

# The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory

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## SUMMARY

Speaking directly to the grant scheme's theme on 'inter-generational communication, cultural transmission, and exchange', this exploratory research project seeks to critically examine the ways the First World War is taught via History and English Literature across secondary schools and universities in England. The ultimate aim of the project is to deepen our understanding of the link between education and the formation of contemporary memories of the war in the English context.

It is about examining the war in its articulation in the present, to allow us to be in a position to make recommendations for the future. This cannot be achieved, however, until we find out what is actually happening in classrooms across England.

There exists, in England, a specific national perception of the First World War. A tragic disaster, fought mainly in the muddied, rat-filled and lice-ridden trenches of the Western Front, by young, innocent 'Tommies', led by imbecile Generals who willfully sacrificed their men for a cause that would, with the outbreak of the Second World War, be proven to be utterly pointless. Overall, there is a general awareness that the war was a uniquely terrible experience. Where has this view come from?

Popular cultural outputs such as *Blackadder Goes Forth*, *Downton Abbey*, *Birdsong*, *Regeneration*, and *War Horse* – to name a selection - reiterate and consolidate the above view. Academic commentators such as Stephen Badsey, Ian Beckett, Brian Bond, and Gary Sheffield argue that these programmes, novels, plays and films are popular because they echo the image of the war that has been taught in secondary level History and English Literature classes across the UK.

However, until now, no serious study has been undertaken into the way the First World War is taught via the subjects of History and English Literature. Until this is rectified, and in a context that allows dialogue and interaction between academics and secondary school teachers, we cannot make assertions about the links between education and the way the war is understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With its series of centenaries approaching, the First World War is likely to be of increased interest to teachers in secondary and tertiary education. It is therefore an opportune moment to begin research into the way the war is taught in schools and its role in the creation of a cultural memory of the war. If secondary education does contribute to a narrow and Anglocentric understanding of the war - and is at a mismatch with some of the latest scholarship taught at university level – the centenary period provides a ripe opportunity for investigating capacity for change and making suggestions that consider the expertise, requirements and aims of teachers at secondary and tertiary level on equal terms.

This exploratory project seeks to listen to teachers and academics about their experiences, needs and challenges in teaching the First World War in two stages. Firstly, in the half-term break of February 2013, a symposium will be hosted in London where teachers and academics will come together to discuss and compare the ways the First World War is taught via the subjects of History and English Literature. The aim is to create a positive and

fruitful atmosphere to discuss ways of achieving greater continuity between the learning experiences of students who study the First World War at school and university, with lasting outcomes such as an interactive website to allow for teacher-academic dialogue into the future. Stage two will take the form of a questionnaire circulated in a two-tier methodology, online and in face-to-face interviews with focus groups made up of teachers and academics across the country. These two research stages will form the basis of a comprehensive report into the teaching practices in secondary schools and Higher Education and two peer-reviewed journal articles relating to cultural transmission of the First World War through education.