

Teaching of history is no longer stuck in the past, so let's not leave it there

LET'S be clear about one thing: Ruairi Quinn's desire to allow all secondary school students to opt out of history before the Junior Certificate will effectively kill the teaching of the subject in this country in a short matter of time.

Experience elsewhere shows that giving students the opportunity to drop history inevitably leads most of them to pick other subjects. This in turn means that undergraduates who have not studied history in school chose other subjects in college. Soon, there are no qualified teachers and so even students who want to study history cannot do so. Within a generation, history could become as Latin is today; a subject limited to a few elite schools.

This is not scaremongering. This process is already well under way in Britain where the study of history has been on the backfoot since the Thatcher years, to the dismay of the present government which is currently considering making the subject compulsory (again).

So, let's not be in any doubt about what the minister and his advisers are proposing; it is the effective abolition of history as a mainstream subject in our schools.

Curiously, this comes at a time when interest in history is close to an all-time high. The numbers taking History in the Leaving Certificate has increased substantially since the introduction of the new syllabus, while the ratings of history programmes on both Newstalk and RTE attest to the subject's popularity.

Of course, some people won't shed any tears. History, taught badly, is among the most tedious of subjects. The irony is that Mr Quinn is about to abolish history teaching just as the internet opens up thrilling new ways to experience our past.

Archive films, voice recordings, games, the ability to look at ancient texts and access libraries anywhere in the world as well as new ways to analyse data using number-crunching programs or crowd sourcing all offer new ways to teach students about the past. Thanks to the internet, the smallest rural school has access to more historical sources than the greatest universities did 20 years ago. Anybody who doubts these new teaching materials exist should take a look at the documentation on Century Ireland (rte.ie/centuryireland), and compare it to the text books they used in school. History can be exciting thanks to new technology but that technology also helps to answer the most fundamental question of all – why study history at all?

That the internet is an ideal medium for teaching history is no coincidence – history is the ideal guide to those trying to negotiate the hundreds of sources of information available to most of us these days.

That is a big claim but what other subject places such emphasis on interrogation and verification – the two core skills needed to negotiate the flood of information that comes our way these days?

WHAT other subject insists that we put things in sequence, judge their importance, think about the consequences and hold people responsible for their actions? To study of history is to insist that the order in which things happen is important and explains why we are

where we are. History is a kind of cultural alphabet that equips us to understand and discuss the present.

Without having that alphabet, it is impossible to be the sort of critical citizen that society needs. Without forensic skills, it is difficult to take part in the debates that shape our present and future. It is its honing of the mind's skills of discovery, discrimination and assessment that the true relevance of all history – not just recent history – lies

To be sure, there are other subjects that teach some of these skills. The sciences place great emphasis on observation and the art of deduction. The social sciences, which Mr Quinn believes should replace history, sometimes deal with important moral questions.

What sets history apart is that it is concerned with the real world and human beings inhabit. The lesson from history is that stuff happens. Sometimes unexpectedly and dramatically. Sometimes slowly.

It doesn't matter; historians deal with the world as it is, not as we might wish it was. It is good to be critical and to seek reform: these, after all, are historical skills; but in undermining history Ruairi Quinn risks depriving generations of Irish people of the very skills necessary to understand how we got to be where we are, what decisions, good and bad, brought us here, and how we should move on.

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