

History in Schools

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. The session is suitable for students at any stage in their undergraduate studies.

Context and aim

This seminar looks to interrogate some of the problems and controversies surrounding the teaching of history in schools, and to get students to think about the compromises and political imperatives which are involved in selection as a necessary part of any school history curriculum. Students are encouraged to reflect upon their own learning of history as well as the ways in which this might have been guided by wider forces (political and social), but also to consider that it is inevitable that broader contexts will influence and delimit subject choice and approaches to the past.

Preparation

Ahead of the session, students should read:

Lloyd Bowen, 'History in Schools', in Tracey Loughran (ed.), *A Practical Guide to Studying History: Skills and Approaches*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2026).

They should also:

- Jot down the history subjects which they have covered in their schooling.
- Note some areas which they have not studied at school, but which they think should be included in the education of a citizen in the twenty-first century.
- Provide a few sentences of reflection on the ways in which they think their history education has been shaped by local or national policy decisions.

Description of activity

Introduction to the seminar [5 minutes]

The tutor should briefly introduce the concepts covered in the chapter about diversity of history curricula and the state's interest in history teaching. They should solicit any questions on matters that are unclear or uncertain. They should also introduce the structure of the seminar and reassure students that while the discussion ranges over cultural backgrounds and expectations with respect to the various history education experiences in the room, no value judgements will be made on the nature of those experiences.

Part 1: Small-group work [15 minutes]

In small groups, students should compare the subject areas they have identified as being covered in their history education. They should note where there are commonalities but also differences.

The group members should also note down the different subject areas which they thought should be included in a history education but currently are not.

After a period of discussion, these similarities and differences should be reported back to the class at large and collected together on a whiteboard under the headings 'Included' and 'Not Included'.

Part 2: Small-group discussion [15 minutes]

In the light of the subjects collected on the whiteboard under the headings of 'Included' and 'Not Included' in their history education, students should discuss the following questions in small groups:

- How can we account for those areas that have not been covered in our historical education? Were these omissions a result of policy or of other factors?
- What forces have shaped the inclusion of areas which are found in our historical education? Were these omissions a result of policy or of other factors?
- Should our history education in school be expanded? If so, how?
- What are the practical problems of trying to include more subject coverage in school history lessons?

The groups should then report back to the class at large under these headings, and a discussion should be facilitated as to the question of inclusion and the question of exclusion in history teaching and some of the possible reasons behind this.

Part 3: Plenary discussion [15 minutes]

In the light of the discussions already undertaken around this subject, the whole class will be asked to agree or disagree (and to give reasons for their position) with the following statement:

National governments have a legitimate interest in determining the nature of their citizens' historical education.

A debate on this point should be conducted with examples drawn from the reading and from the class experiences. The question of state 'interference' along with practical problems of inclusion and exclusion should be addressed.

If there is sufficient time, a further point of discussion might be addressed in terms of the changing nature of the historical discipline:

At university, we discover that history is always contested and contestable. How can history be taught in schools around an agreed body of knowledge in the light of this discovery?