**‘Theory’ as the practice of asking questions: moving second year History undergraduates from knowledge acquisition to knowledge construction in a UK university.**

‘Theory’ is surprisingly difficult to teach well to students studying History in Higher Education. Part of the difficulty lies in defining what we mean by ‘theory’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Routinely, we use the term ‘theory’ to mean one thing, and students hear us as meaning another. Good teaching of theory requires a good understanding of what we, as educators, mean by ‘theory’ in the teaching of history and a good understanding of what students *think* we mean by it. The process of ‘decoding’ the discipline of history is a core part of this: understanding what students *don’t* understand about the nature of the discipline, because we’ve taken it as given and haven’t taught it to them (Shopkow et al, 2012). We need to be clear to ourselves about the uses and value of theory, and thereby why we think our students need to understand it.

Consequently, we also need powerful pedagogic strategies that enable students to understand and use ‘theory’ effectively. This paper explores one such strategy, adopted in teaching second year History students at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, in the UK. In this teaching strategy, theory is presented as a practice, not a body of knowledge; and students need to *do* theory, not *learn* it. The essay roots this strategy within inquiry-based learning, but also argues that this practice needs to be taught explicitly as a ‘grammar’ of enquiry. We cannot expect all of our students to acquire good theoretical skills without some initial direction and guidance to this enquiry.

Why theory?

Before considering *how* we want to teach theory, it is useful to remember *why* we want to teach it. ‘Theory’ is normally taught as an element of skills training, rather than as intellectual history in its own right. Although it is interesting to know something of intellectual history, as a branch of study it is not an essential element in most history degrees. ‘Theory’, on the other hand, is useful because it frames our research.

Theory enables us to put boundaries on what we investigate, so that we can provide coherence to the vast and unbounded multiplicities of ‘the past’. Theories of history and historical change lead one historian, for example, to seek explanations for what has happened in the past in the structures of government, while leading another to focus on the agency of politicians, or of corporations theorized as if having personal agency (Halldén, 1997: 208). Theory defines the ‘motors of history’ that will provide our explanatory frameworks; and points us to where we look for agency and structural contexts.

By ‘theory’, then, we mean the frameworks we use to make sense of the past. The past is inchoate, unstable, unruly: an undefined mass of event and transformation. Our work as historians is to provide some shape and explanation to these events and transformations that define the passage of time. Theory provides us with ideas about what makes change happen and about the agents that bring about change. These theoretical approaches encompass the basic ‘procedural concepts’ of the discipline, such as empathy, progress, continuity, change, historical significance (Lévesque, 2009). But they are *specific* positions about what requires empathy from the historian; what stimulates change; what is significant in the past. As a discipline, we tend to consider the most important, most canonical, works of historical research to be those that add to theory, not because theory has more inherent value than empirical findings, but because theory provides us with transferable tools that we can use across the discipline.

Of course, historians do not always recognise that they are using theory. For example, history was long regarded primarily as an account of the actions of rulers of empires and nation states, without acknowledging that this entailed a theoretical position about the importance of political boundaries, and the significance of individual power-holders, in producing change. However, the past is now also analysed in many other ways, in response to new theoretical approaches. We might now be as likely to write accounts of how physical geography, or ordinary people’s actions, or attitudes towards bodies or ways of responding to emotions, have created change in the past. Recognising and acknowledging the theory that underpins these decisions is a key skill in literature review, as well as in formulating one’s own approaches to research.

The importance of theory in doing historical research is based on a particular understanding of what ‘research’ is. As Philippa Levy and Robert Petrulis beautifully illustrated in their 2012 study of first year humanities students in UK Higher Education, students do not, on the whole, conceptualise ‘research’ in the same way that historians do, particularly during their first year of study. Many students in Levy and Petrulis’ study thought of research as *gathering information*, with a sense that ‘real’ research was separate from their own learning experiences. Students tend to work largely within a ‘knowledge acquisition’ mode, rather than a ‘knowledge construction’ mode (Brown et al.1989; Duffy and Jonassen, 1992). Our ways of teaching and testing tend to reinforce this (Levy and Petrulis, 2012: 98). When we set students projects and research tasks, we normally present these as ‘skills training’, implicitly distinct from the default model of knowledge transmission and testing. This paper argues that we need a different pedagogy to introduce students to research. Specifically, it considers how we can encourage students to use and recognise ‘theory’ as a tool in all their work, if they are to become effective independent researchers and learners.

A ‘grammar’ of learning

Of course, in all teaching, we need a diversity of pedagogic strategies. Not all students learn in the same way. In language learning, we know that some students learn best through immersion, while others need a framework of grammar. A similar thing happens when trying to teach undergraduate history students how to do ‘research’; that is, when we try to teach them how to become independent knowledge-constructors, rather than recounting or interpreting others’ constructions of ‘the past’. Many students – particularly the stronger candidates – simply pick up key skills and theoretical approaches when they start their research projects, in the same way that immersion linguists use complex grammatical structures in a new language, without being consciously aware of them.

A survey of the course descriptions for History across HE institutions in the UK indicates that the default mode for presenting and teaching research skills is this ‘immersion’ model. Students are introduced to finding and interpretative skills as part of doing their own research projects. Often, these projects are linked to a module that teaches theory, either under an overall ‘concepts and methods’/‘theory and practice’ umbrella, or as supplementary teaching alongside the project. For example, at the University of Birmingham, ‘lectures on the major schools of historical thought are backed up by seminars in which students can see how these schools are represented in their own particular project’. (University of Birmingham, 2017)

This curriculum makes perfect sense, especially for students who find it easy to pick up research skills through immersion. It is no surprise that some variant of this approach is common in History departments in UK Higher Education, as a survey of the descriptions of first year teaching on university web pages will show. But there is a fissure at the heart of this practice. On the one hand, students are encouraged to complete an active discovering project, either individually or in groups, often using local archives. On the other hand, theory and concepts are taught separately as a body of knowledge. Classes on ‘research skills’ tend towards the specifics of gathering and interpreting data: how to use an archive; how and when to do oral interviews; how to use visual and material resources; how to organise and interpret this material in order to discover something about the past. The discoveries tend to be content-driven: ‘finding out about’, not ‘finding a way to think about’.

Of course, these two are always in dynamic conversation, as the ‘immersion’ student understands implicitly. But other students – many students – can see ‘finding out about’ and ‘thinking theoretically about’ as separate activities. Theory appears, at best, as contingent to the practice of the research project. It is often taught in separate classes and routinely examined in a different way. The teaching and testing of ‘theory’ tends to present it as information to be learned, rather than as an *activity* to be carried out. Moreover, as Berti’s 1994 study of children’s use of concepts demonstrated, the fact that a student can use a concept is not a guarantee that the concept has been fully understood. The ‘immersion’ model of acquiring research skills leaves many students unable to acquire the critical analysis they need: they continue primarily to seek information, rather than to frame inquiry and to actively construct knowledge.

Recognising this difficulty led me to start asking what teaching the ‘grammar’ of research might look like, as an alternative to learning through ‘immersion’. I was interested in the multiple elements that collectively interact to produce ‘research’, in the same way that nouns, verbs, conjugations, declensions, ideophones, prepositions and so forth interact in multiple ways to produce language. How could we help students who find it easier to learn with grammar, rather than immersion, to become ‘fluent’ in historical research?

In producing a grammar, linguists must first identify the ‘parts of speech’. In devising a ‘grammar of research’ for our students at the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol, I had to identify the ‘parts of speech’ – the individual acts of research – involved in a complete research project. What made this ‘grammar’ approach different from the previous training in research skills was that each component was made explicit – no-one was expected to just ‘get it’. These components included locating primary sources (textual, visual, material); reading primary sources for overt and implicit meaning; ways of interpreting primary sources (empirical, discursive, deconstructive etc.); ways of using secondary material (for data, for argument, for analytical framing etc.); organising and presenting findings (voice, rhetoric, protagonists, points of view); genres of writing; using statistical, oral and material data; and so on. The more my team thought about it, the more elements we identified in the process of completing a research project.

Yet, however complex the model, we were always clear that right at the start of the ‘grammar’ we needed to introduce theory. And, in the same way that verb forms keep returning in more complex ways throughout the learning of a language’s grammar, theory had to be integral to every step in learning the ‘grammar of research’. It was integrated as an *activity* in the work. To use another metaphor, we gave the students a toolbox, in which they knew and understood the specific uses of every tool in the box, including the uses of theory.

‘Theory’ as a verb, not a noun

‘Theory’, then, is one part of the ‘grammar of research’, one of the tools in the box. When it is thought of in these terms, it becomes clearer what it is, and what it is not; and what students need to know of theory as part of their research practice. Immediately, it becomes evident that the ‘theory of history’ – what history *is* – is something of a distraction. This is significant, given that theories *of* history often provide the initial framing for theory teaching in history courses at British universities. Most students are aware of the debates about ‘what is history?’ In the UK, they’ve probably come across E. H. Carr’s *What is History?* (1962), if nothing else; and perhaps even Hayden White’s proposition, following Kant, that ‘we are free to conceive history as we please just as we are free to make of it what we will’ (2014 [1973], p433). These questions are undoubtedly good to discuss, particularly for those interested in intellectual history. But, as researchers ourselves, we don’t normally spend much time integrating theories *of* history into our research; or, if we do, it is because they relate to some larger theoretical concerns that we might have regarding the nature of evidence. These debates inform our understanding of what history is at a meta-level: they define the tool box, not the tools within it.

Another common way of teaching ‘theory’ in history is as historiography, often connecting questions of ‘what is history?’ with accounts of the development of historical techniques and approaches. Typically, in the UK, such courses might cover Heroditus, Bede, Gibbon, Ranke, Hegel, Marx, the Annales school, second wave feminism, and Foucault, with perhaps some attention to cliometrics, microhistory, ‘history from below’, the ‘linguistic turn’, or postcolonial theory. Again, these narratives are good to know and clearly have some connections to the *practices* of research. A knowledge of Ranke, for example, can underpin an understanding of empirical analysis and the uses of archives, particularly state archives, to construct quasi-‘objective’ narratives of a national past. But these histories of the discipline are not, in themselves, tools for research. Again, the ‘immersion’ student may absorb the distinctive practices of, say, Rankean empiricism and recognise them as a choice that can be made in their own practice of constructing accounts of the past. Most students, however, regard these histories simply as more knowledge to be acquired, on which they will be tested.

In many parts of the world, ‘theory’ in the teaching of history is heavily influenced by science and social science models (see, for example, Halldén, 1997; also Crawford 1945, Fain, 1970). Science models in history theory either establish what something ‘is’ (e.g. parliament; Christianity; gender) before it can be integrated into a narrative; or treat historical theories as propositions against which case studies can be tested. These approaches have more of a sense of the toolbox, but, as Halldén points out, they constitute a category error:

Conceptions in history such as parliament and revolution do not form part of a theory in the same sense as conceptions such as force and electrical field do in physics. The understanding of such concepts as revolution and parliament does not constitute an understanding of history in the same sense as the understanding of the concept of force constitutes part of an understanding of physics. (Halldén, 1997: 204).

The past has no laws, and theoretical approaches to thinking about the past can be abandoned if they don’t fit the case study, without any damage to the theory itself.

When thinking about theory as a tool in a toolbox, the focus shifts from ideas to thinking, from knowledge to praxis, from noun to verb. We wanted students to *do* research, not learn *how to do* research. This was like learning French or Swahili, not Latin or Sanskrit. Practice was essential to meaning. And central to this practice was the ability to frame and investigate questions to pursue. Theory, in history research, is a set of ideas that influence what we think ‘makes things happen’. These ideas frame what we try to discover. Theory determines what we want to know, and therefore what questions we want to ask. *Theory is not about information, but about practice: the practice of asking specific questions*.

‘Learning what to ask’, not ‘learning through asking’

Teaching theory as a tool, then, is teaching about *the questions that define the theory*. It may be obvious to us, when we read a journal article, that if a writer discusses how class conflict and ownership of the means of production have defined, for example, the shape of the global film industry, then the orientation is probably Marxist; or if a writer discusses how geographical features have, over time, played an enabling role in women’s opportunities within a national economy and culture, then the orientation is probably towards the Annales school. However, even students who are good at learning theory as a body of knowledge tend to struggle when asked to identify the theoretical approaches being deployed in journal articles. They’re not good at seeing how these theories work as *practice*, which influences the work that historians do. They tend to focus on topic rather than theory, assuming, for example, that a focus on workers indicates a Marxist analysis, a focus on film indicates a cultural analysis, while a focus on women suggests a gendered analysis. And because they’re often not good at recognising theory in other works, they’re not sure how to use it in their own. Too often, ‘theory’ is used as a synecdoche for ‘literature survey’, plonked at the front of an essay and not actually used for analysis at all.

Teaching ‘theory’ as a practice of posing questions seems, at first glance, to be a form of Inquiry Based Learning (IBL), or Inquiry Guided Learning (IGL). However, although related, this approach is distinct from those. Students are encouraged in IBL/IGL to learn through the process of exploring answers to questions, which ‘requires faculty members to reimagine their discipline as a framework for learning rather than as a framework for scholarship’ (Lee, 2012: 7). Most of the project-based classes for teaching the skills of historical research are designed as forms of IBL. Students acquire research skills through the process of posing questions, doing research, and finding out howto research answers. The exploration of *how to find answers* is part of the process, alongside doing the research that might supply some answers. Finding answers necessarily entails learning about the activity and skills involved in researching those answers.

Inevitably, IBL involves students in asking, and perhaps also designing, key questions. Schreiber et al. (2006, cited in van Drie & van Boxtel , 2008) identify critique, the ability to pose and effectively answer questions, as the defining skill of History as a discipline. But, normally, we find that the questions that students pose for their research are about the topic, not about critical analysis. Their inquiry is holistic. Indeed, thinking about the teaching of history has moved significantly towards the importance of holistic approaches, away from the focus on individual parts (van Drie, J. & van Boxtel, 2008). Nonetheless, in our experience, in the absence of a ‘grammar’, students often asked the right questions, but in the wrong way and at the wrong level of analysis. They can – and often do – conflate different aspects of research, constructing incoherent narratives out of contradictory evidence; or seeing viewpoint as ‘bias’; or interpreting ‘Marxist history’ to mean ‘history of the Soviet Union’.

By explicitly unpacking distinct elements of the research process (such as selecting evidence, reading evidence, identifying topics, and constructing narrative), we can make explicit that ‘theory’ is about the questions we ask, rather than about the topics we study. But this is not inquiry-based learning, so much as a *precondition* for inquiry-based learning. IBL is *learning through asking questions*. What I am discussing here, in conceptualising theory as part of a ‘grammar of research’, is rather, *learning which questions to ask*.

Case studies

This approach to teaching theory was integrated into the core Level 2 (second year) module, ‘Theory & Practice’, in the History programme at UWE, Bristol. This module provided the hinge between learning to *study history* in the first year, and learning to *be historians* in the third year, when students wrote their independent dissertations. Teaching was by one whole-group lecture each week to all students taking the module; and one weekly small class group of 14-16 students each. Students taking this module remained in the same small class group, with the same set of other students, all through the academic year. Meanwhile, they were also taking at least one other history module, in different class groups, which also continued throughout the academic year.

Going against the trend in teaching research skills, we did not ask students on this module to carry out any research projects. Rather, we asked them to perform distinct tasks that collectively constitute the practice of ‘research’. Instead of asking for a new project, we asked them to apply each element of the research process to the work they were *already* doing in their other history module(s). Each of the elements we identified was broken down into *activities*. The class groups were active workshops, in which each newly-acquired element could be practised, in the same way that new verb or noun forms are practised in a variety of sentence constructions in language learning. Students explored tasks such as reading a piece of text ‘against the grain’, or constructing a narrative from empirical readings, or identifying political elements in a painting and cultural elements in an ordinance. We gave the students a toolbox, for which they knew, understood and had practical experience of the specific uses of each tool..

Theory, then, had to be broken down into activity, the use of a tool. As ‘linguists’, we had to identify what researchers actually *do* when they use a theoretical approach. Specifically, the challenge was to identify *the questions* posed at the core of the theories we teach. Students were not always given the name of the theory we were studying in each classroom session, in order to avoid preconceptions. Instead, they were presented with a task involving asking a series of questions. As in language learning, the process was iterative: practice in using theory in early sessions, for example, provided a foundation for critical analysis of secondary texts in later sessions.

The classes were divided into four sub-groups of 3-5 students each, who had in common another module that they were taking alongside ‘Theory & Practice’. This enabled us to highlight that the same theoretical tools could be applied in historical research, regardless of the period or topic. Below are examples of three of the tasks that we set students in these classes. These examples describe a class that was made up of four sub-sets of students, who were also studying 20th century US history; crime and punishment in 18th century Britain; religion in Early Modern Europe; and 19th century international diplomatic history.

Example 1: International Relations theory

At the start of the course, we focused on empirical, Rankean-influenced approaches to using primary data, and we followed this with an introduction to what we called the genre of international history and the theory associated with that. Students tend to think of ‘the people’, ‘the state’, or ‘the parliament’ as entities with independent agency and interests. They often struggle to conceptualise structures, constitutions and institutions as determining factors in historical change (Halldén, 1997). So we wanted to encourage students to start to recognise the difference between agency and structure in analysis of the past. We also wanted them to begin to notice the tendency for international history to use narrative forms, and to think about why this might be.

We asked each set of students to think about how to answer a set of questions about their other module, and then to report back to the whole group in plenary. The questions were:

1. Which are the important states in the period and geographical region covered by your linked module? What makes them important? What makes them powerful?
2. What defines each of these ‘states’? Is it the people, the constitution, or the power of the ruler over them?
3. Who made the important decisions that affected what happened to those nations? In particular, think about who might have influenced relationships with other states - international and diplomatic relations, wars etc.
4. Did the main decision makers get their power to make decisions because of the post they held? Would any other person in that post have had the same decision-making powers?
5. What led to effective negotiation and decision-making? Did some institutional structures make decision-making more difficult? Did some individuals make decision-making more difficult? Were these connected?
6. If individual negotiators are important in international history, what’s the best way to tell that story? If institutional factors are more important, would you tell the story in a different way?

Most students in all the sub-groups initially saw these as questions about content, not theory. The students who were also studying religion in Early Modern Europe, perhaps inevitably, became involved in a discussion of the Peace of Westphalia and what defines a state. Not all of the students recognised that the questions were implicitly evaluative, rather than descriptive (Van Drie et al. 2006), and the recognition of the difference between these ways of interpreting the questions was important in the plenary session. Nonetheless, the sub-group of students studying US history and international history quickly found that they were debating principles of causation, rather than identifying ‘factual’ answers to the questions. They began to recognise that they were dealing with different theories of the motors of historical change. The students studying crime protested that this had nothing to do with them, before becoming very engaged in discussion about whether ‘great men’ make history and how important the legal system itself was in defining the history of crime in 18th century Britain.

In plenary at the end of the class, the students found that, despite their different topics, they had all been able to think in terms of institutions and of individual agency as different types of explanation for what happens; and that this was a helpful distinction. They also all recognised that narrative is a good way to talk about individual actions; but that discussion of institutional structure may need a more thematic approach.

Of course, there are many other types of questions that international historians pose. We could have thought of questions that required students to carry out some game theory analysis, for example. The question ‘What makes them powerful?’ could have been unpacked into a series of many questions that got them thinking about different ways in which power can be exercised. But we wanted, first, to get them to understand theories of agency and structure; and to recognise where and how to research history if they’re interested in the agency of leaders.

Example 2: Marxist analysis

The title of this class was only given as ‘food, clothing and housing’. Marx was not mentioned. We asked each sub-group in the class to attempt to answer a set of questions and then to report back to the whole in plenary.

**How do basic human needs - food, clothing & shelter - affect 'what happened' in the past? Go *carefully & thoughtfully* through each of these questions for the period and place covered by your other module:**

1. In their everyday lives, how important were food, clothing & housing to people? (This is not a trick question: it is the easy one to get you started.)
2. What were the most important resources for the production of food, clothing & housing? E.g. land, human labour, timber, tools, livestock, machinery, oil, coal, water etc?
3. Who did the actual physical work of accessing these resources, e.g. by farming, mining etc.? Who did the physical work of turning these raw materials into food, clothing and housing?
4. Did those people who did this work own the land, tools, fuel or other resources they needed in order to make the food, clothing, housing and other basics? Did they control the process of producing these basics? If not, who did own and control the raw materials and the production process?
5. When the work was completed, who owned what was produced? Why?
6. How did everyone else, who didn’t own what was produced, get access to the food, clothes, housing & other basics they needed to survive?
7. How did those who controlled the production of food, clothing, housing and other basics manage to keep control over them? What institutions/ tactics/ systems did they develop to maintain (or extend) their control over the raw materials needed in the production of food, clothing, housing and other basics? Who challenged those arrangements?

These questions were easier for the groups studying social history to answer than those studying political and diplomatic history. Those studying diplomatic history found it almost impossible. But all the groups were able to answer the questions to some extent.

The sub-group of students who were studying crime in 18th century Britain focused largely on the inequitable access to resources that led to prosecutions and deportations of those stealing food. They had no difficulty finding examples and grasping the issues at stake. Those studying 20th century US politics found that once they focused on emerging corporations and business interests’ attempts to control the state, the questions became easier to answer and were even illuminating. The 16th century European religion sub-group could easily conceptualise ownership and control of raw materials, and focused on church control over land and state. The international history sub-group could not get much further than noting that disputes over access to food and coal could affect diplomatic relations.

All the groups except the 18th century crime group were surprised to discover that they had just done some basic Marxist analysis. None of the students had realised that Marxist approaches could be used to analyse the wealthy, such as the railroad owners in the US, as well as the poor. There was better understanding of what ‘proletarianisation’ meant at the end of the session, even amongst the international historians. Once they understood that this was what ‘Marxist class analysis’ entailed, the students felt much more confident about recognising its use in the secondary texts. Of course, the analysis here is oversimplified, but it worked as a way of breaking the idea that Marxist theory is about poverty, rather than about class relationships.

Example 3: Cultural history

In this class, we focused on theory about ritual and symbol. Each sub-set of students in the seminar had previously been asked to locate items of primary material, both textual and visual, that they brought to the class with them.

In asking them to use these resources to think about theory, we were not suggesting that this was the sole way to consider primary materials. At other times, we asked them to engage with other ways of interpreting primary materials, covering the three key types of cognitive response to historical texts: as text, as event, and as subtext (Wineburg, 1994). But at this particular point, we were interested in the text as rhetorical/cultural artefact, susceptible to a cultural theory analysis. We asked them to use the resources they’d located to think about these questions:

Cultural History thinks about sources as *manifestations* of culture. So questions about sources and how to read them are particularly important here.  
(NB: these could be any kind of text: a diplomatic memorandum, a treaty, a census or tax return, a trial record, a sermon, a poem, a newspaper article, etc. But they could also be visual sources, or an artefact, or a building, or a piece of music. If so, please substitute artist, maker, architect, composer, for ‘author’ below)

1. To what extent do sources deploy obvious symbolism, ie things that you can easily identify as coded imagery or language? How might you decode such symbolism?
2. Is it possible to use the sources to learn something about unconscious assumptions and everyday thought? (e.g. assumptions about fairness and duty towards others, expressed through tax returns; assumptions about the nature of the state, expressed through a diplomatic memorandum; assumptions about gender and the body, expressed through segregation of living or working spaces).
3. What can you glean from the source about contemporary value-systems? What values do you think were most important to the author or the contemporary reader?
4. What does language tell you? How would you characterise its style – dry, crisp, embellished, florid, witty …? Why has the author chosen to use some words and not others?
5. Is there anything to do with ‘ritual’ here? Remember that ‘ritual’ need not be to do with religion: it can be to do with the state, or the household, or the nation.
6. What are these rituals for? What do they symbolise/enact/affirm? How do they relate to power relationships; class; gender; the creation of heroes and villains?
7. Do people ‘perform’ before others? (e.g. speaking in a particular way; walking in a particular order; carrying out a ritual – ‘performance’ is anything that involves an action as part of an interaction between people)
8. What questions would you want to ask, to find out whether authors and intended readers shared a common world view? How could you decide whether the author was typical of the culture, or an idiosyncratic exception?

All the groups found plenty that they could do here. The students studying European religion and 18th century crime felt familiar with these kinds of questions. The religion students discussed an icon of the Counter-Reformation, seeing how cultural artefacts can embody complex political messages; and drew also on their knowledge of church rituals and their transformations. The crime students were using an Old Bailey court case, which not only revealed the rituals of justice, but also, in the details of the case, many normative assumptions about gender, childcare and alcohol, often expressed implicitly in language.

The American history students had state department memoranda about the Cuban Missile Crisis to analyse. Initially they felt that their material had nothing to do with cultural history. Nonetheless, they quickly identified ritual in the conduct of state department affairs, particularly in the keeping of minutes and the use of titles in referring to people. They noted how values were embedded in performative claims about security, freedom and the rights of a state. They even noted how the language and rituals of state department business were gendered.

The international history students were similarly sceptical. But their analysis of a formal agreement between Russia and Germany was found to be replete with ritual and values. In particular, they noticed how the language of the agreement treated states as entities with individual agency (reinforcing the issues that had been discussed in example 1); and how the formality of the language was exclusive and represented the culture of diplomacy from which the majority of people were excluded.

In this case, the students had previously been assigned reading on the theory and historiography of cultural history. Most of the students who identified with political and international history had not completed the reading. The religion students were a little surprised, and dismayed, that they could not get more from their analysis of a cultural artefact. Conversely, the international history students were surprised, and pleased, to discover what added depth of insight they gained when they began to read their diplomatic agreement as expressing cultural norms within diplomatic circles.

Conclusion

This paper offers some ways of presenting theory as a practice, rather than as a body of knowledge. Von Borries (1997) discovered that students in Germany tend to perceive historical expertise as deep and extensive knowledge of facts, rather than as skill in critical analysis. This perception is found in most HE institutions, as well as amongst the public more generally. When we teach theory as information to be acquired, we reinforce that perception.

Teaching theory as a practice of asking particular questions helps to shift the perception of research, taking the emphasis away from gathering information and moving it towards constructing knowledge. In this way, it places teaching of theory more within the IBL framework that prioritises reasoning over knowing (cf. van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). It is this orientation itself, as much as the detail of the tasks, which is important.

As tutors, we identified the questions by asking our colleagues to reflect on what it was that they did when they used a particular theoretical orientation. Some theories, such as the idea of the longue durée, or Marxism, or gendered analysis, have a well-defined set of questions behind them. Others, such as the theories underpinning international history, are harder to distil into a discrete set of questions. This is less important than the fact that we were asking students to go through the thought processes involved in using theory, rather than asking them to learn theory.

We also wanted students to recognise that theory is about ways of thinking, not about particular topics. So we asked all students to work with all theories, regardless of their topic. This revealed how theories are generally better suited to addressing some topics than others, but that the underlying questions can be asked about any topic or situation in the past.

The success of each individual session varied, not only according to how well we had identified the questions, but also according to the interests and topics that the students were working on. The international students remained unconvinced by the value of Marxist analysis in their work, for example, although they did become more skilled at recognising when it had been deployed in secondary reading. Moreover, the challenge for tutors of reflecting on what we do, when we do theory, is considerable. The success of the method depends on how well we, as tutors, manage to encapsulate that reflection.

Nonetheless, the iteration of this practice across a term of classes embedded a recognition that theory can always be understood as a set of questions to ask, regardless of the topic of research. In this sense, it was successful in changing the orientation of students towards some recognition that research should go beyond knowledge-acquisition to knowledge-construction, and that such construction must be informed by theoretical framing. Presenting theory as a set of questions took it from the realm of idea to the realm of practice. In asking students to do theoretical analyses of topics they were studying elsewhere, we rooted theory in the material realm of ‘event’, which is where students tend to see ‘history’.

This was not inquiry-based learning, in that we were not primarily trying to teach the students to learn through asking questions. We were trying to teach them to learn *the questions to ask* when using a theoretical framework. We conceptualised these exercises as practice in learning one element in a basic grammar of research. Once the students became more fluent, they could begin to carry out their own inquiries, putting together the elements in new ways, while consciously aware of the role and uses of theory within historical research.

Endnotes

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1. This difficulty has been exacerbated in the UK, at least, by a lingering tendency to regard ‘theory’ with suspicion, as in some way ‘foreign’ and inimical to the traditions of English empiricism [↑](#footnote-ref-1)