creative new ways of working with the time they have got. For the teaching of the First World War, this means a need for greater access to useful research on the war. Some accessible material is offered already by the *English Review* or the *English and Media Centre*, and the Historical Association journal *Teaching History* as well as the *BBC History Magazine*. Teachers will also use JSTOR for their own background reading where available, but it was felt that academic researchers could do more to make their work accessible in more user-friendly formats.

At the same time, teachers need to be aware of the pressures academics are under due to the demands of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a ranking exercise whose focus on specific measurable outputs means little time remains for outreach work that cannot be classed as REF-able "impact". It was suggested that one use for the planned project website might be to link up information about ongoing research as well as teaching resources.

When the discussion moved on to choices of texts and topics for teaching, Wilfred Owen's dominating place on the English syllabus was debated alongside options for teaching the war's history. Owen's position in the teaching canon is problematic because he serves as a valuable starting point in the study of war poetry on the

one hand and is certain to engage students, while on the other hand his poetry tends to narrow down our understanding of the war's literature to a combination of tragedy and trenches. Similarly, a focus on teaching the Western Front and trench warfare in history lessons is likely to capture students' attention, but conveys a sadly limited understanding of the reality of total war. First suggestions on how to tackle these problems included the use of alternative texts and alternative views even of well-established writers such as Owen in English lessons to flesh out students' sense of context and to expand their grasp of Owen into a rounded human being with a sense of humour as well as a sense of pity. For history lessons, it was suggested that the study of established topics such as the Western Front could helpfully be added to by looking at related events and contexts, from the experience of colonial soldiers to the Irish Easter Rising of 1916.

One of the questions that arose early on in the discussion was that of compatibility between teaching First World War writing on the one hand and history on the other. Where English teachers might be teaching war poetry simply as a form of poetry, with little interest in its context, history teachers are trying to achieve completely different goals. However, the majority of participants felt that despite practical and intellectual difficulties in bridging gaps between subject areas, English and History teachers could fruitfully work together to provide students with a more rounded understanding of



Roundtable 1: Expectations contd.

both the war and its literature. Although many schools suffer from the effects of inter-departmental rivalry or failure to communicate, there are plenty of examples of good practice where English and History departments collaborate over extra-curricular events if not teaching, and it was felt that such collaborations are generally desirable, as they help to maximise teaching time and resources. Year 9 in particular was identified as a time of great opportunity for collaborative efforts, as it currently offers the greatest space in the curriculum. While battlefield tours and field trips to museums are a particularly good way of engaging students beyond the obvious, these are subject to time and financial constraints – but even schools that cannot afford to run such trips have a vast wealth of digital materials at their fingertips to work with. Imperial War Museum learning officer Anna Lotinga stressed the value of using thematic approaches and material culture, of getting young people to use virtual resources if ‘real’ objects are not available, or to work with local museums to borrow objects for the classroom. The same applies to access to alternative texts to supplement the study of canonical war writers like Owen, as a multitude of more popular texts and manuscripts are also freely available online.

Last but not least, Dan Todman made the important point that while we may be assuming everyone to be familiar with the myths we wish to move beyond, in reality most people (not only pupils) will in fact know very little about the First World War,

in many cases not even its start and end dates. Todman also highlighted that for many pupils, computer games are the first and sometimes only encounter with the First World War. It was suggested that, in fact, rather than suffering from an over-abundance of empathy many students may have to be re-sensitised after encountering the war purely through video games. Similarly, many teachers will be lacking both knowledge and interest in teaching the war’s literature and history. As a result, one of the key questions for the workshop was how to reach the disengaged and uninterested. How to engage teachers and students, how to balance the need for factual and assessable knowledge with the need to help students deal confidently and independently with the war as a complex literary and historical event, and how to share resources between sectors, institutions and disciplines were identified as further focal points for the following discussion sessions.



The breakout discussion sessions

Bridging sectors

Having identified the need for researchers to make their work available for teachers and secondary-school students, our discussion groups addressed the question of how this can be achieved in practice. Both teachers and researchers are passionate about their work, but are subject to time constraints and external pressures in meeting targets. In addition, academics often struggle to know how to speak to a Year 9 audience and are much more comfortable doing outreach work with sixth formers, and as such need help from teachers to get their research into secondary school classrooms.

Related to this difficulty, it was noted that many educational resources created by academics, archives or museums are pitched at the wrong level, e.g. claiming to be for KS3 when really they are not suitable even for KS4. It was highlighted that liaison for schools tends to go through outreach or admissions departments with a very specific agenda about recruiting students, rather than academics with subject expertise. This will need to change in order to make a genuine difference, and academics also ought to engage more with Sixth Form conferences such as the ones organised by the English Association (EA) and Historical Association (HA). However, the existing exam culture unfortunately affects sixth form conferences in that one could not be held on the war's centenary, as these conferences have to be linked to the exam topics.

Other suggestions included:

- Getting university students (undergraduate and postgraduate) into schools to talk about their research and/or design their own materials.
- Allowing teachers to sit in on a single MA module – not do the assessment, just listen/take notes, free of charge.
- Academics could help with example lesson plans or schemes of work, or answer student questions collated by a teacher via email.
- Teachers could use the Expanded Project Qualification at A Level to create a greater level of student engagement with university-level research.
- Academics could offer conference calls or Skype meetings with local teachers about the 'top ten myths' of the war or 'ten alternative voices to Owen'.
- Encouraging autonomous learning at secondary level by getting older pupils to develop self-prepared lessons for younger students.
- Getting students to undertake an independent web quest, or using learning journals to track progress and independent reading and research.
- Raising awareness among teachers and pupils that there are two kinds of essays, a fact-based essay and an exploratory essay – the former necessary to show what has been learnt, the latter for the learning process that prepares for both school exams and university-level research.

At the same time, there was a feeling that bridging sectors shouldn't be taken too far, and that the transition should be primarily about skills rather than content. In some ways it was felt that one needs to teach students the 'wrong' thing in order to get them started at the basics, so they can be challenged when they are older in order to introduce a sense of progression in their learning. Similarly, it was suggested that transition should not be a priority for this project. Both History and English Literature at university are different to how they are taught at schools, and for good reasons assessment is by necessity harder and more open-ended at university level than it can be in schools. This needs to be accepted as in many ways students should get to university and be surprised and challenged.

Nevertheless, it was seen to be imperative that teachers are researchers in their own right, and talk to researchers in the university sector to keep their teaching practice up to speed, which in many cases is already happening. Access to JSTOR and similar academic resources is hugely important to teachers in this respect, and can usually be provided by local libraries where schools themselves have no access. Sharing resources between universities and schools is also of crucial importance.



The breakout discussion sessions contd.

Bridging subjects

Only two schools represented at the workshop were engaging in cross-curricular activities: Gresham's in Norfolk are using the centenary as a vehicle to organise whole school activities, such as commemorative events and field trips, while at Treviglas College in Newquay the Head of History and Head of English swap teaching duties for a few weeks every summer to establish better mutual understanding and allow students to explore one topic from two disciplinary angles, albeit not related to teaching the First World War.

In most cases, it appears that there is a basic lack of communication between departments, whether out of a sense of inter-departmental rivalry, for personal reasons, or because teaching a topic like the First World War is scheduled for different year groups in different subjects. A recurring complaint was that where the History department teach the First World War in Year 9, First World War writing is taught in Year 8 or 10, preventing any real collaborative teaching. This was generally seen as regrettable because it was felt that the First World War offers excellent scope to collaborate across different subjects.

Kate Lindsay reported that the centenary is used as an opportunity to draw together all kinds of local activities in Oxford, involving not just the university but schools, local councils, etc. There was agreement that now is the time to have these types of conversations, and battlefield tours or other

extra-curricular activities might be very useful in bringing the two subjects together.

Other suggestions for achieving a greater degree of collaboration were to stress to students how closely related English and History A Levels can be, and to encourage them to choose both and work together, rather than pick one over the other. Organising a conference exercise where pupils have to adopt various cross-curricular perspectives, e.g. of a museum curator, journalist, etc. could also facilitate better mutual understanding and collaboration, but would depend on the help of local experts to assist students in establishing their critical positions.

Pressures and obstacles

A number of participants expressed concerns that the centenary might lead to complete boredom and student apathy through sheer overload. Several suggestions were made as to how this could be dealt with: adopting an inter-disciplinary/cross-curricular approach, getting pupils to analyse centenary coverage itself, asking students to compare previous anniversaries and commemorations with current ones, as well as with anniversaries of other events, such as Agincourt or Shakespeare's birth in 1916 and 2016 respectively. Adrian Barlow also pointed out the worrying fact that while research into First World War history and literature at university level is diversifying more and more, its teaching in schools appears to be getting more and more restricted, as less and less material can be covered

and English teachers in particular are often completely dependent on teaching anthologies in their choice of materials.

Apart from the risk of overdoing the teaching of FWW-related material in the wake of the centenary, the perennial problem remains that students tend to forget much of what they are being taught in any case – particularly when faced with a strongly limited image of FWW writing and history in the media. Even if they are taught a diverse programme of study, they might still end up remembering the same small selection of facts and preconceptions. Much of the less canonical (as well as some canonical) sources that could potentially be used to challenge these preconceptions can also unfortunately be extremely racist or otherwise offensive, which is potentially problematic even though a case can be made for such controversial issues to be brought into the classroom for discussion.

Attention was also drawn to an inherent problem with the new government-led curriculum review, which adopts an entirely facts-first approach that doesn't really leave time for practising critical analysis in either subject. Particular frustration emerged with regard to purely content-driven modules, which make it impossible for pupils of lower academic abilities to thrive, whereas the Schools History Project approach offers a positive counter-example. A partisan approach to the National Curriculum was suggested, subverting how "representative FWW poetry" (the phrasing in the current draft KS4 English curriculum) is



The breakout discussion sessions contd.

interpreted. Paul Norgate, OCR exam board representative for English, cautioned, however, that at some point this phrasing would necessarily have to take more specific form as it will have to be translated into actual assessment, at which point a list of sorts will have to be produced.

Last but not least, there are also obstacles in the way of academics collaborating to lend assistance to teachers in the form of resource packs or similar. If two academics from different institutions were to collaborate on creating a school pack on the First World War, their respective institutions would not be happy. Owing to pressures of recruitment, they would only want one logo on the pack so as not to confuse potential applicants.

Myths

In our discussion of the top myths to dispel through teaching, misery was named first, as it encourages wallowing in sentiment rather than exercising critical thinking. Adrian Barlow particularly emphasised being beware of encouraging generalisation of any kind, such as inferring from one poem what the war was like for everyone. Other issues raised were the importance of realising – and making pupils realise – that the war was not just about the Western Front. There was general agreement that other aspects, such as the home front, food rationing, global frontlines, and communication between front and home front also needed to be communicated to pupils. War memorials across the globe could be used as a good

access point to discussing the global nature of war, as information on these is usually readily accessible online. Other top myths suggested were the idea that all women involved in the war were nurses, that the war caused the instant liberation of women, that British soldiers were “lions led by donkeys”, that the war was completely pointless, and that pacifists and conscientious objectors were universally hated.

Reasons for teaching the First World War

For academics, the reasons for teaching the First World War are clear: academics teach modules that directly relate to their research interests. In the case of History, where there is First World War expertise within a department it is common for the topic to appear in different formats across all three years of an UG History degree. This is because it provides students with a broad base to study some of the key issues in 20th century Britain before opening up to more specialised study in Years 2 and 3. In addition, the First World War – with its plethora of resources and archives – is a good basis for independent research projects, a crucial aspect of an UG History degree. It allows students to see that their work is meaningful and not only about the final grade.

English scholars were more reticent about whether the war should be taught. They shared a concern that First World War literature is being used to teach First World War history, whereas one might argue that texts should be taught as texts and not to

teach the war. Questions then followed as to whether the work of Sassoon and Owen should be taught, rather than that of other literary figures such as Shakespeare or Wordsworth. If the conclusion was that Sassoon and Owen should be on the curriculum at the expense of other literary figures, does that suggest that the First World War poets are being taught for reasons other than the study of English?

Teachers and Exam Board representatives shared their perspectives on why they taught (or included) the First World War in their curriculum.

For History teachers:

- The First World War is clearly a seminal moment in 20th century history. It offers a good focal point for modern history, being a kind of turning point in many ways. Moreover, the war provides avenues into exploring other areas such as women's emancipation, colonialism, revolution, etc.
- Whilst the topic allows for broader exploration and a springboard into other issues, it is nicely contained with a clear start and end date.
- Many teachers were aware of the significance of the approaching centenary. They want to teach the First World War to ensure their students are prepared to engage, critically, with the tsunami of coverage in the public domain during this period.



The breakout discussion sessions contd.

For English teachers:

- The First World War is a watershed moment between the Victorian and Edwardian age, helping to understand the onset of modernity.
- First World War writing offers excellent examples of how words can be used for different purposes in different ways.
- First World War poetry allows students to see the genesis of an idea in wartime. It helps students to think about how poetry was created and its context.
- Sassoon and Owen are good to teach at Year 9 because their poetic techniques are very obvious. A reliance on the canon becomes more problematic at older levels, particularly Years 12 and 13 (pre-university).

For teachers in general:

- The subject benefits from a wealth of resources that are available to English and History teachers alike.
- There is enthusiasm for the subject amongst students. They are drawn to the subject and the students' pre-existing interest can be exploited to teach important skills and ideas.
- There would be a significant gap in the curriculum if the First World War was not there.

For the Exam Boards:

- The First World War has been on the curriculum since the introduction of GCSEs (1988), and it would now be very difficult to remove. The '*Daily Mail* test' was alluded to: if the Exam Board took the First World War off the specification, there could be a public outcry.
- With current suggestions around curriculum reform, especially in History, the First World War fits nicely into government aspirations for a more Britain-centric and patriotic curriculum.
- Finally, there is a practical issue; the exam board is required to ensure that 25 per cent of the specification is on British history. The First World War is a good way of meeting that requirement.

No teachers at the symposium suggested that the war should not be taught or that they resented teaching the subject. This is unsurprising given the self-selecting profile of the delegates who volunteered their time during half-term predicated on an already established interest in the war. However, this issue is something important to explore via the questionnaire where a private, anonymous survey will allow individuals to solicit answers that may not be deemed 'acceptable' in public.

Ethical implications

All participants agreed that the First World War should not be taught via a framework of ethical implications. Delegates felt it was dangerous to have moral/ethical implications attached to a particular subject. English teachers noted how a moral approach to First World War literature limited students' perceptions of the literature, encouraging them to view a pro-war poem as 'bad' and an anti-war poem as 'good'. It was agreed by all that students should be taught to look for complexity rather than morality.

However, delegates agreed that there could be purposeful ethical discussions *around* the topic, for example the implications of using technology against civilian populations; genocide in the period before the Second World War; or discussions around the contrasting wartime legacies of a shipwright striker on the home front versus the soldier who fought. Other teachers felt that exposing students to the emotion of war was also an important part of the educational experience. Battlefield visits, such as Tyne Cot, have a place in the teaching of the war. Some students may come away convinced of the futility of the war but that should not mean battlefield tours be excluded entirely.



The breakout discussion sessions contd.

Alice Pettigrew, Institute of Education, acknowledged how different this part of the discussion was to those from the self-selecting teachers in the Holocaust focus groups (as part of the 'Teaching about the Holocaust' project). For them, the purpose of teaching the Holocaust was 'outside' their individual subject areas of History, Religious Education, etc. Teachers spoke of 'taking their History hats off' because teaching the subject was absolutely of moral purpose.

The overall conclusion maintained that it was very much down to the individual teacher. Some will teach Owen as 'futile' because that is all they know (and they are not engaged enough with the subject to approach the topic differently); others will teach it as a chronicle, a series of contradictions.

What topics do you cover/would like to cover when you teach the First World War?

As a starting point for our discussions, teachers were invited to list the topics they currently teach that are related to the First World War.

In English, these were:

- How the war is represented at different times – 1920s, 1960s, etc.
- Owen/Sassoon/*Journey's End*/*Oh! What A Lovely War!*
- The IB does cover poetry in translation. However, most other exam boards avoid that owing to the inherent difficulties.

In History, these were:

- Causes of the war; life in the trenches; the Western Front (Year 9)
- Total War
- Peace Treaties
- 'Lions led by donkeys' debate
- Russian Revolution, 1917

Teachers were then invited to outline the topics they would like to teach:

- Significance and consequences of the war
- Naval aspects, such as the Battle of Jutland
- Using the war to link to other topics on the curriculum such as regime change; democracy unleashed; Fascism; the Cold War.

History teachers agreed that they needed to be given the freedom to go beyond the chronological parameters of 1918 in order to explore the impact of the First World War on the 20th century. English scholars suggested that First World War literature should be used for English language teaching, for example by looking at letters from the war as sources for change in language usage. Other English teachers expressed a desire to move away from pure context to allow an examination of language use from the period.

Teachers expressed a shared frustration with the limited menu of topics currently on offer. This is particular acute at levels below Sixth Form where there is the space to teach more complex and interesting topics. While some teachers felt supported by their schools to teach beyond what was simply being assessed (which often correlates with better results, in their experience), others were acutely aware of constraining issues such as available time and the academic ability of students.

Paul Bracey pointed out the importance of not only thinking about a selection of topics based on personal interest, but also how the selection reflects more general teaching aims. He stressed that the First World War is a fantastic opportunity for addressing many aspects of world history beyond the war itself.



The breakout discussion sessions contd.

Resources

This discussion here focused on the types of First World War resources utilised by delegates in their teaching practice. Some lesser-known examples included:

- Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier* (1918), which was perceived as an interesting contrast to the work of Pat Barker.
- Photographs and pictures, such as the work of Henry Tonks. His 'broken faces' series provide evidence of both a medical and artistic response to the war.
- Popular songs (such as an anthology of soldier songs edited by Cecil Wolf) and drama go some way in countering the propensity to focus on war poetry.
- Getting students to create their own propaganda materials as a creative exercise to teach the war/war writing.

Some teachers discussed the difficulties of using sources that portrayed the harsh reality of war. The work of Henry Tonks, for example, may be deemed inappropriate by some schools/parents, particularly for younger age groups.

English scholars and teachers debated the different types of literature available for use in the classroom. There was a concern over seeing historical fiction as a bridge between the two disciplines. Whilst some teachers saw contemporary writing about

the First World War as a way into the subject, others felt this material had to be handled cautiously, with strict awareness of the underlying sources and an ability to draw out what was contemporary and retrospective. Tim Kendall argued that the best soldier poets of the First World War remain Owen, Sassoon, Gurney et al. and they should be taught. In addition, he felt this created a tension between historians who seek to globalise and internationalise the war (thus exposing students to more varied trans-national sources), and the subject of English Literature, which by its nature is Anglophone.

A common thread between all delegates was the issue of access to resources. For some, there was a call for increased access to particular types of sources, particularly paintings, which can be interpreted by students for their various meanings. However, Kate Lindsay pointed out how stringent copyright laws make using art in the classroom very difficult. Other scholars called for popular texts from the war to be more readily available to contrast with the literary canon. However, most delegates felt that the issue was actually of *too many resources*. Teachers required more time and guidance to be able to sift through the quantities of resources available online and digitally. Some teachers agreed that the sheer volume of choice was sometimes overwhelming.

Perhaps the most pertinent point from this discussion was the recognition that resources are dependant on the way they are taught. For example, staples such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Journey's End* can be explored in context and thus complicated. Equally, they can be taught rigidly as 'anti-war' texts. Resources are dependent on how individual teachers use them. All delegates agreed that the real issue was not availability of resources, but whether they are being used critically.



The breakout discussion sessions contd.

Objectives and purpose of the AHRC project

In the final breakout discussion, delegates were invited to comment on what value they saw in the follow-on survey and its resulting report.

Delegates felt that this was a real opportunity for all involved to reflect on teaching practice, in relation to the First World War, and why the subject is taught. It is helping to avoid a 'lazy' commemoration as the survey and report will help teachers from all sectors to actively reflect on the process of teaching the war and question why they are doing it.

Teachers felt that the overarching message of the project was to get those involved in education to understand 'it was more complicated than that' and that there are traditional narratives, or 'myths', that can be exploded through innovative teaching.

Dan Todman felt that this was an important project to help paint a picture of how the First World War is taught in schools in England. The project is significant for the study of remembrance and will develop an understanding of how popular conceptions of the war are formed. He agreed that academics have a lazy view of this – they assume they know what is happening in schools – but this is the first survey of its kind on the topic. Even teachers agreed that they have little idea of the vast number

of ways the First World War appears in the curriculum and that the report would be useful in helping them to navigate the landscape of different exam boards and specifications. In addition, the resulting report could be used as an 'enabler', giving political capital to academics and teachers to effect change.

The project is also significant in terms of resource development. English teachers, specifically, see the project as a chance to move away from traditional anthologies and to perhaps produce an anthology that is a mixture of prose and poetry, and not all 'misery' literature. Regardless of subject expertise, the report will help to highlight what is useful and what teachers want. For resource designers, such as Kate Lindsay, the report could be used to develop educational material and provide evidence in funding bids for such purposes.

If resource development does stem from the project, it should be in two ways:

1. For the minority of 'keen' teachers, passionate about the war: good examples that help them to remain innovative and engaged with the latest research;
2. For the majority of less engaged teachers: off-the-peg, easily accessible resources that provide variety and nuance with minimal effort.

Exam Board representatives highlighted that the report would be useful in indicating what teachers want and what is out-of-date. This sparked a debate about whether the real focus of the report should be the exam boards. Tim Kendall argued that if the exam boards produce the 'canon' where the 'right' answers come from, then the report needs to target them if it is to effect any substantial change. Teachers are slaves to the exam boards; change has to come from that level. Alternatively, Dan Todman felt that the focus needed to be at government level. Policy-makers need to acknowledge that Higher Education interaction with exam boards is a valuable use of academics' time and should be recognised as such.



Roundtable 2: Closing discussion

Adrian Barlow (English Association) opened the final session by highlighting three important future developments stemming from the symposium:

- 1. A close collaboration between the EA, HA and the project organisers;**
- 2. A special issue of *The Use of English* (EA journal) on First World War writing, to which he warmly invited teacher contributions;**
- 3. The upcoming EA conference on First World War poetry to be held in Oxford in September 2014.**

He then invited participants to comment on their observations regarding the differences between teaching the war at secondary and tertiary level. It transpired that most participants felt there were striking *similarities* between the sectors. The symposium had enlightened both teachers and academics to the pressures on educationalists in both sectors, such as time constraints and the pressure to meet external validation. It was agreed that everyone (teachers, researchers, and students at both levels) can and should

engage in their own research, certainly from Year 8 upwards, albeit on different scales.

An English Literature teacher commented that it would be useful to have an interactive map illustrating how historical attitudes to the war have changed over time. Adrian Barlow agreed that this was a key issue, particularly when one considers that the war was not always a key focus in young people's education, particularly in the inter-war period. Yet, even within the context of a changing National Curriculum, the First World War (from a British perspective) remains a key focus of teaching and this is unlikely to change during the centenary.

English teachers stressed that it would be useful to know the types of questions posed by other disciplines to texts or artefacts, to see how these might differ from their perspective. This spoke to an overarching agreement amongst delegates that there needs to be more cooperation and cross-curricular activity between colleagues in different departments (especially History and English) as well as between colleagues in secondary and HE.

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