

Report on the 'Big Pictures of the Past' project

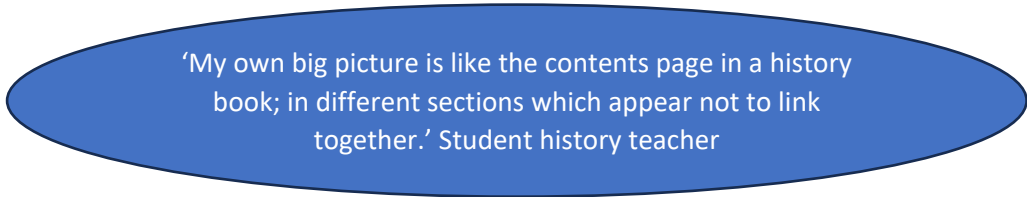
As *Stair* goes to print, the report on the 'Big Pictures of the Past' project is due to be launched by the Minister for Education, Norma Foley. The project – which was the subject of articles in *Stair 2020* and *Stair 2022* – was a collaboration between UCD School of Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). We thank the executive of HTAI for assistance in publicising the research and, in particular, the editor of *Stair*, for her help in this regard.

Originally conceived as a project extending over one school year, due to the arrival of COVID-19, it was not possible to complete our plans for the 2019-2020 school year; therefore, the research was extended into a second school year, 2020-2021. Focusing on student teachers and their First Year History students, the research sought to identify their state of readiness for the teaching and learning of the learning outcomes that appear in the junior cycle specification under the heading, 'Acquiring the big picture', as well as associated learning outcomes.

As an immediate form of assistance to the students teachers and their students who were involved in the project, and to gather some initial data on how helpful a particular type of resource might be, the team developed a framework entitled 'Our History Scaffold'. The framework was – and is – an experimental framework, which we hope will provoke debate and deliberation on how best to assist students in developing more robust 'big pictures' of the past. We would welcome on-going feedback on its use, which we hope will become widespread, until other framework approaches are developed and applied. Resources relating to 'Our History Scaffold' will be available on the NCCA website, www.curriculumonline.ie, in the near future.

Over the two years of the project, research was undertaken in the Dublin and Greater Dublin regions. Fifteen schools were visited by the researchers and, prior to each visit, a 'student task' was completed to 'prepare the ground' and gather some initial data. In total, 257 First Year students completed the 'student task' and, of these, some 140 or so met with the researchers as we visited the fifteen schools, meeting with focus groups of ten. (The slight shortfall in focus group numbers is due to factors such as absenteeism on the day.) Visits in the 2020-2021 school year were virtual - using the Zoom platform – due to the on-going pandemic. In the school year 2020-2021, there was a second encounter with the focus groups to gather some data on use of the experimental framework.

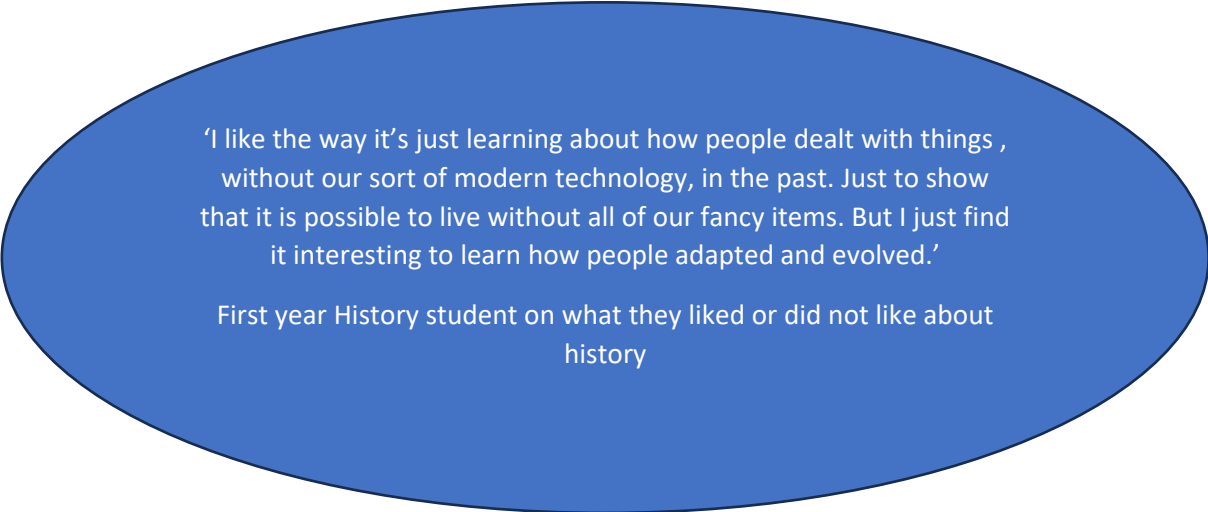
The student teacher dimension of the research was conducted with the Professional Master of Education (PME) class of 2019-2021. Nineteen student teachers filled in a questionnaire which yielded valuable insights into their perspectives on matters relating to 'big picture' teaching. Of the nineteen, a total of nine student teachers became collaborators in our research over the two years of field work. Each of the nine was interviewed, following up on themes from the questionnaire. The data gathered gives helpful insights into the views and capabilities of young student teachers and some of the strategies deployed to foster 'big picture' understanding.



'My own big picture is like the contents page in a history book; in different sections which appear not to link together.' Student history teacher

The report is unique in the attention it gives to the 'student voice' dimension of our history education services. As mentioned above, the voices highlighted are those of First Year Junior Cycle

History students and, also, student history teachers from the 2019-2021 UCD PME History methods class. Positive feedback from both sources on the classroom use of the experimental framework, 'Our History Scaffold', has fostered our desire to see it used more widely as we fervently believe its use can make a positive contribution to the overall history education of students.



'I like the way it's just learning about how people dealt with things ,
without our sort of modern technology, in the past. Just to show
that it is possible to live without all of our fancy items. But I just find
it interesting to learn how people adapted and evolved.'

First year History student on what they liked or did not like about
history

Chapter Six of the report contains our main findings and recommendations. The experience of our student teacher interviewees would suggest that developing an overarching 'big picture' was not a part of their own history education. Some expressed concern that perceived 'gaps' in their own historical knowledge might compromise their attempts to help their students develop more robust 'big pictures'. The use of a framework such as 'Our History Scaffold' was seen as helping to address such concerns in ways that were personally beneficial as well as helpful to the classroom dynamic, the ability to engage students and improve their capacity to learn in more productive ways.

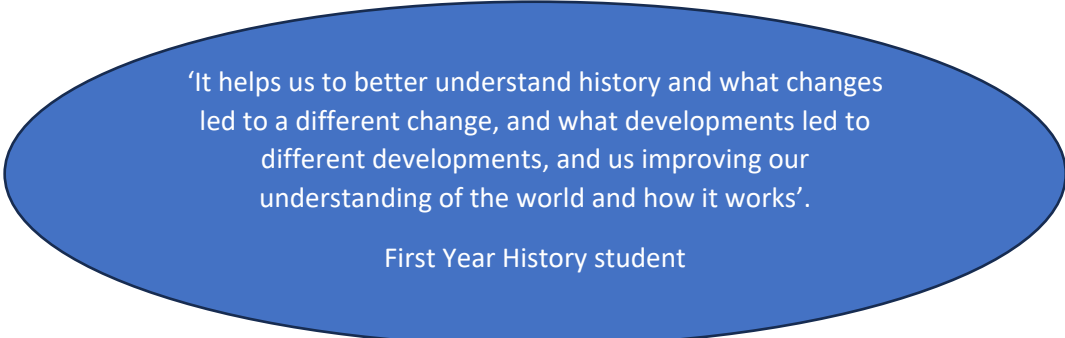
There is a consensus among researchers that the prospects of improving 'big picture' understanding are closely linked to students' understanding of the nature of history as a discipline, including their understanding of concepts such as historical evidence, historical significance and historical change, and this consensus is re-affirmed by our own findings. Thus, the set of learning outcomes contained in Strand 1 of the Junior Cycle History specification, 'The nature of history', are interdependent and mutually supportive of each other. We strongly recommend that the disciplinary understanding that underlies the historical subject matter identified in Strands Two and Three receive due emphasis in all teacher education courses.

With regard to the First Year History students, it was clear that some – a minority – had the capacity to adopt an 'overarching' view of the past, albeit one with acknowledged limitations and hiatuses. A majority had an ability to identify specific 'events', but with little or no awareness of the processes that underlie observable events such as battles and rebellions, specific voyages of discovery and the actions of named reformers. Those students who had a more process-focused awareness of how change in history operates were also more likely to have some level of 'big picture' awareness. Such students were also more likely to have related awareness of how written histories are underpinned by historical and archaeological research. So, what do we recommend for these students with varying degrees of understanding?

Firstly, we would argue that, for students with some kind of overarching 'big picture' of the past, their existing knowledge needs to be recognised and affirmed and used as a springboard for the

development of more sophisticated understanding. For those whose current horizons are limited by perceptions of history as 'event' or, more accurately, as a concatenation of events ('one damn' thing after another'), not necessarily linked or connected, they need to be enabled to view the past 'with an eye to processes at work and states of affairs that change.' ('Big Pictures of the Past' Research Project, Section 5.6.4.) The longer-term perspective that this requires is fundamental to the building-up of more robust 'big pictures'.

It is our hope that the publication of this report will act as an impetus across the whole system of history education to further deliberation on the development of stronger and richer 'big pictures' of the past for all students of history, and the potential role of specially-designed frameworks in furthering such development. Perhaps, the last word should be left to one of the students who took part in the focus group discussion, when asked about the use of the framework, 'Our History Scaffold' in the classroom:



'It helps us to better understand history and what changes led to a different change, and what developments led to different developments, and us improving our understanding of the world and how it works'.

First Year History student

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