Hard Choices: What Does It Mean 'to Be Good at ICT' as a History Educator? a View from England

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Abstract Over the past three decades, developments in new technology and digital communication have led to revolutionary changes to the ways in which history teachers and history teacher educators teach their students about the past. There have also been radical changes in the way that young people get their information about the past outside of formal education, with a much higher proportion of this information being accessed by sources that are not mediated by the university academic, the history textbook, or the history teacher in school. During the same period, in England as in many other countries, there have been continuing arguments about the aims and purposes of teaching young people about the past. What are the implications of these developments for those who teach history? The chapter looks at the recent debate about new technology and history education in England, where competence specifications relating to the use of ICT in the teaching of history have fluctuated dramatically over the past two decades. Analysis of the views of policymakers and practitioners—particularly those who are considered to be 'experts' in the use of new technology in history education—reveals widely divergent views on what teachers and learners need to know about new technology and digital communication. In the final section of the chapter, some conclusions are drawn, which suggest ways forward in terms of enabling history teachers to make the best use of new technology, in a way that is of maximum benefit to effective history teaching, the good of society and the future well-being of the human race. Although the chapter focuses on the English context, the implications of the study are relevant to many other education systems.

Keywords History education · Digital literacy · History and social media · Communities of practice · Expert practitioners · ICT education policy

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Introduction

The past three decades have seen revolutionary developments in new technology and digital communication. There are hard choices to be made by history educators in terms of what their priorities should be in terms of optimising the potential of new technology to improve teaching and learning in history, and in terms of providing a digital education appropriate to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The chapter explores how ideas about the uses of new technology for improving teaching and learning in history have evolved in recent years in England, and considers the implications in terms of what might be the most useful and important things to focus on when preparing history teachers to work in a technology-rich environment.

The first section of the chapter provides a summary of the ways in which new technologies and developments in communications technologies have impacted history education in England over the past three decades. This is followed by a summary of recent debates in England about the aims and purposes of school history over the same period. This is important as it has a direct bearing on the ways in which new technology might advance those aims and purposes.

The second strand of the chapter focuses on the ideas and actions of politicians and policymakers in attempting to optimise the potential of new technology for improving educational outcomes. These are contrasted with the views of practising history teachers about their ideas about 'priorities' in the use of ICT, and in particular, history teachers and teacher educators who have very strong credentials in terms of their deployment of new technology in history teaching. They have published in the field of ICT and history education, either in books, book chapters, and journal articles or through blogs and websites. They have a claim to influence the community of practice of history teachers in England through their large number of 'followers' on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, and their well-attended conference and teacher development presentations. The contrast between the perspectives of policymakers and expert practitioners reveals a stark disjunction between the ideas of the two groups, not just in terms of how new technology might be best used in history teaching, but also, their ideas about what school history is for, and the ways in which it might benefit both the individual learner, and society as a whole.

In the final section of the chapter, some conclusions are drawn, which suggest ways forward in terms of enabling history teachers to make the best use of new technology, in a way that is of maximum benefit to effective history teaching, the good of society, and the future well-being of the human race.

The Impact of New Technology on History Education in England, 1990–2020

The past few decades have seen a revolution in developments in communications technology. Some of these developments were designed specifically for educational purposes (for example, the interactive whiteboard), others were not originally developed with education in mind (for example, PowerPoint and the data projector), but have nonetheless percolated through to the education system and influenced the ways in which teachers teach, and learners learn history (Akanegbu, 2013; Firmin & Genesi, 2013). Well into the twenty-first century, the dominant paradigm for history lessons in English schools was teacher instruction and questioning, combined with the use of the textbook and worksheets. In spite of the high profile of the internet, CD-ROMs, the personal computer, and history simulation programs in the media, comparatively few history teachers were making regular use of new technology (Harrison, 2003; Ofsted, 2007). This was to change rapidly with the increasing availability of data projectors and the Wi-Fi-equipped classroom. In terms of 'killer applications' (that is to say, developments that had a seismic influence on practice), these two developments, in combination with the facility to show PowerPoint presentations to the whole class were to transform the standard way of teaching history lessons for the majority of teachers in England (Haydn, 2013; Walsh, 2017). An OECD study in 2010 found that although there were many ICT applications that were not widely taken up by teachers in England (for instance, the interactive whiteboard), the vast majority of teachers wanted to have a data projector equipped classroom, which was also equipped with Wi-Fi so that resources from the internet could be deployed in teaching sessions (OECD, 2010). The other new technology application which emerged as being 'essential', or ubiquitous was the humble memory stick, which nearly all teachers used to collect and share resources (more recently, the emergence of 'cloud' storage has reduced reliance on memory sticks). Another development that influenced history teachers' practice from around this time was schools' adoption of Virtual Learning Environments (Blackboard, Moodle or similar), which acted as online repositories for departmental resources, homeworks, etc.

Recent years have seen two parallel sets of developments in relation to history education and ICT. The first can be characterised as the development and marketing of fairly expensive and sophisticated hardware and software, which can be used in the teaching and learning of history. In 2004, the then Education Labour Secretary Charles Clarke launched a massive investment in funding interactive whiteboards in English schools. Teachers generally were under a degree of pressure to make full use of the whiteboards, given the scale of this investment. A report on the use of ICT to promote achievement in history by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reported that 'teachers failed to exploit interactive whiteboards or digital projectors fully. In some cases, the whiteboard was as static as the blackboard it replaced' (Ofsted, 2011, para. 135). An OECD survey in 2013 ranked UK investment in interactive whiteboards as the highest in the world, with whiteboards estimated to achieve 93% penetration in UK classrooms by 2016 (OECD, 2013). Not only did

this investment fail to raise pupil attainment; all the evidence suggests that the vast majority of teachers in schools made little or no use of the interactive whiteboard, and tended to use it only as a projection screen (see, for example, Christodoulou, 2020; Hinds, 2018).

Another expensive form of educational technology which evinced the enthusiasm of many policymakers and ICT researchers in England was the tablet computer, most prominently expressed as the aim to equip schools with an iPad for each pupil. This extended to some schools insisting that parents bought iPads for their children as a condition of entry into the school (Helm, 2013). The early government commissioned evaluation projects into 'the iPad classroom' were cautiously positive and enthusiastic, pointing to the potential of tablet computers to enhance engagement and learning (see, for example, Clark and Luckin, 2013; Geer et al., 2017; Perry, 2003). However, Convery, a member of one such evaluation study, argued that often the research was conducted by researchers who had a positive overall view of the potential of new technology to improve teaching and learning, and who often reported 'the potential' of iPads rather than more concrete gains, blaming 'Luddite' teachers as the problem (Convery, 2009).

As with interactive whiteboards, iPads have not had a transformative impact on classroom practice in England, and several years after their introduction and trials and evaluations, there are few history departments in England where one-to-one iPad use is standard pedagogical practice. Two other expensive and 'sophisticated' new technology developments for which there was external advocacy, but at best modest take-up by front-line history teachers were voting technology software (such as *Turning Point,* and similar), and e-portfolio software (OECD, 2010).

The second strand of developments in the use of new technology in history education stemmed from the development of Web 2.0 applications on the internet, and the emergence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and history education websites. In the UK, these have attracted massive numbers of history teachers and student teachers into 'community of practice' conversations, activities, and sharing of resources. In terms of impact on history education practice, the use of the internet and social media far exceeded the influence of interactive whiteboards, e-portfolios, voting technology, iPad classrooms and other expensive hardware and software innovations. There are very few history teachers in England who do not use the internet and social media to acquire and share resources and ideas for teaching. As Richardson (2006) argued, there is something very powerful about being able to share (very quickly, easily, and at no cost) resources and ideas with a web audience that is willing to share back what they thought of those ideas.

So, it could be argued that with the exception of the data projector, and presentation software such as PowerPoint (or similar), the main impact of new technology on history teachers' practice over the past three decades has been their use of the internet and social media.

Politicians and New Technology

From the 1980s onwards, English politicians (of all parties) were unreservedly positive and enthusiastic about the educational potential of new technology, which was seen as a magic wand or 'quick fix' for the perceived gap between educational standards in England and those in high performing Pacific Rim countries.

Conservative Minister David Hunt (1995) predicted that 'the nation which embraces technology most willingly and most effectively will be the winners in tomorrow's world'. As Labour Party leader, and later as Prime Minister, Tony Blair was evangelical about the educational potential of new technology, with a succession of high-profile statements about the essential part that new technology must play in raising educational standards (Blair, 1995, 1997).

Selwyn warned of the vague and inchoate nature of this techno-fundamentalism, accusing policymakers of 'a strictly techno-utopianist and futurist viewpoint, where virtually all of society's problems, be they economic, political, social or ethical, are subject to a technical fix' (Selwyn, 1999, p. 80).

On the rare occasions when the precise advantages of computers in relation to the processes of teaching and learning were specified by politicians, the facility to increase access to information was seen as one of the key educational attributes of new technology. In advocating the extension of internet access in schools, Blair made the point that new technology could increase the volume of information available to learners: 'It's going to bring libraries and archives right into the classroom […] The children can access virtually anything they want' (Blair, 1998).

If learning is seen principally in terms of the transfer of information, new technology, with the facility to transmit massive amounts of information very quickly, would appear to have much to offer. As John Naughton (1998) pointed out, 'It's not every day that you encounter a member of the government who appears to understand the Net. Most politicians (Clinton, Blair, Blunkett, to name just three) see it as a kind of pipe for pumping things into schools and schoolchildren'.

This vision of the potential of ICT to improve educational outcomes, focused to a large extent on the idea of developing a technologically enabled workforce, and using communications technology to transmit a greater volume of information to learners. In the words of Cochrane (1995), 'In future, there will be two types of teacher, the IT literate and the retired'.

In terms of investment in ICT in schools, attention was focused on providing more 'computer rooms', generic ICT training for teachers, money for the purchase of educational CD-roms, money to equip classrooms with interactive whiteboards, and pilot schemes for one-to-one iPad or other small screen devices (OECD, 2010).

Revisions to the National Curriculum in 2013 reduced the importance of teaching digital literacy in the ICT curriculum, which was renamed 'Computing', with increased emphasis on programming and removal of 'social' aspects of new technology. The National Curriculum for English also saw a reduced role for media literacy, with more emphasis on the teaching of the classical 'canon' of English Literature (Department of Education, 2013).

Politicians and School History

As in many other countries, the past decade has seen continuing debates about the aims and purposes of school history. The part that new technology might play in historical education is to at least some extent dependent on what those aims and purposes are. The radical changes in how people receive information about the past (and the present) also have implications for what constitutes a historical education appropriate for present times. The revolution in social media over the past decade means that there has been an increase in the proportion of information about history that people receive from sources that are not mediated by the academic historian, the school teacher, or the history textbook (Haydn & Ribbens, 2017).

This raises the question of whether the aims of school history are 'enduring', or whether a historical education should take account of societal change. One of the paradoxes of the current version of the National Curriculum for history is that it is stated that pupils should be taught about 'the challenges of their time' (DfE, 2013, p. 1), and yet the politicians who brought in the current version of the history curriculum have argued strongly and unapologetically that school history should not be corrupted by notions of 'relevance' and a need to respond to present-day concerns. The Secretary of State who ushered in the present version of the National Curriculum for history argued that 'Curriculum content should contain the classical canon of history […] We should pull back from seeking to make content more relevant to the contemporary concerns and lives of young people' (Gove, 2010).

The call for a return to more traditional forms of school history was not limited to matters of curriculum content but also extended to a call for a return to traditional teaching methods, with more emphasis on 'direct instruction' (teacher exposition), rote learning, testing, the acquisition of facts and the transmission of a more extensive body of knowledge about the past. There were criticisms of what was described as 'progressive' teaching methods such as discussion, group work, and enquiry-based learning. These were seen as less time-efficient compared to direct instruction by the teacher, and the use of textbooks and pupils being given more to read about the past, either in books or through online materials (Gibb, 2016; Gove, 2012).

Scrutiny of the statements of policymakers about ICT and history education from 2010 onwards reveal three significant divergences from earlier policies, and from the current discourse of the majority of history teachers and teacher educators. They are as remarkable for what they do *not* talk about as what they do focus on. First, in contrast to the techno-evangelism of earlier iterations of education policy and curriculum specification, there is little or no mention of new technology as an important issue for history teachers. The current *Teachers' Standards* (Department for Education, 2011) make no reference to the ability of student teachers to use new technology. Second, there is only occasional reference to history student teachers' understanding of history as a form of knowledge, with its distinctive disciplinary features, conventions and procedures for ascertaining the validity of knowledge claims. Unlike many other European countries, English politicians have had little to say about historical consciousness, historical culture or 'historical thinking' (Cajani et al., 2019). Third,

there is hardly any mention of the role that history education might play in developing the digital literacy of young people. This is remarkable given the high profile of this issue in the media, in history education blogs, websites and Twitter feeds, and in many other countries (note the high profile, for example, of Sam Wineburg and Mike Caulfield's work in the US (Caulfield, 2020; Wineburg, 2018). The only Department for Education document addressing online safety and information literacy makes no mention of history as a school subject that might contribute to this agenda (DfE, 2019).

History Teachers, Digital Practices and the Aims and Purposes of School History: The Perspective of Expert Practitioners

Earlier sections of the chapter have looked at what Ball termed 'the context of practice', that is to say, the ways in which history teachers have actually made use of digital technology over the past three decades, and the context of influence and text production—the statements, actions and written policy documents made by politicians and policymakers (Ball, 1990). Scrutiny of these two perspectives reveals a difference between politicians' ideas about the affordances of digital technology in education and the teachers who actually do the job.

Another strand of the enquiry into the use, impact and potential of digital technology to improve teaching and learning in history relates to exploring the views of 'expert' practitioners in the use of new technology in history education. Although Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reports consistently note the considerable variation in the degree to which history teachers and departments make use of new technology (Harrison, 2003; Ofsted, 2007, 2011), findings also report that there are a number of history teachers and teacher educators who are very accomplished at using new technologies to improve history education, and who have considerable influence over the community of practice of history teachers in England. This is evidenced in *Teaching History,* the main professional journal for history teachers in England, in book chapters and academic journals written by these experts, in their well-attended public presentations at history education conferences, and in their large following on history education social media. What insights can be derived from consideration of the views of these expert practitioners?

One of the most obvious points arising from the writing of these expert practitioners is that unlike earlier competence specifications for student teachers it is not a 'coverage' model of expertise. These high-profile practitioners do not have substantial numbers of 'followers' on social media because of the *breadth* of their digital expertise; it is rather that they have focused on particular facets of new technology, and found ways of developing their potential for improving teaching and learning in history. Jones-Nerzic (2013) explores the potential of student-led filmmaking in history; Messer (2013) focuses on the use of wikis; Martin on the use

of ICT to get students to interrogate history datasets (Martin, 2003), Payne and Walsh (2016) explore the challenges of digitising archive collections for use by students, and Lyndon (2013) has experimented with the use of blogs, podcasts and webquests. Many of the articles, chapters, blogs and conference presentations focus on exploring the potential of the internet and Web.2.0 and social media dimensions of digital technology.

Expert status is not dependent on stellar levels of technological expertise; it is not about being brilliant in using an interactive whiteboard, or knowing the advanced features of PowerPoint as a presentation tool, or being able to create sophisticated web pages. Nor does their attention focus on the use of expensive and sophisticated ICT developments. There is very little in their writing or their conference presentations that focuses on interactive whiteboards, e-portfolios, or one-to-one iPad classrooms. Most of the applications that the expert practitioners write about or talk about are cost-free. Several history educators in England have explored the use of web discussion boards to bring the voice of the professional historian into the history classroom (see, for example, Chapman, 2012; Tarr, 2020). Martin (2014) and Tarr (2020), both of whom have a substantial following in the history education community, have promoted the use of Twitter in the history classroom, and there are now hundreds of history teachers in England who use Twitter as a form of professional development (Tarr, 2018).

History teachers in England have made extensive use of digital technology in recent years, but not in the technicist way that policymakers envisaged, with their emphasis on teachers using new technology to develop the ICT skills of their students. Looking at 'the historical record' of history teachers' use of digital technology in England, its most influential attribute has been the facility it offers to collect and share useful resources and ideas, and to develop history teacher networks to discuss and share good practice (Haydn & Ribbens, 2017; Walsh, 2003).

But part of the difference between the vision of history educators and policymakers about what digital technology had to offer in history education was not down to ideas about what new technology could offer, but about the aims and purposes of school history. As noted earlier in this chapter, politicians wanted more emphasis on the transmission of substantive historical knowledge of the past, particularly in relation to the national story. The majority of history teachers in England were keen to retain the previous emphasis on history as a form of knowledge, with its disciplinary concepts and emphasis on the importance of understanding the status of historical knowledge. A Historical Association survey of a proposed revision of the National Curriculum for history which drastically increased the content of the history curriculum, particularly in terms of the proportion of British history to be taught, found that 96% of the 545 history teachers who responded were strongly opposed to the proposed new curriculum (Mansell**,** 2013). A sense of the beliefs of experienced and expert history teachers in England can be gleaned from a perusal of articles over the past decade in *Teaching History,* the main professional journal for history teachers in England, and the public media pronouncements of influential experts in history education on their blogs and Twitter feeds. A study of these documents reveals that most leading history educators in England speak of the importance of *both* substantive subject

knowledge *and* disciplinary knowledge of history. There is also widespread support for a socially relevant form of school history, which relates the past to the present and addresses current issues in society. In the words of the Schools History Project, one of the main history teacher associations in England,

> A determination to connect history to young people's lives was the foundation of the original Schools Council History Project [...] As history educators we need to make our subject meaningful for all children and young people by relating history to their lives in the 21st century. The Project strives for a history curriculum which encourages children and young people to become curious, to develop their own opinions and values based on a respect for evidence, and to build a deeper understanding of the present by engaging with and questioning the past.
>
> (SHP, 2020)

This vision of school history is different in emphasis from the idea of the classical 'canon' of the national past which has foregrounded politicians' statements about the aims and purposes of school history over the past decade. It has profound implications for the ways in which the digital revolution of the past decade of history education might influence the teaching of history.

As early as 2011, Cannadine et al. pointed out that the digital revolution was having a major impact on the way that young people got their information about the past:

> There can be no doubt that both inside the classroom and beyond, children today engage with history, and apprehend the past by a range of virtual, digital, visual and electronic means that was unimaginable a generation ago. Taking the long view, this is bound to have a greater impact in the classroom than the imposition of a National Curriculum – in history or indeed in any other subject.
>
> (Cannadine et al., 2011, p. 232)

Wineburg also regarded these developments as of such importance that 'we must rethink how we teach kids every subject' (Wineburg, 2019a, 2019b), whilst focusing primarily on the implications for the teaching of history (Wineburg, 2018). Wineburg's work has already become very influential in the English history teaching community but has not been mentioned (or perhaps even read?) by policymakers who continue to champion a Hirschian view of learning and curriculum.

As Blair (1998) had foreseen, the digital revolution meant that 'children can access virtually anything they want', but this was not necessarily a good thing given the exponential increase in the amount of 'bad history' that they were to be exposed to (Haydn, 2017). English politicians seemed to be oblivious or unconcerned about the arrival of the 'post-truth' era, the rise of populist nationalism, and consequent threats to liberal democracies worldwide (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; McIntyre, 2018), or were of the view that the most appropriate response was to revert to the traditional modes of history teaching which pertained prior to the 1970s. But for many history educators, these developments rang alarm bells, and brought about a call for the development of digital and information literacy to be an important aim of history education (see, for example, Walsh, 2008, 2017; Wineburg, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). This was not just about the quality of history education, it was

about dangers to society and civilisation, and the ways in which an appropriate and high-quality historical education might alleviate some of these threats. For many history teachers and teacher educators, in terms of what was important that student teachers should know about the history and new technology, the development of pupils' digital literacy, and their ability to discern between 'good' and 'bad' history in the public domain became more urgent and important than developing their technical competence in various ICT applications, and the facility of digital technology to increase the volume of substantive historical information which could be transmitted to and between learners.

Ben Walsh, a high-profile history educator in England has argued that as well as history teaching being part of the solution to the potential problem of 'bad history' on the internet, an emphasis on digital literacy could play an important part in reminding pupils or the relevance and importance of history to their lives (Walsh, 2017). In 2008, well before 'post-truth' became the Oxford English dictionary's 'word of the year', Walsh argued for the need for 'historical thinking' in an information age:

> Historical thinking can encourage students to think critically about how lazy stereotypes about social, racial or ethnic groups have been manufactured and reinforced over time. Proper historical thinking can also equip students with the intellectual equipment required to see through the approaches used by extremist organisations which use historical facts in particular ways to peddle particular views.
>
> (Walsh, 2008, p. 9)

The digital revolution has implications for pupils' understanding of democracy, and the vocabulary of provenance which has always been part of historical education. It is no longer enough to teach pupils about the secret ballot, the rule of law, separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, and the sovereignty of parliament: they need to also know what populism is (and its history), what a demagogue is, about 'the manufacture of consent', and 'outsider groups', what 'dead catting' is, and what 'playing the race card' means. It is no longer enough to teach pupils about bias, unwitting testimony and corroboration: they need to know what 'astroturfing' is, and about boots, trolling, the backfire effect, digital gaslighting and 'doxing' (Haydn, 2019). Rather than being shielded from 'bad history', pupils need to be exposed to dubious and mendacious historical claims on the internet, and it needs to be explained to them why it's 'bad history', why it is deployed, how it achieves its objectives, and how to recognise it.

Important though the work of Walsh, Wineburg and others is in this respect, it is not enough to simply furnish young people with the intellectual tools to discern good history from bad. Lack of respect for truth and evidence is a major problem in modern societies. For politicians to be caught in a lie no longer serves as an impediment to popular support. One of the reasons that history is potentially such a valuable aid to what Wineburg has termed 'civic literacy' is that respect for evidence and concern for truth are central to the discipline. As Lipscomb (2016) remarked, 'You can't be a historian and a liar'. As well as giving young people the intellectual and practical tools for 'getting at the truth', there is a moral and ethical basis to history which should also be made explicit in the teaching of history. Concern for truth and accuracy,

and professional integrity are some of the qualities which delineate good historians from bad ones. Oancea and Furlong trace this stand of civic virtue back to Aristotle: 'Practical wisdom or the capacity or predisposition to act truthfully and with reason in matters of deliberation, thus with a strong ethical component' (Oancea & Furlong, 2007). An important part of a historical education relevant to the digital age is to get young people to understand that the internet and social media have contributors who try to use history for immoral and unethical present-day purposes, and some who use it in a decent and ethical way. It is important that learners encounter both types of contributions.

Conclusions

The ideas of policymakers and the history education community of practice in England about the impact and potential of digital technology on the teaching of history are not diametrically opposed. Neither group is 'anti-technology', and there is consensus that many facets of new technology enable teachers to teach history more effectively. But differing ideas about the aims and purposes of a historical education mean that the two groups have different views about what features of digital technology are most important for history student teachers to engage with and become proficient in. For most history educators in England, the increase in access to information about the past is only a positive attribute of digital technology if it is accompanied by the development of a digitally literate audience who has the ability to make intelligent and well-informed judgements about the information they receive via the internet and social media. As well as being knowledgeable about the past, young people need to be discerning in their use of information about the past. They need to be able to tell the difference between 'good' and 'bad' history and to see through the mendacious and malign conspiracy theories that accompany the discussion of many current world problems.

In a 2010 OECD study of ICT use in teacher education, several experienced initial teacher education tutors who were considered to be 'experts' in their use of ICT remarked on the close links between lobby groups representing the technology industry and the Department of Education, and the pressure on schools and universities to purchase particular hardware and software packages. One referred to these commercial pressures as 'a slightly different but just as unhealthy equivalent of the military-industrial complex' (OECD, 2010). This chapter argues that policymakers should pay greater attention to the views of education professionals if they are to optimise the role that digital media might play in contributing to 'the public good'.

Given how things are at present in the world, with controversies and conspiracy theories around climate change, the environment, the Coronavirus crisis, migration, tax and many other global problems, in terms of history education's role in 'the good society', and the health and vitality of liberal democracies, the development of young people's digital literacy, and respect for truth and evidence, are perhaps history education's most important contributions.

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