Teaching Modern British Political History in a Politically Polarised and 'Post-Truth' Environment

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Abstract

This article assesses the challenges that university-level teachers of modern British political history currently face in what is often described as a 'post-truth' and polarised political environment. It argues that, whilst these challenges do not always present entirely new pedagogical considerations, the sociocultural and political terrain in Britain today requires careful navigation, particularly in an academic field which addresses recent historical topics that are routinely politicised and contested in contemporary discourse. Although there is a lack of scholarly literature on the topic of teaching modern British political history in a higher education setting, this article draws upon a wide array of educational studies to map out the contours of a successful pedagogical strategy that could facilitate 'deep' learning in the current contextual environment. To this end, it suggests that by utilising modern British political history's interdisciplinary foundations, applying teaching techniques that help students to explore topics from multiple viewpoints, devising new and stimulating interactive tasks, and capitalising on the opportunities afforded by the Internet age, learning can be enhanced and many of the more academically problematic features and characteristics of the current political climate can be counteracted.

Keywords: British; politics; history; teaching; polarisation

Introduction

Academic scholars and commentators have viewed Britain's 2016 vote to leave the European Union as both an outcome and a perpetuator of the nation's recent identity-based political polarisation.[1] In recent years, British society

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[1] M. Sobolewska and R. Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* (Cambridge, 2020), 1–18.

has frequently been portrayed as fractured, divided and locked into incompatible and competing entrenched political understandings of both itself and the wider world.[2] These developments have often been situated within a broader global context that has been characterised by rising levels of populism and heightened political polarisation in established democracies, including in North America and Europe.[3] At the same time and in line with this trajectory, it has been suggested that there has been something akin to a 'post-truth' shift in global politics. Different definitions of this 'post-truth' cultural climate have been advanced by academics, but, broadly speaking, most coalesce around dictionary-style depictions of 'a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts'.[4] This transition from 'facts' to 'beliefs' has been shaped by the rise of a populist-inspired discourse that seeks to devalue and undermine notions of 'expertise' and has led to 'diminishing trust in traditional epistemic systems', including academia.[5] Whilst the historical uniqueness and perceived newness of this 'post-truth' era have been contested, a number of scholars, including Michael Peters, have outlined how the specific dynamics of the Internet age have contributed to the development of a sociocultural environment which generates particularly pronounced issues for educators.[6] In particular, the preponderance of 'fake news' and the development of uncritical algorithmically driven online 'echo chambers' have served to delegitimise objectively provable information and arguments and, via the process of confirmation bias, consolidated pre-existing and binarily located views of politics.[7]

Since modern British political history, by its very nature, tends to focus on politically charged (and, thus, politicised) recent historical events, all of the aforementioned issues are likely to affect the teaching of the subject at universities significantly. Certainly, debates around history and, in particular, the way that the past should be depicted and taught have acquired elevated emotional significance in Britain. Increasingly, in Britain as elsewhere, the country's history has become a battleground on which historical 'culture wars', rooted in the competing visions of the past offered by liberals and conservatives, have been fought, with the type of nuance and balance associated with 'professional expertise' often representing the primary casualty.[8]

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[2] R. Eatwell and M. Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (2018), 277–8.

[3] M. Tribukait, 'Students' Prejudice as a Teaching Challenge: How European History Educators Deal with Controversial and Sensitive Issues in a Climate of Political Polarization', *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 49 (2021), 540.

[4] See *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge, 2013). Updated version at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/post-truth.

[5] C. A. Chinn, S. Barzilai and R. G. Duncan, 'Education for a "Post-Truth" World: New Directions for Research and Practice', *Educational Researcher*, 50 (2021), 57.

[6] M. A. Peters, 'Education in a Post-Truth World', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49 (2017), 565. The novelty of this environment has been contested by T. Bowell, 'Response to the Editorial "Education in a Post-Truth World"', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49 (2017), 582.

[7] Peters, 'Education in a Post-Truth World', 564.

[8] M. Watson, 'Michael Gove's War on Professional Historical Expertise: Conservative Curriculum Reform, Extreme Whig History and the Place of Imperial Heroes in Modern Multicultural Britain', *British Politics*, 15 (2020), 273.

Without a doubt, societal divisions create unique considerations for history teachers.[9] The emotional volatility and conflictual dynamic of a divided society are, perhaps, liable to manifest themselves in the classroom when the historical topics under consideration are inherently 'political' and at the forefront of contemporary debates, such as Britain's relationship with the European Union (EU).[10] This situation might create the potential for the type of combative and disruptive situations that many seminar teachers fear.[11] However, staff working on political topics at British higher education institutions have also noted that the prevailing political climate has sometimes shaped historical and political seminar discussions in less straightforward ways. Paradoxically, students might, simultaneously, feel less inclined to engage in discussions of controversial and contested topics because of a heightened sensitivity and awareness of their emotionally imbued contours.[12]

Education scholars, such as Ruth Neumann, have for a long time made the case for examining 'disciplinary differences in teaching'.[13] Yet there is a dearth of academic literature on the teaching of modern political history, particularly with a British focus, in higher education settings. Moreover, given the significant issues that currently surround the teaching of this discipline in a polarised and 'post-truth' political environment, the lack of recent scholarly attention afforded to this specific discipline is, perhaps, somewhat surprising. This article seeks to address the existing lacuna in the literature and assess some of the mechanisms and techniques that are available to university-level teachers working in this particular academic field and operating within the type of political context that I have outlined. It aims to provide some tentative suggestions regarding the way that teachers can help to facilitate the kind of 'deep' learning of Britain's recent political past that is often advocated in the education literature.[14] It does so by isolating and addressing four distinct, but ultimately interrelated, thematic categories: interdisciplinarity; multiperspectivity; interactivity (with a particular emphasis on simulations); and technology.

Interdisciplinarity

Modern political history is not just the study of the recent political past, nor is it simply a sub-discipline of historical studies. Instead, it combines features and approaches drawn from the disciplines of both history and political science.

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9 A. McCully, 'History Teaching, Conflict and the Legacy of the Past', *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 7 (2012), 148.

10 J. O'Mahony, 'Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain: Responsive Teaching at a Time of Uncertainty and Change', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 16 (2020), 47.

11 P. Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Assessment, Learning and Teaching* (2020), 218.

12 'How Brexit Changed the Way Politics is Taught', *New Statesman*, 1 Oct. 2019. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2019/10/how-brexit-changed-the-way-politics-is-taught.

13 R. Neumann, 'Disciplinary Differences and University Teaching', *Studies in Higher Education*, 26 (2001), 144.

14 J. Biggs and C. Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (Maidenhead, 2007), 27.

The idea that academic disciplines retain their own identifiable processes, language, patterns of behaviour and self-reflective understandings of themselves is well established in the academic literature.[15] At the same time, much has been written about the current prevalence of interdisciplinary discourse in higher education. Indeed, Harvey Graff has noted that 'The ubiquitous appearance of the term interdisciplinary in current academic and educational writing might suggest that it is rapidly becoming the dominant form of scholarly work.'[16] Interdisciplinarity can also provide a challenge to existing disciplinary hierarchies and establish new fields and modes of academic enquiry.[17] Yet the interdisciplinary nature of modern political history has been left relatively underexplored. Moreover, whilst there has been some discussion of the way that effective research might combine political-science-style theorising with the kind of rigorous engagement with facts and evidence associated with history, the implications that any points of disciplinary overlap might have for teaching have remained largely neglected.[18]

In many ways, modern British political historians teach from a point of immediate advantage. In seminars and lectures, the way that the past and the present are often closely linked, both thematically and temporally, arguably helps to retain 'students' attention' with greater ease than more distant and less relatable historical subject matter.[19] Also, particularly when it is taught in Britain, the historical material that is under discussion frequently pertains to topics that are both highly contentious and contestable and at the forefront of current debates. Therefore, it is relatively straightforward for academics who are teaching this subject area to convey and generate the type of enthusiasm that is often described as a prerequisite for an effective learning environment.[20] In the classroom, opinions are almost always held, and debate is usually forthcoming. However, as noted earlier in this article, when operating in the current political environment, this can lead to heightened concerns regarding the potential for volatility, conflict and disruption. Here, modern British political historians could learn from political scientists who teach recent historical topics and establish robust ground rules that might 'include attentive listening, no interrupting, "open" questions, letting everyone express him/herself, respect for everyone's opinion etc.'.[21]

In line with Steve Yetiv's analysis of the benefits of an integrated approach to history and international relations research, political historians can

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[15] A. Booth, 'Rethinking the Scholarly: Developing the Scholarship of Teaching in History', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 3 (2004), 246.

[16] H. J. Graff, 'The "Problem" of Interdisciplinarity in Theory, Practice, and History', *Social Science History*, 40 (2016), 775.

[17] M. Moran, 'Interdisciplinarity and Political Science', *Politics*, 26, no. 2 (2006), 77–8.

[18] W. Kaiser, 'History Meets Politics: Overcoming Interdisciplinary Volapük in Research on the EU', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (2008), 310.

[19] C. Toplak, J. Pikalo and I. Lukšič, 'Teaching History to Political Science Students: Historiography as Part of Political Process', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 44 (2007), 380.

[20] Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit*, 15.

[21] Toplak *et al.*, 'Teaching History', 381.

encourage their students to engage with political science concepts and theories in a way that can help them to interpret and scrutinise the nature of change over time in a more rigorous fashion.[22] This type of approach allows for a robust level of academic interaction with recent political developments, up to and including the present day. Perhaps just as significantly, the application and testing of the historical validity of a range of conceptual frameworks enables students to move away from and scrutinise normative judgements in a manner that an untheoretical focus on the historical evidence alone might not facilitate. Direct engagement with the concepts deployed by political scientists, such as the idea of social constructionism, can also encourage meaningful and 'deep' critical analysis of specific historical political events, such as the 1978–9 Winter of Discontent, that have become embedded in contemporary British political discourse.[23]

This type of theoretical interaction with past events can push history students in new directions intellectually and allow them to develop the type of conceptual toolkit that can lead them to challenge their prior-held assumptions about the recent political past in Britain. In turn, history's preoccupation with the study of historiography – that is, the history of history writing – serves to illuminate the way that the past has always been written about in inherently political ways and challenges the idea of politically neutral texts, thereby driving a more critical approach to political discourse and rhetoric in the present.[24] In such a manner, if meaningful interdisciplinary research can be underpinned by the understanding that important questions cannot be answered by recourse to singular disciplinary approaches, so too the points of intersection between history and political science might offer signposts for navigating challenging pedagogical questions in the current polarised political environment in Britain.[25]

Multiperspectivity

Scholars have noted how 'multiperspectivity' has, increasingly, represented something akin to a buzzword in the field of history education studies and that the term itself is typically deployed in reference to 'multiple subjects' views on one particular object; in the case of history education, multiperspectivity typically concerns a historical event or figure'.[26] In the twenty-first century, multiperspectivity's popularity as a topic for academic evaluation has

[22] S. Yetiv, 'History, International Relations, and Integrated Approaches: Thinking about Greater Interdisciplinarity', *International Studies Perspectives*, 12 (2011), 94–118.

[23] See C. Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30 (1996), 235–77.

[24] Toplak *et al.*, 'Teaching History', 378.

[25] For the discussion of interdisciplinary research, see E. Pawson and S. Dovers, 'Environmental History and the Challenges of Interdisciplinarity: An Antipodean Perspective', *Environment and History*, 9 (2003), 62.

[26] B. Wansink *et al.*, 'Where Does Teaching Multiperspectivity in History Education Begin and End? An Analysis of the Uses of Temporality', *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 46 (2018), 496–7.

reflected the value attributed to it as a model for successful undergraduate-level teaching and its ability to get students thinking about the past in complex and multifaceted ways.[27] As Alan Booth's recent research has shown, historians believe that, when 'History teaching is at its best', students 'are able to see the world from perspectives that are not their own: to learn to view the past on its own terms; stand in others' shoes'.[28] Yet the contemporary world of political polarisation and 'echo-chamber'-shaped identities that we inhabit, often informed by binarily located views of the past, clearly represents a challenge to the ideal of multiperspectivity.[29] Moreover, for modern history teachers, the proliferation of 'fake news' stories and unsubstantiated emotional arguments regarding the recent past has served to increase the level of responsibility associated with the need to screen, filter and scrutinise problematic views effectively and appropriately. As such, the kind of considerations that have always informed seminar discussions of particularly controversial and emotionally charged historical events are regularly at the forefront of the modern British political history teacher's mind and moral decision-making process.[30]

There has been a significant amount of research into viable pedagogical techniques that can help to facilitate multiperspective-style learning in higher education settings. Academics working on recent 'hot' British political history topics, such as Brexit and the way that the referendum result was shaped by views on immigration, could learn a great deal from the way that university teachers in post-conflict European societies have encouraged seminar discussions that are open and non-judgemental and applied techniques that direct students towards reflecting on their prior-held historical assumptions.[31] Furthermore, when operating in the current 'post-truth' climate, university teachers might want to initiate 'explicit discussions about core intellectual virtues (e.g. open-mindedness and intellectual courage) that are relevant to their planned class activities'.[32] More generally, the educational literature on effective small group teaching contains some useful suggestions for navigating group tensions and dynamics and setting an appropriate 'tone' in seminars that can be helpful when encouraging the core values and skills associated with multiperspectivity.[33] To take one specific example, by practising and teaching the process of 'active listening', tutors can create sensitive and productive learning environments in which students feel comfortable absorbing, expressing and challenging a range of different opinions.[34] Similarly,

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[27] McCully, 'History Teaching', 152.

[28] A. Booth, 'What Really Matters: A History Education for Human Possibility', in *Teaching History for the Contemporary World: Tensions, Challenges and Classroom Experiences in Higher Education*, ed. A. Nye and J. Clark (2021), 240.

[29] Bowell, 'Response to the Editorial', 582

[30] For these considerations, see Wansink *et al.*, 'Where Does Teaching Multiperspectivity in History Education Begin and End?', 517–18.

[31] Tribukait, 'Students' Prejudice as a Teaching Challenge', 542–3, 564.

[32] Chinn *et al.*, 'Education for a "Post-Truth" World', 58.

[33] D. Mills and P. Alexander, *Small Group Teaching: A Toolkit for Learning* (York, 2013), 16.

[34] S. E. Spataro and J. Bloch, '"Can You Repeat That?" Teaching Active Listening in Management Education', *Journal of Management Education*, 42 (2018), 170–1.

particularly when addressing emotionally demanding material and posing difficult questions, teachers should also consider their body language and nonverbal signals, as an 'open, warm, challenging or sensitive manner may gain more responses of a thoughtful nature'.[35]

Once students feel secure and confident in their understanding of the emotional contours and parameters of a debate, an even more analytically detached and critical approach can be adopted that, amongst other exercises, might include tasks that 'analyze how the [controversial] issue is discussed publicly in the media', with students then being 'asked to identify the emotional forces behind such discussions'.[36] As discussions progress, complex and 'messy' information can be introduced into the debate that cannot be located easily within pre-existing binary narratives.[37] In order to enhance understandings of change over time, students can also be encouraged to isolate and assess the perspectives that have operated at different 'temporal layers' between the past and the present.[38] In much the same manner, the study of historiography can play an important role in developing the type of critical skills associated with multiperspectivity by highlighting the interpretative and contestable nature of historical narratives that lay claim to representing the absolute 'truth' of the past.[39] Above all, students should be supported and equipped to adopt a more critical position with regard to recent political history and develop a more 'empathetic understanding' of perspectives that run counter to their own historical arguments and ideas.[40] In this way, by encouraging students to look at the past sensitively through different lenses, multiperspectivity represents a pedagogical mechanism for destabilising the type of entrenched opinions associated with political polarisation. Yet any effective engagement with new viewpoints is also dependent on the critical evaluation of the evidential basis (or otherwise) on which such interpretations are formed. Therefore, although it might not entirely solve the issue of susceptibility to false or inaccurate sources of information in itself, multiperspectivity can help to contribute to the creation of learning environments in which the disentanglement of fact from fiction is paramount and 'post-truth' historical assumptions can be recognised and addressed.

Interactivity

In the academic discipline of history, the twenty-first century has witnessed a notable shift towards treating undergraduate teaching as seriously and as

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[35] S. Griffiths, 'Teaching and Learning in Small Groups', in *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*, ed. H. Fry, S. Ketteridge and S. Marshall (2009), 82.

[36] Tribukait, 'Students' Prejudice as a Teaching Challenge', 546.

[37] Chinn *et al.*, 'Education for a "Post-Truth" World', 58.

[38] Wansink *et al.*, 'Where Does Teaching Multiperspectivity in History Education Begin and End?', 497–8.

[39] C. Hoefferle, 'Teaching Historiography to High School and Undergraduate Students', *OAH Magazine of History*, 21, no. 2 (2007), 40–1.

[40] McCully, 'History Teaching', 153.

rigorously as research.[41] As a result, history scholars in higher education have begun to identify and use innovative and new forms of teaching. The educational literature almost always indicates that seminar activities operate effectively when they have a significant interactive component that enables them to adopt a 'deep approach' to the historical topic that is being covered.[42] Moreover, as the previous section argued, in the current political climate, there is also a pressing need to encourage history students to engage directly with perspectives that are not necessarily their own. With these objectives in mind, it is somewhat surprising that, in contrast to their relative popularity in America, political history simulations have been neglected by higher education history teachers in Britain as both a seminar-based learning vehicle for interactivity and 'deep' learning and a mechanism by which students can be oriented further towards the kinds of values associated with multiperspectivity.[43] Indeed, one of the most significant characteristics of historical simulations – which, broadly speaking, take the form of reconstructive role-play tasks – is the way that they can, potentially, combine both interactive and multiperspectival elements.

Although there is still a distinct lack of research into the use of simulations for teaching political history topics, much of the evidence to date supports the idea that these types of interactive tasks stimulate students intellectually and help them to open their minds to new arguments and perspectives. To this end, William Gorton and Jonathan Havercroft, who are political theorists who utilise historical role-play activities in their own teaching and assessment, have noted that the nature of these simulations means that 'students must forge a hybrid identity of sorts, one that reflects the worldview and interests of their role, but also one that they infuse with their own views'.[44] Additionally, a similar study by Matthew Weidenfeld and Kenneth Fernandez has found that historical simulations, when used to teach political concepts, improve 'student engagement' levels via the production of heightened 'emotional responses' to historical material that enhance cognitive learning processes.[45]

Such results do, of course, need to be caveated by acknowledging the criticisms that have been levelled at simulations by a significant number of teachers, particularly in the academic field of social studies where such activities have been more routinely conducted. Most notably, it has been argued

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[41] Booth, 'Rethinking the Scholarly', 259.

[42] C. Wekerle, M. Daumiller and I. Kollar, 'Using Digital Technology to Promote Higher Education Learning: The Importance of Different Learning Activities and Their Relations to Learning Outcomes', *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 54 (2022), 1; Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning*, 27.

[43] For historical simulations that are popular in the United States, see Barnard College's *Reacting to the Past* website. https://reacting.barnard.edu.

[44] W. Gorton and J. Havercroft, 'Using Historical Simulations to Teach Political Theory', *Journal of Political Science Education*, 8 (2012), 63.

[45] M. C. Weidenfeld and K. E. Fernandez, 'Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement? An Empirical Evaluation of the Use of Historical Simulations in Teaching Political Theory', *Journal of Political Science Education*, 13 (2017), 57–8.

that students can fail to take simulations seriously and that this can lead to the production of superficial teaching environments.[46] Even studies that have advocated the pedagogical value of interactive role-plays have discovered that 'student time spent reading and preparing for class declined during the simulation'.[47] Nevertheless, most of the challenges associated with historical simulations can be overcome if a well-scaffolded activity is provided that is oriented towards precisely defined learning outcomes that are, in turn, articulated clearly to the students involved.[48] In such a manner, particularly in the current political environment, which is often defined by a degree of narrow-mindedness and ideational inflexibility, the positives appear to outweigh the negatives and the pedagogical benefits of interactive simulations that 'challenge [students] to think critically and develop empathy for people who lived in the past' should not be readily dismissed.[49]

Technology

The coming of the Internet era has presented a number of significant challenges for higher education teachers working on historical topics. History, as an academic discipline, has usually been depicted, sometimes with a substantial degree of merit, as particularly slow to respond to and harness new technological innovations.[50] Alongside this type of implied criticism, there has been, perhaps, a slight tendency to overstate the potential impact of technology on the teaching of history-related subject matter.[51] Yet there is a large amount of research-based evidence that suggests that students can struggle to process the vast quantity of information available to them on the Internet and to assess this material's validity and accuracy in a critical fashion.[52] Indeed, the ever-expanding and voluminous nature of online resources can lead to significant difficulties for history undergraduates who are attempting to conceptualise and operationalise research projects that are based on Internet-related archives and sources.[53]

The pedagogical challenges that new technological developments raise for modern political history educators have gathered further significance with the recent growth of polarised 'post-truth' politics online. A broad scepticism towards the idea of objective political 'truth' has been fuelled by an

[46] L. DiCamillo and J. M. Gradwell, 'To Simulate or Not to Simulate? Investigating Myths about Social Studies Simulations', *The Social Studies*, 104, no. 4 (2013), 155–7.

[47] Weidenfeld and Fernandez, 'Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement?', 58.

[48] DiCamillo and Gradwell, 'To Simulate or Not to Simulate?', 158; Shelda Debowski, *The New Academic: A Strategic Handbook* (Maidenhead, 2012), 49–50.

[49] DiCamillo and Gradwell, 'To Simulate or Not to Simulate?', 158.

[50] A. Crymble, *Technology and the Historian: Transformations in the Digital Age* (Urbana, 2021), 1.

[51] For example, see T. M. Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, 2013), 127.

[52] D. G. Morais, 'Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom', *The History Teacher*, 52 (2018), 49–50.

[53] D. Daniel, 'Teaching Students How to Research the Past: Historians and Librarians in the Digital Age', *The History Teacher*, 45 (2012), 265.

information-saturated online cultural milieu.[54] To take one particular case study on a highly contested contemporary political topic, Jane O'Mahony has highlighted how a 'massive expansion in the availability of information and analysis for students … often representing polarised views of the EU' has created new obstacles for scholars who are teaching the recent history of Britain's relationship with the EU to undergraduates.[55] Similarly, as Tracy Bowell has shown, the increased prominence of social media as an online vehicle for the mass dissemination of information has led to a world in which established forms of expertise, such as academia, are questioned, and a '140 character throwaway remark [on Twitter] can be afforded as much authority on the issue at hand as a carefully researched in-depth article'.[56]

These developments make it ever more pressing for modern British political history scholars to imbue their teaching with the values of critical engagement and methodological scrutiny. Teachers should seek to equip students with the skills that can identify and disentangle any political 'bias' that is contained within online arguments.[57] Furthermore, rather than avoiding the discussion of emotionally charged and potentially divisive arguments, it is often better to 'acknowledge them explicitly and integrate them into our teaching in order to enhance understanding'.[58] This type of direct approach might also be applied successfully in order to address some of the specific issues that currently surround social media content. To this end, given the apparent ever-increasing proclivity of elements within social media to embrace populist 'post-truth' narratives, it is understandable that higher education teachers are now adopting a more cautious approach to the very same websites that were, until fairly recently, more likely to be identified for their 'democratising' pedagogical potential.[59] Yet direct analysis of how and why problematic social media narratives, particularly those that offer either distorted or fabricated views of the recent political past, are formed and sustained, alongside engagement with their lack of evidential legitimacy, can form an important part of the learning process. More generally, as Dominque Daniel has shown, in order to develop and promote the kind of critical skills that facilitate effective web-based learning, historians should seek advice and guidance from other members of higher education staff, such as librarians, who often provide online training and Internet archive-related support that enables 'students [to] become better at using and creating information' and, thus, more critical and discerning consumers of online material.[60]

It is also important to recognise that, alongside the aforementioned challenges, the Internet era has opened up a range of new pedagogical possibilities, many of which could be used successfully to address and nullify some of the

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[54] Chinn *et al.*, 'Education for a "Post-Truth" World', 51.

[55] O'Mahony, 'Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain', 39.

[56] Bowell, 'Response to the Editorial', 583.

[57] O'Mahony, 'Teaching the EU in Brexit Britain', 39.

[58] *Ibid.*, 46.

[59] A. Blair, 'Democratising the Learning Process: The Use of Twitter in the Teaching of Politics and International Relations', *Politics*, 33 (2013), 135–45.

[60] Daniel, 'Teaching Students', 262.

effects of 'post-truth' politics and political polarisation. As it stands, historians have only really just started to realise the opportunities afforded by online developments in their teaching practice.[61] The somewhat belated progress that has been made in the depth and quality of online teaching provision has been accelerated by the relatively recent transition to Online Learning Environments as the primary forum for the provision of university-level teaching material.[62] Nonetheless, throughout the twenty-first century, academic enquiries into the pedagogical value of online teaching provision and techniques in the field of historical studies have, typically, reached positive conclusions. Specifically, a considerable body of research has stressed the utility of collaborative and interactive research-based website construction activities for increasing critical engagement with the recent past and providing students with valuable encounters with a diverse array of historical perspectives.[63]

When evaluating one assessed task that required students to build web pages that examined complex historical issues relating to an American university's athletics club, Dominic Morais found that the 'project [forced] students to look at subjects and issues from a number of viewpoints' and that the process helped to generate 'critical thinking' skills, such as 'analyzing evidence, assessing the worth of knowledge claims, and synthesizing complex data'.[64] The existing literature on the use of collaborative wiki-building exercises in higher education points to the similar pedagogical benefits of tasks that are scaffolded effectively, as long as appropriate technological guidance is provided.[65] Wiki construction tasks have also been seen, albeit in research that has been conducted in a pre-university educational environment, to operate particularly successfully when deployed to support historically-oriented teaching because they can provide students with 'the opportunity to practice and demonstrate higher order thinking skills' and, perhaps just as importantly, allow participants to 'engage in rich discourse in a non-intimidating environment'.[66] In other words, when they are supported with appropriate training and guidance, Internet-based research activities can help historians to develop an academically rigorous skill set that is ideally suited to traversing critically through our era of 'post-truth' politics and fostering the kind of tolerant and inclusive discussions that might offer a pathway out of our current fractious political malaise.

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[61] Wekerle *et al.*, 'Using Digital Technology', 14.

[62] K. Schrum and N. Sleeter, 'Teaching History Online: Challenges and Opportunities', *OAH Magazine of History*, 27, no. 3 (2013), 38.

[63] An early study was N. B. Milman and W. F. Heinecke, 'Innovative Integration of Technology in an Undergraduate History Course', *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 28 (2000), 546–65.

[64] Morais, 'Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom', 61, 63–4.

[65] J. E. Hughes and R. Narayan, 'Collaboration and Learning with Wikis in Post-Secondary Classrooms', *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 8, no. 1 (2009), 63–82; B. Zheng, M. Niiya and M. Warschauer, 'Wikis and Collaborative Learning in Higher Education', *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 24 (2015), 357–74.

[66] C. Cabiness, L. Donovan and T. D. Green, 'Integrating Wikis in the Support and Practice of Historical Analysis Skills', *TechTrends*, 57, no. 6 (2013), 46.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, when working in a higher education setting, modern British political history lecturers currently face an identifiable set of dilemmas and tensions that should, necessarily, inform their considerations when they are designing and providing teaching-related content and activities. In terms of their general contours and characteristics, the challenges that this work has highlighted do not necessarily represent entirely novel pedagogical considerations. Regardless of the contemporary context in which they are being discussed, recent political historical events and topics that relate to the country in which the subject is being studied are always likely to excite students and, to a certain degree, represent controversial subject matter. Nevertheless, the growth of 'post-truth' politics and polarised societies, aided by the profligate spread of misleading information and development of online communities that act as mutually reinforcing 'echo chambers', presents additional obstacles to the development of critical and self-reflective teaching and learning environments. In such an environment, lecturers need to display a heightened awareness of the need, simultaneously and, perhaps, somewhat paradoxically, both to embed the values of critical thinking and analytical detachment within their teaching and to 'respect the role of emotion as part of our response to the world and of our lived experiences of it'.[67]

To respond successfully to the challenges of the 'post-truth' age, this article largely concurs with Martin Peters's assessment that university-level teachers 'need an operational strategy to combat "government by lying" and a global society prepared to accept cognitive dissonance and the subordination of truth to Twittered emotional appeals and irrational personal beliefs'.[68] Somewhat tentatively, this work has begun to outline a strategy for modern British political historians that might draw upon the strength of the subject's interdisciplinary foundations; the values of multiperspectivity; interactive exercises such as historical simulations; and the growth of technological opportunities associated with the Internet age. In doing so, it has been informed by the idea that, although the current sociocultural and political challenges faced by higher education teachers are significant, they by no means represent insurmountable barriers to effective teaching.

Author Biography. Dr Richard Jobson is a lecturer in twentieth-century British history.

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[67] Bowell, 'Response to the Editorial', 584.
[68] Peters, 'Education in a Post-Truth World', 565.