

## The importance of humanities subjects

**David Lambert** argues that the humanities are essential to education for a just and sustainable world. He focuses on the importance of subject knowledge and makes the case for humanities being a core part of all 14-19 diplomas.

**Professor David Lambert** was a comprehensive school teacher of geography for 12 years, becoming a deputy Headteacher. He has had a second career as a teacher educator and trainer at the University of London Institute of Education, during which time he authored numerous articles and books mainly in the field of geography education. In 2002 he took up the full time post of Chief Executive of the Geographical Association (GA). Shortly afterwards he became an adviser for geography education to the government, as part of the Action Plan for Geography jointly led with the Royal Geographical Society. In 2007 he was appointed Professor of Geography Education at the Institute, a post he shares with his continuing leadership of the GA.

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The Humanities are currently marginalised at all levels. This paper briefly addresses why this matters and why this needs to be reversed.

Often the secondary curriculum is seen as a collection of subjects which have remained much the same since 1904. There remains an assumption, reinforced through the National Curriculum, that knowledge can, and should, be divided into subjects for the benefit of the learner. This view can be defended (e.g. within the current 14-19 Curriculum Review conducted by the Nuffield Foundation: [www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk](http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk)). But it is under attack from a number of sides.

The erosion of subjects comes from:

- a. the growth of interest in the kinds of *vocational* preparation the school curriculum can (or should) provide as opposed to ‘academic’ subjects,
- b. *philosophical* questioning of the appropriateness of ‘compartmentalised’ knowledge in the modern world (leading to a preference for ‘transferable skills’ and ‘competences’ over knowledge and understanding) and
- c. concerns about ‘the whole child’ and *preparation for life*, following the Every Child Matters agenda and the re-designation of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) into the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF).

It is interesting, in this context, that I was asked to write a think piece on ‘the humanities’. I am happy to do so, but from the outset I should make it clear that my understanding of the humanities is as an umbrella term for a number of contributing subjects. This includes my own, geography, but I also note that geography contributes to other areas of experience too, such as science and the arts.

An immediate issue is to delimit the humanities – which subjects contribute? This is an even more difficult question when we take on board Richard Pring’s observations about the ill-defined nature of ‘subjects’:

*“(‘subject’) is a fairly elastic concept. ‘History’ could be divided into several subjects – medieval or modern history, economic or social history, Welsh or Scottish history and so on. The boundaries are fluid. Subjects merge and alter. ... And there are new subjects like Media studies ... What all these have in common is an identifiable content of knowledge, understanding and skills.”<sup>1</sup>*

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The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust have settled on the following subjects making up the humanities specialism: English, Geography, History, Citizenship, Religious Education, Classics. The Trust also refers to humanities itself as a 'subject'.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, subjects are significant, even if a school decides that its starting point of curriculum design is young people's interests – implying topics and themes such as climate change or fair trade. The significance of subjects is recognised by government<sup>2</sup>, and other bodies such as the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET):

*“There are those who look upon subject teaching as the transmission of slabs of content for no worthier purpose than examination success, and the subject teacher, operating within a highly restricted pedagogical range, as having no loftier ambition than to crowd pupils’ heads with facts. Of course, such characterisations represent an absurd caricature of subject teaching. Properly conceived, however they differentiate and coalesce over time, subjects constitute the available ways we have of exploring and interpreting the world of subjective experience, of analysing the social environment and of making sense of the natural world. It is through subject study that learners acquire historical, scientific, mathematical and other forms of understanding; and it is through subject study that learners develop the capacity to engage in the distinctive modes of investigation and analysis through which human experience is differentiated and extensions of human understanding are achieved. That rationale does not by any means imply that knowledge can only be mediated through subject specific teaching; nor does it discount the value for particular purposes of combining knowledge that is drawn from discrete disciplines. Clearly, for many, including early years and primary teachers, that integrated approach is the preferred mode of knowledge engagement.*

*Moreover, subjects are communities of debate and argumentation, of exploration and criticism, of conjecture and refutation; they are pursuits in which knowledge, in due recognition of its provisionality, is open to continuous reconstruction. As such, subjects are educational resources of remarkable power, offering unlimited scope for realising an enormous range of educational purposes for enquiry and reflection, for hypothesising and the interrogation of evidence, for adjudicating between the valuable and the meretricious; for the use of the imagination and creativity; for the examination of human motive and the improbability of the social condition; for coming to terms with the responsibilities of*

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*citizenship; for promoting personal, social and environmental competence; and much else besides.*<sup>8</sup>

I have argued, with Martin Roberts, an historian and former Headteacher, that the main aim of education in a modern democracy is to create autonomous individuals who are able to make informed and worthwhile choices as individuals, as citizens and as workers. Such autonomy, leading to informed and worthwhile decision-making, is impossible without understanding human experience and the interactions of humans with each other and with their natural (and economic, social and cultural) environment.

For such understanding the humanities subjects are vital and, in the secondary school curriculum, this must include specialist history and geography teaching. Because of the insights they give into human behaviour these subjects are as important as English, mathematics, science or ICT, especially to older pupils who are moving through adolescence to adulthood with all its responsibilities and rights. Consequently history and geography should be required in the education of **all** students up to the age of 18

History offers to all young people a distinct and powerful instrument for comprehending human behaviour. It interrogates primary evidence and evaluates this evidence for accuracy and possible bias. It provides an understanding of one's origins and a sense of identity through family, local, national and global history. It encourages a healthy scepticism, a vital characteristic if young democratic citizens are to make informed and worthwhile choices in an age of political 'spin' and media manipulation.

Significant historical themes that all young people should have the opportunity of addressing in the 14-19 curriculum should include the big issues of our time; e.g. the Middle East, the origins and spread of industrialisation and consumerism, of democracy, socialism and capitalism, of changing gender roles.

Geography provides young people with the opportunity to appreciate the significance of place, space and scale. It explores the interdependence of the physical and human worlds which are essential for all young people if they are to make sense of their experiences of the world around them and through that understanding make informed and worthwhile choices about their actions in relation to both their immediate locality and broader environmental issues. It also contributes powerfully to an individual's sense of identity and belonging, and intercultural understanding.

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Significant geographical themes could include global climate change and its possible impact, sustainable development, energy supply, possible conflicts over water rights; also issues vital to young people if they are to understand their role as potential productive producers as well as consumers, e.g. economic globalisation and its impact.

In the next few years we anticipate that the proportion of 14-19 year olds staying on in some form of education and training will increase to virtually 100%. In the context of substantial changes to the relationships between GCSE, AS/A2 and vocational courses<sup>4</sup>, it can be hoped that overarching aims for the whole school curriculum can be agreed nationally. In this time of significant curricular change, we would argue for a new required humanities component of c.10% of curriculum time, i.e. 90-100 hours per annum, with a variety of modular courses being designed appropriate to the learners' needs, combining discrete complementary historical and geographical modules, taught by specialists who have the 'synoptic capacity' to engage fruitfully with the subject discipline.

Without a substantial humanities component, young people will be restricted in their capacity to make sense of the complex, unequal, fast-changing and often dangerous world they live in, to the detriment of the quality of their lives and of the society to which they belong.

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<sup>1</sup> Pring R (2005) The Strengths and Limitations of 'Subjects' Discussion Paper for the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training ([www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk](http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk))

<sup>2</sup> For example the strong *Subject Specialisms* statement from Secretary of State Charles Clarke in 2003 and the subsequent launch of the Council for Subject Associations (CfSA) in September 2007

<sup>3</sup> Kirk G and Broadhead P (2007) *Every Child Matters and Teacher Education: A UCET Position Paper*, London: UCET Occasional Paper No 17, (para 39)

<sup>4</sup> Note the surprise announcement from the DCSF, in October 2007, of three new Diploma lines, in science, modern foreign languages and the humanities – to be introduced in the context of a full GCSE and A level review in 2013.