The long public debate over National Curriculum History has reached a temporary lull in the wake of the Dearing revision. Perhaps it is a good time to reconsider the nature of this debate. One of the bitterest battles was fought over the original first attainment target (AT). At the time of the Final Report (DES, 1990a) the suggestion was for an AT entitled ‘Understanding History in its Setting’. By July 1990 this was changed by the Secretary of State to ‘Knowledge and Understanding of History’. Yet in the months between April and July 1990 there had been a forceful media campaign for a ‘knowledge’ AT led by Robert Skidelsky, Chris McGovern, and Tony Freeman, who had been closely associated with a much-publicised controversy over the teaching of GCSE history at the Lewes Priory School in Sussex. The apparent triumph of the ‘knowledge’ camp was interpreted by many as a sign of the rising influence of the New Right through the Campaign for Real Education (Deuchar, 1992) and the Centre for Policy Studies (Lawlor, 1989). The ‘Lewes Three’ were subsequently appointed to the SEAC History committee and Chris McGovern became a member, albeit dissenting, of the 1994 Dearing History Advisory Group (McGovern, 1994).

Having been a member of the original History Working Group (HWG) I was witness to the discussions which led to the framing of the Final Report, and saw the development of the dispute between the Group and the Secretary (or Secretaries) of State over the assessment of historical knowledge. Part of the problem was undoubtedly political - the wish by the Government to assuage both its own right wing and the Tony popular press, and to reassure them that some traditional history would be taught in English and Welsh schools. There was much suspicion about empathy and active learning (see O’Hear, 1991) and a great deal of misunderstanding about what the HWG was suggesting. It is possible that HWG itself had misinterpreted its own role when trying to work within the constraints of the ten level system imposed by the TGAT report.

It was accepted by most teachers that you could not place individual substantive items of ‘historical knowledge’ in ten levels. History itself, and even the selection which the study units represented, was too unwieldy to categorise or assess in this unnatural way. A decision was made by the Working Group that pupils’ progress through the ten levels would have to be assessed qualitatively. The option of quantitative assessment was suggested by the senior civil servants attached to the
Group but it was not fully considered. It is, however, worth pausing to consider what the implications might have been. In the case of historical knowledge, criteria would been brought to bear against the amount and perhaps the accuracy of historical knowledge.

It was decided that certain qualities or concepts lent themselves much more readily to assessment against historical knowledge than ‘mere’ memorisation of facts or dates. The implications and the curriculum history of this decision were not fully realised at the time, nor were they discussed by the Working Group. But the dichotomy at the heart of the quantity/quality debate is one which transcends party politics and moves the debate into the realm of philosophy and epistemology. In the summer of 1990 many teachers suspected the Government of having anti-democratic tendencies (Ball, 1994; Kelly, 1990) and of seeking to impose on them a regime that went against apparently established principles of good history teaching. But what if some of these principles themselves were open to criticism not on political but on philosophical grounds?

It is this wider realm of the philosophical and epistemological principles underlying the debate about AT1 which I wish to explore in the rest of this paper. The AT1 debate of the 1990s is the latest manifestation of an on-going consideration of the fundamental principles behind history and history teaching. It is a concern kept alive by successive generations of historians, philosophers and educationalists. It rises to the political surface from time to time when the school curriculum is reviewed and reshaped (see Kerr, 1994). The concern has been given bite in the 1990s by the desire of politicians to shape a national history fit for the rapidly changing world of the 21st Century. Similar considerations of the place of history in the modern world weigh heavy on the minds of philosophers and professional historians across the world (see for example, Fukuyama, 1993).

Indeed my exploration raises the need for history teachers grappling with National Curriculum History to be made aware of this wider realm in order to enable them first to review their working list of historical concepts (the ‘what’ in terms of lesson aims and objectives) and, second, based on the review, to revise their approaches to teaching and learning in history (the ‘how’). The closed, directive process behind the formation of the History National Curriculum excluded many teachers. It is a vital function of pre and in-service history teacher education to make student teachers and teachers aware of this wider realm and of its potential benefits for their classroom practice. A useful starting-point is a reappraisal of the curriculum influences on the original History Working Group.

The curriculum origins of the first attainment target have been largely neglected in the discussions about National Curriculum History. An acknowledgement should have
been made by the Working Group to Alan Blyth and his Schools Council team of the early and mid-1970s (Blyth et al, 1976). The Working Group leaned heavily on the development work of the Schools' History Project (SHP). The Schools' Council team based its curriculum developments around six key concepts that history and geography were said to have in common. The six were change and continuity, cause and consequence, and similarity and difference. These key concepts formed the fundamental structure of the original AT1.

As the notion of key concepts is central to the controversies associated with the assessment of historical subject knowledge, I wrote to Alan Blyth about the Schools' Council work. He agreed that the key concepts terminology had been used, unacknowledged, in the National Curriculum. However, he also made me aware of two interrelated developments which threw further light upon the depth of the philosophical and epistemological debate about assessing subject knowledge in history teaching. First, he confirmed the link between the team's work and that of Hilda Taba. Second, he drew attention to the only contemporary critical evaluation of both the work of Taba and that of the Schools' History Project by Elizabeth Kingdom from the University of Liverpool. Pursuing these two links opens up the wider context in which the 'Great Knowledge' debate of the early 1990s must be seen.

Blyth confirmed that the Schools' Council team developed the ideas of Hilda Taba (Taba, 1962; Taba et al, 1971) and that she in turn owed much to the writings of the pragmatic instrumentalist John Dewey (Dewey, 1916). It is ironic that the year before the Centre for Policy Studies published Anthony O'Hear's diatribe against John Dewey (O'Hear, 1991) the DES published a draft National Curriculum (DES, 1990b) that was partly based on Dewey's philosophy. It is likely that in 1991 neither the DES nor the NCC recognised that the epistemology adopted in AT1 was that associated with the Dewey/Taba/Blyth development link. No other model was considered at the time. The simple choice seemed to be between purely quantitative and purely key-conceptual. Nor did they realise that the problematic relationship between key concepts and historical knowledge was not solely political but masks a perpetual debate about the principles of history and history teaching.

Blyth and his team did not take on Taba's ideas without some critical appraisal and adjustment. Indeed, Blyth openly encouraged critical evaluation of the Schools' History Project's aims and methodology. It was this encouragement which led Elizabeth Kingdom, Lecturer in Philosophy at the Institute of Extension Studies, University of Liverpool, to write in 1975 an Occasional Paper entitled Key Concepts and Curriculum Content (Kingdom, 1975). Kingdom's paper provides the only critical analysis of the Schools' Council team's underlying philosophies. Its importance is acknowledged by Blyth in his postscript to the paper when he writes:
The Project team has been consistently urged by herself as well as by their own Evaluator to give more attention to the epistemological adequacy of its key concepts and to their relation to the structure of the social disciplines...Such continuing criticism and elucidation is part and parcel of the process of academic involvement in curriculum development in which the Team themselves intend to play a continuing part. For -quite apart from their awareness of the inadequacies of key concepts as advocated by the Project itself -they adhere to the principle that a process of continuing self-criticism is fundamental to a democratic approach to education ... Perhaps she [Kingdom] is right in thinking that teachers would rather have kits than Taba, props than Hirst, or directives than Stenhouse. Perhaps, sadly, they will tend to fall back on what she calls 'intuition', though in practice it might seem to smack less of Plato or Bergson or Collingwood than of accumulated habit leavened by conventional professional wisdom and an informed knowledge of particular situations.

Kingdom’s paper is the crucial link in the epistemological trail that leads from the History Working Group back through the Schools’ Council team to the deliberations of Hilda Taba. It explains the difficulties that face those attempting to define and develop the relationship between knowledge, understanding and skills in history and history teaching, whether politician, civil servant, historian, philosopher or educator.

What were Kingdom’s criticisms? They focused on the relationship between the theory of the key concepts and theories of knowledge (or epistemology), and also on the relationship of concepts to facts or content. Kingdom identified one of the issues by criticising Taba’s view that 'content by itself does not develop the techniques and skills needed for thinking, does not change or develop patterns of attitudes and feelings; nor does it produce the necessary social and academic skills' (Taba et al., 1971, p 15 in Kingdom, 1975, p7). In response Kingdom states that 'the acquisition of academic and social skills cannot be achieved in a knowledge vacuum, that is, without content. So even if is agreed that content by itself cannot achieve the four educational objectives it is obviously necessary to them all'. (Kingdom, 1975, p8)

The relationship between an academic discipline and what constitutes knowledge in that discipline is a crucial one to the 'Great Knowledge' debate, and an identification of how different kinds of knowledge relate to different theories of knowledge, especially in the discipline of history is of fundamental interest. As Kingdom notes
The question which must be put to Taba is this 'What grounds are there for equating knowledge and the content of academic subjects or disciplines?' This question is not to be understood as the sort of rhetorical question sometimes raised by idle students faced with examinations. It is in the first instance a serious request for an analysis of academic disciplines which would show how their content satisfies the protocols of a theory of knowledge. In response to such a request it might be shown, for example, that the content of social psychology of a particular kind is able to satisfy the criteria of an existentialist epistemology, or it might be shown how history of a certain kind is able to meet the standards prescribed by a pragmatist theory of knowledge. (Kingdom, 1975, p 12)

Kingdom also ranges over a variety of other epistemological theories related to the discipline of history in a long passage which is quoted in full here. This is done to show not only the breadth of the theories of what constitutes knowledge in history, but also that Hilda Taba was making a mistake by basing the key concepts theory on just one (or two), namely empiricist (and perhaps pragmatist) theories of knowledge.

The effects of adopting a particular epistemology are not confined to disputes between putative disciplines. Within any one discipline different epistemologies produce contradictory accounts of what constitutes the proper content and methodology of the discipline in question...the dominant epistemology in British and American disciplines [is], namely, empiricism. It is naturally enough shared by Taba, nowhere more clearly than in her brief description of history as characterised 'by documentary, doubt-removing methods of verification and by an acquired fund of historical information' (p 172). But no mention is made of the fact that such a conception of history is disputable, even if not normally thought to be controversial. There are many overtly idealist conceptions of history. Dilthey, for example, conceives history as memory and consequently argues the crucial importance for history of autobiography (Dilthey, 1961, p. 100).

An even more explicitly idealist conception of history can be found in the works of Collingwood. For Collingwood the fact that the historian is not an eye-witness to the facts he desires to know means that 'the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind' (Collingwood, 1946, p282) So, for Collingwood, historical knowledge 'has for its proper object: thought; not things thought about, but the act of thinking itself'. (Collingwood, 1946, p 305) A quite different conception of history stems from Braudel's attack on 'the history of events' as being too concerned with 'short-term time' to neglect the 'plurality of social time'.
And, finally, one might cite the doubtless more familiar concept of history shared in part by Lord Acton and E.H.Carr. Acton argues that history is not 'the art of accumulating material, but the sublimer art of investigating it, of discerning truth from falsehood and certainly from doubt'. (Acton, 1973, p 26) Carr effectively endorses Acton's point by arguing that 'the facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and cannot exist in pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder'. (Carr, 1961, p 22) (Kingdom, 1975, pp 13-14)

In a footnote she added:

Taba's empiricist leanings are also reflected in the analysis of knowledge in general as comprising 'ideas' and 'concepts' of varying degrees of abstraction and 'facts' which are 'illustrations' of ideas. There are, of course, other epistemologies: see Foucault, M. (1972) and Braudel, F. (1958). (Kingdom, 1975, p 23)

There are many implications in Kingdom's analysis for qualitative research including, 'the problem of inappropriately fixed meanings where these are variable and renegotiable in relation to their context of use' (see Henwood and Pidgeon in Hammersley, 1993). Such research is urgently required to enable history teachers to better understand the key historical concepts which underpin their practice. Of course the key concepts identified by Taba (1962), Taba et al (1971), and further developed by Blyth et al (1976) have a much longer history, and statements about, for example, cause and consequence have been recognised as controversial since early times. Herodotus wrote in 450 BC that he wanted to investigate the causes of the recent war. Herodotus's journalistic methods were subsequently criticised by Thucydides who said that some people were only too ready to believe the first story they hear. More recently the historian Conrad Russell made these comments on cause and effect.

In investigating causes, the first necessity is to match them with effects, and it therefore seems a logical priority to begin by trying to establish the effects for which causes must be found. If effects are wrongly postulated, the causes will be wrong also. If we discuss causes without any investigation of effects, we are simply indulging in unverifiable speculation...The first point to emerge is that some of the supposed 'effects' for which we have tried to find causes were imaginary: we deduced the effects from the supposed causes.
For a historian, this is back to front. For example, it has become clear that it is impossible to interpret the Civil War as the clash of two clearly differentiated social groups or classes: the fullest possible knowledge of men’s social and economic background, if it leaves out the preaching available in their home parishes, tells us nothing about their likely allegiance in the Civil War. (Russell, 1990 pp. 1-2)

This supports the view that a grasp of the facts of a narrative must be a prerequisite of any teacher, pupil, or historian attempting to make statements about causes or effects.

The relationship between academic historians and classroom teachers is problematic to say the least, but is at the heart of the problem associated with subject knowledge and the assessment of historical knowledge. Primary and secondary teachers require access to a wider tradition of history described thus by Jon Nichol:

Any historical writing must relate to a publicly accessible body of knowledge which academic historians have built up. Such knowledge is part of an ongoing historical debate which assimilates new ideas and hypotheses and factual information.

The historian brings to his work his ‘second record’, that is his range of intellectual skills, his experience of life and his general historical understanding. His ‘second record’ provides him with the mental equipment with which to handle the historical ‘first record’ - the sources of history: the evidence which the past has left behind. (Nichol, 1980 pp. 26-27)

Like the historian, both teacher and pupil have to have a ‘second record’ with which to understand the ‘first record’.

In recent years the ideas about key concepts have been very influential, and they formed the basis of the first Attainment Target - AT1 ‘Knowledge and understanding of history’. The ways in which these concepts could or should be linked to a growing body of historical knowledge has proved to be controversial (Deuchar, 1992; Graham, 1993; Husbands and Pendry, 1992) though the History Working Group gave a very full rationale for its views in Chapter 3 and Annex A in the Final Report (DES, 1990a). At times the controversy was so heated that it seemed to be an example of what McIntyre referred to as ‘competing and conflicting understandings of rationality’ (1988, p.400)
The years 1989 to 1991 were unique in that the Government intervened directly in the history curriculum by selecting members of a working group to write a new national curriculum. After the publication of the Final Report in April 1990, the Government made it clear that it regarded the Group's suggestions about the assessment of historical knowledge with some scepticism tinged with disappointment and impatience. As a member of the working group I have some insight into the problems.

A major worry was the possibility of the oversimplification of the curriculum by placing selected key historical facts in the statements of attainment. The Group insisted that historical information, content or knowledge should be what is taught through the programmes of study (PoSs) and the individual study units within them, but that the pupil's understanding of these PoSs should be assessed through the attainment targets and their constituent statements at ten levels.

Despite pressure from civil servants within the DES the Chairman, Commander Michael Saunders Watson, would not consider a simplistic view of historical knowledge in purely quantitative terms for assessment purposes. His view, echoing that of the group, was that a pupil's understanding should grow allied to an increasing perception of the role of interpretations, different points of view, the use of a variety of historical sources, and the ability to express his or her understanding effectively. The Government huffed and puffed, it changed the title of the first AT, and all ATs bore the rubric that made it a requirement that pupils would be 'demonstrating their knowledge of the historical content in the programmes of study'. The Chairman accused the Secretary of State of 'window-dressing'.

There has certainly been a move away in the last twenty years from the attitude that history is merely a received body of knowledge to be learnt and memorised, parrot-fashion. The introduction of active learning and an enquiry-based approach has reduced the burden of passivity which may have prevailed in many classrooms. However one unhelpful assumption has been that work based on asking and answering questions focused around the key concepts is of a superior quality to work based on an enquiry about what happened. This assumption failed to give sufficient recognition to the common-sense view that pupils could not approach problems of cause and consequence without a sound understanding of the detail and sequence of events. Historical facts have fallaciously been seen merely in terms of alimentary metaphor: to be swallowed whole or to be regurgitated. They are not always seen as tools that pupils need in order to help them function as reasoning beings. This attitude towards knowledge was criticised in the so-called Three Wise Men

There are two related hypotheses which may well be worth testing in relation to aspects of historical knowledge. First, pupils need a coherent factual background before they can cope with questions related to cause and consequence: i.e. pupils cannot make valid statements about why events happened before they understand what happened. Second, student teachers and teachers need a coherent factual background before they can cope with raising questions related to explanations including cause and consequence: i.e. they cannot help pupils to make valid statements about why events happened before they as teachers or student teachers understand what happened and can therefore help pupils to understand what happened.

R.J. Unstead, writing in 1956, hit the nail on the head:

The teacher, one hopes, knows a great deal more about the period of history in question than she will attempt to convey to her children - older children, particularly, will rejoice in the extra snippets of history which she is constantly producing as the term advances and as they are working in their groups - that, for instance, earth floors were hardened with bull's blood or that the urinal was called the 'garderobe' because clothes were hung up there in the belief that the ammonia fumes protected them from moths, or that boys hardly older than themselves were on board the Victory at Trafalgar. Nevertheless she will select the information for her children having regard to their ages and to what is significant and memorable to them. (Unstead, 1956, p. 50)

The view of Peel that young children cannot understand the nature of history or the significance of time within it (Peel, 1967, in Cooper, 1992) shows a deplorably low opinion of the possible effectiveness of teachers. Much depends on the knowledge and skill of the teacher in providing suitable stories and explanations. These should not outpace children's own understanding or assume knowledge of vocabulary that is beyond children's immediate experience or imaginative capability.

More recently, McDiarmid, Ball, and Anderson (1989) have looked at implications for teacher education in subject-specific pedagogy. They explain why staying one chapter ahead doesn't really work:
For example, a teacher whose understanding of the origins of the Civil War extends no further than being able to list 'slavery, states' rights, and Southerners' wish to preserve their lifestyles' may have little to draw on to help pupils understand the complexity and subtlety of historical causation or concepts such as 'states' rights'. Such a teacher would be unlikely to relate this idea to more contemporary events - say, school prayer, AIDS legislation, abortion, or Southern opposition to black civil rights - or to create activities, such as assigning pupils to write a Bill of Rights for their school, that would provide occasions for pupils to confront, discuss and think about the 'reserved-powers' amendment. The greater this teacher's knowledge of United States history and historical concepts such as causation, the greater his or her repertoire and capacity to invent or select representations that fit the context and provide multiple opportunities for pupils from diverse backgrounds to understand. In the teaching-for-flexible-understanding model, teacher educators must therefore focus on the understandings of subject matter that prospective teachers can call on to help diverse pupils understand (p. 198).

They move on to assert that knowledge of subject matter is essential to teaching for subject matter understanding:

In history, preservice teachers should be able to view a study of the causes of the Civil War as an opportunity to think about and explore the notion of causation in human affairs and what doing history means. Where does the idea that slavery and the plantation system 'caused' the Civil War come from? Teachers need to understand that the causes of the Civil War have not been definitively established. Historians are continually sifting through historical records. Their views of the significance of events, organisations, people, and so on is shaped by the preoccupations of the present. Accounts of the causes of the Civil War represent a process of assessing, reconfiguring, and interpreting the historical record (p. 199).

Post-structuralist and post-modernist interpretations of history, notably Foucault's realisation that rules about history (including rules about key concepts) are 'caught up in the very things that they connect', make it imperative to re-examine the dominance of the key concepts approach to history teaching of the last twenty years. Such a re-examination should
encompass not only a range of epistemologies, including the works of historians and philosophers, but also the nature of the key concepts in common usage. Are there any post-modern or post-structuralist equivalents that could offer valid alternatives to the existing key concepts in history teaching? For example, a list drawn from Foucault might look like this:

- discursive practice and decisive thresholds
- positivities and non-coherence
- simultaneity and succession
- overlapping and replacement (Foucault, 1972, p.127)

It is easy to speculate about how practical these would be in the classroom, and they would probably not offer a viable alternative to the well-worn key concepts. However, the concepts should emerge from 'the deeds themselves' (Trevelyan, 1914), the 'very things that they connect' (i.e. the rules) (Foucault, 1972) and 'the corpus delicti' (Russell, 1990). The need to prove the corpus delicti or to make it fit certain patterns or concepts assumes awareness of the corpus delicti, and the nature of the succession (or connection) of events or even discourses in the past.

Here we are at the heart of a dilemma which is still dogging the teaching profession. It is often assumed by teachers who use key concepts in their teaching that the methodology of the subject is also the best teaching methodology. This view, also held to some extent by John Dewey (1916), has been challenged by Hirst (1974). According to Hirst, Dewey, by approving of logical method (or 'grammar'), but not of logical sequence, had made a sustained attack on traditional teaching methods (Hirst, 1974, p 122). Dewey's critique of teaching by logical order is based on his reluctance to present to pupils a perfected form of knowledge without their realisation of how such an ideal form had been reached.

In this context, according to Hirst, Dewey regards all knowledge as ultimately scientific, and this statement could apply equally to history. Hirst attacks this view of logical order which separates what Dewey calls the 'ideal' from the method and seeks to explain that logical method and logical order are mutually interdependent:

The question to be asked first, however, is whether or not the logical features of some form of understanding can simply be regarded as an end product. Is logical order the ideal that Dewey implies? For was it not being suggested earlier that without adherence to the
logical characteristics of some form of knowledge even the concepts which that subject uses cannot be grasped? Must not every element of historical knowledge that is taught, necessarily be true to the conceptual structure of that domain? Is it not false therefore to suggest that in developing understanding one can start anywhere? And even if logical order is an ideal in some sense, does it not exercise a perpetual control over the method by which it is approached? In a jig-saw the pieces will only fit together one way so as to make up the picture, and the picture has one and only pattern in the end. Is knowledge like that? (Hirst, 1974, p.122)

Hirst’s points (a) that logical order should exercise a perpetual control over the method by which it is approached, and (b) that the historical knowledge that is taught, if indeed it is historical knowledge, must be true to the conceptual structure of that domain, do have implications for the use of key concepts or any concepts in the teaching and learning of history.

In contrast to Hirst’s view, Jenkins (1995) looks at how Haydn White analysed historical narratives. White identified the role of Western cultural traditions in superimposing predetermined patterns on history, when those patterns did not necessarily exist, but for the sake of conforming to a certain accepted mode of narrative. Jenkins neatly summarises White’s views on the significance of ideologies that determine attitudes to different kinds of historical narrative:

Commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the kinds of generalisations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it .... indefinitely (Jenkins, 1995 p.163).

The above review of alternative approaches to the debate about historical knowledge, its teaching and assessment, confirms that the controversy which arose at the time of the publication of the Final Report of the History Working Group in April 1990, was not solely political. Despite the practical problems associated with the Government’s attempts to influence the shape and nature of the history curriculum, beneath the political controversy of the early 1990s lay a long-standing philosophical and epistemological debate about the nature of the relationship between key historical concepts and what Foucault termed ‘the historical a priori’, Russell the ‘corpus delicti’, and Trevelyan ‘the deeds themselves’. Though they did not fully realise it the disagreements between the members of the History Working Group and respective Secretaries of State were at root philosophical rather than political. The political debate
about historical knowledge may now have abated, with AT1 subsumed under the heading 'Key Elements' in the revised History Order (DFE, 1995) but the philosophical debate is very much alive and likely to intensify as we move toward the 21st century.

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