

Foreword to the special feature ‘Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education’, edited by Jocelyn Létourneau and Arthur Chapman

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Every day billions of person-hours are spent in the teaching and learning of history in schools around the world. On top of that countless additional hours are spent going to history museums, participating in commemorative holidays and watching *The History Channel* or its equivalent. What do we take away from all this? Are the attempts to expose us to accounts of the past effective? Are different accounts effective in different ways? Do students become more critical consumers of history by participating in history classes, or do they just become more patriotic, perhaps mindlessly so?

These are the kinds of questions posed by the contributors to this special issue of the *London Review of Education* edited by two distinguished scholars of the field. Given the investment we put into teaching and learning history, one would expect that we have long had an active, ongoing discussion of these questions along with a robust research tradition to back it up. But this is not the case. Over the past few decades there has been much more research on the teaching and learning of, say, reading, maths and science than on history instruction. To some extent, this reflects the greater research funding devoted to these other subjects, but it also reflects two other factors.

First, there is a sense in which history instruction involves a more nebulous and complex topic. As all the contributors to this issue note, there are few black or white, right or wrong answers to questions about the past, yet teachers are still given the task of rating students’ performance, meaning that they are dealing with skills that can be harder to describe and assess. For example, Dawes Duraisingh touches on one element of this complex topic by asking how history instruction can connect with students’ lives. And Lévesque suggests that history serves as a sort of GPS for French Canadian students’ identity projects. Issues such as these play a much less important role or are simply absent when it comes to teaching other subjects, and this raises special questions for how we envision the goals and assess the outcomes of history instruction.

A second complicating factor is that discussions of national pasts inevitably move into topics that are ‘political’, raising issues not typically covered in other areas of instruction. In some cases the political aspects of history instruction come through in spades, as in Goldberg’s analysis of the ‘useful past in negotiation’. He provides insight into the uses of history in ‘Jewish–Arab conflict’ and in the process raises points echoed in other cutting-edge writings on ‘narrative negotiation’ by Rauf Garagozov (2005) in the case of conflicts between Armenians and Turks,

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and Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In one way or another, virtually every contributor to this special issue touches on the political dimension of history instruction.

In addition to raising these issues, an important strength of this collection is that the authors take us into concrete claims and methods for investigating history instruction. For example, Angier outlines the notion of agency in narrative as she gives us insight into young South Africans' knowledge about the past. One of the hallmarks of narrative knowledge is that it gives certain actors the agency to push the story forward and positions others as mere bystanders or as victims of what powerful agents do. How and why this is done is a question that has not received very much attention in the past.

Several other contributors provide additional insights into the myriad ways narratives organize our understanding of the past. For example, Holmberg delves into some interesting ideas about 'prospective' and 'retrospective' tellings of history as 'operating frameworks' that need to be taken into account when collecting and analysing narratives. Olofsson and his colleagues give us a tour of history from a standard Swedish perspective that views the world in terms of progress and 'conflict-free' history, a perspective that is coming increasingly into question today in a world where troubling ethno-nationalism is again raising its head. And taking up the case of Flemish students' views of the past in modern Belgium, Van Havere *et al.* lay out a fascinating set of narrative templates that seem to compete for space in the cultural toolkit in unique ways in that case. Finally, Sheehan and Davison examine how history and collective memory vie for place in young New Zealanders' remembrance and commemoration of war.

In making their argument, Sheehan and Davison touch on another of the themes that runs throughout these articles: the unending, seemingly irreducible tension between analytic history and collective memory, and this brings us back to a motivating theme that makes this collection so fascinating and important. Namely, it brings us back to the question of what it is that the world's population is doing – or thinks it is doing – when we spend those billions of hours on thinking and talking about the past every day. In my view, history instruction might be better termed 'memory-and-history' instruction, because it is typically charged both with inculcating an account of the past that allows nations to reproduce themselves as 'mnemonic communities' (Zerubavel, 2003) and also with encouraging students to gain critical perspective on the materials and texts they use to access the past.

I believe one of the goals that Jocelyn Létourneau and Arthur Chapman had for this collected effort was to remind us of the serious limitations of the image of students as empty containers that are going to be filled up with knowledge. Instead, they and their contributors have done a wonderful job of demonstrating how the study of history is best understood in terms of active meaning-making – a process that, to be sure, harnesses narrative tools provided by others in the sociocultural context, but one that never can be understood as simply learning or internalizing these tools. The combination of papers here makes a landmark contribution to this field of study, and one can only hope that the authors continue their work and have more to show all of us soon.

References

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- Zerubavel, E. (2003) *Time Maps: Collective memory and the social shape of the past*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



Related articles published in the *London Review of Education*

This is the foreword to a special feature called 'Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'.

The articles in the feature are as follows:

- Angier, K. (2017) 'In search of historical consciousness: An investigation into young South Africans' knowledge and understanding of "their" national histories'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Dawes Duraisingh, E. (2017) 'Making narrative connections? Exploring how late teens relate their own narratives to the historically significant past'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Goldberg, T. (2017) 'The useful past in negotiation: Adolescents' use of history in negotiation of inter-group conflict'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Grever, M. and Van der Vlies, T. (2017) 'Why national narratives are perpetuated: A literature review on new insights from history textbook research'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Holmberg, U. (2017) "'I was born in the reign ...": Historical orientation in Ugandan students' national narratives'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Létourneau, J. and Chapman, A. (2017) 'Editorial – Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Lévesque, S. (2017) 'History as a "GPS": On the uses of historical narrative for French Canadian students' life orientation and identity'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Olofsson, H., Samuelsson, J., Stolare, M. and Wendell, J. (2017) 'The Swedes and their history'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Sheehan, M. and Davison, M. (2017) "'We need to remember they died for us": How young people in New Zealand make meaning of war remembrance and commemoration of the First World War'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Van Havere, T., Wils, K., Depaepe, F., Verschaffel, L. and Van Nieuwenhuyse, K. (2017) 'Flemish students' historical reference knowledge and narratives of the Belgian national past at the end of secondary education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Wertsch, J.V. (2017) 'Foreword – Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).