



# The History Boys on Contemporary Education

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## Abstract

Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* provides different perspectives of the educational system, which are reflected in different teaching techniques used by the fictional teachers. The play reflects the clash between two ways of producing legitimacy for education – the modern that relies on grand narratives, and the postmodern that relies on performativity and profitability. The issues raised by Bennett concern the changes in the educational system triggered by reforms introduced in the 1980s that were perceived as a gradual commodification of education. Changes in educational policy governed by neoliberal logic continue to have great impact on contemporary education with the introduction of the Bologna process. The only female teacher in Bennett's play Mrs Lintott, offers a feminist critique of the system of education as well.

**Keywords:** Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*, neoliberalism, education, commodification

Set during the rule of Margaret Thatcher in England, Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* reflects the changes in educational policy and strategies at that period (Jacobi, 76), and raises many issues about the nature of education and knowledge that remain important even today. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate two ways of producing legitimacy for knowledge that can be detected in Bennett's work: the modern that relies on grand narratives and the postmodern that uses performativity as the crucial criterion of legitimacy. In the play, the clash of the two ways of producing legitimacy is represented as the clash of teaching methods employed by different teachers and is most evident in opposing ideas about knowledge espoused by the teacher of general studies Hector and the history teacher Irwin. New ways of producing legitimacy need to be analyzed in the context of the changes in social and political reality that started in the 1980s and continue to have great impact on contemporary education with the introduction of the Bologna



process. Irwin's teaching ethics and his approach to history go hand in hand with the changing perspectives on education supported by the school headmaster who embraces educational reforms that seek to adapt systems of education to the new economic climate governed by neoliberal logic that subjects all aspects of life to demands of the market. In addition, the history teacher Mrs Lintott, whose teaching method is not suitable for the new political and economic context either, offers a critique of the educational system from a feminist perspective.

For the purpose of the following analysis, let us briefly sum up the main points of the play. Set in a classroom of a grammar school in the 1980s, the action of Bennett's work focuses on eight boys preparing for entrance examinations to Oxford and Cambridge. Other characters include the Headmaster and three teachers, who each employ different teaching methods. Miss Lintott is a history teacher who claims to teach pure facts, or objective history as it is without excessive rhetoric. She believes that "plainly stated and properly organised facts need no presentation" (Bennett, 2004a: 9). Hector is a teacher of literature and general studies who teaches knowledge devoid of any practical application; he considers the name of his course to be a euphemism which conceals the true nature of his lessons. The title of his course is "a verbal fig-leaf. The mild or vague expression being General Studies. The harsh or direct one, Useless Knowledge. The otiose... the trash, the department of why bother?" (*The History Boys* 5). During his lessons the students mostly practice learning poetry by heart or performing scenes from plays or movies, as Hector considers the ability to inspire and enlighten the students to be of primary importance. From the perspective of the Headmaster, these two teachers and their methods are not adequate for the new economic and political context that started to affect education. Therefore, the Headmaster employs Irwin, a history teacher who is supposed to prepare the boys for entrance examinations to Oxford and Cambridge. Irwin encourages the students to find alternative ways of answering predictable exam questions, as well as to spice up their answers with fragments or "gobbets" (*The History Boys* 48) of philosophy and poetry that Hector taught them. His technique is therefore not reduced to a mere method of presentation, but also includes a proper selection and ordering of historical facts (Jacobi, 79). One of the students called Scripps describes Irwin's teaching method as follows: "Find a proposition, invert it, then look around for proofs. That was the technique and it was as formal in its way as the disciplines of the medieval schoolmen" (*The History Boys* 35). Jacobi explains that



Irwin's method is comparable to a rhetorical figure that Aristotle identified as the *enthymeme*, which includes first devising the final premise, then collecting suitable evidence, and finally presenting the evidence and the concluding premise to an audience (79-80). The method therefore includes presenting the hypothesis in reverse, as if it was developed from previously collected arguments, rather than the other way around. The Headmaster and the students describe his teaching method as "grooming" (*The History Boys* 8), adding "a bit of garnish" (*The History Boys* 26), or "acquiring flavor" (*The History Boys* 33). Although the students at first reject Irwin's perspective of knowledge and history because they believe it lacks truthfulness, they finally embrace it and use it at the entrance exams. Irwin's teaching method proves successful, as the Oxbridge examiners grant all eight students admission to the universities. However, the play ends tragically, with Hector and Irwin crashing on Hector's motorcycle. Irwin ends up in a wheelchair, and Hector dies.

Let us start the analysis of contemporary changes in educational policy by explaining Hector's teaching technique. As stated above, Hector believes the ability to inspire his students to be of primary importance. Jacobi points out that Hector's teaching has no practical purpose and will not help the students get into prestigious universities. The lack of any practical application of Hector's teaching is reflected in his rejection of any formal curriculum, timetable or lesson plans (78). The student Timms describes Hector's teaching method to Irwin: "Mr Hector's stuff's not meant for the exam, sir. It's to make us more rounded human beings" (*The History Boys* 38). Hector's teaching ideas resemble the modern concept of education that is based on the idea that knowledge can exist for the sake of knowledge itself, without serving any practical purpose outside of educational system itself, because it will eventually lead to the completion of grand narratives. Lyotard explains that modern educational institutions use grand narratives such as "the dialectics of the Spirit" or "the emancipation of the rational or working subject", as a means of providing legitimacy for knowledge (4). In addition, modern knowledge produced legitimacy in itself and was not subordinate to other social systems: it was not legitimized by its usefulness within other social systems and was free from serving the interests of society or the State. Rather than being defined by them, it was knowledge that defined other social systems and the State (34). To go back to Bennett's play, Hector uses the grand narrative of enlightening the students or "making the



students more rounded human beings” to legitimize his approach to education. The lack of any practical application of Hector’s knowledge within contemporary society reflects the freedom of the academic to define knowledge and education instead of letting other social systems determine and define the role and content of education. However, the lack of any practical purpose or usefulness makes Hector’s knowledge inadequate and obsolete in the new economic environment. Hector’s teaching method goes against contemporary changes in education, which legitimize different skills and knowledge and therefore require different teaching methods. When Irwin first arrives to the school, he is curious about why Hector keeps the doors shut during his lessons. The boys reply to his questions explaining that the doors remain locked to protect Hector’s lessons from the future: “Lockwood: It’s locked against the Forces of Progress, sir. / Crowther: The spectre of Modernity. / Akthar: It’s locked against the future, sir” (*The History Boys* 36). Hector’s teaching and his lessons are remnants of the modern concept of education, which is why they clash with contemporary educational policy that uses different criteria for producing legitimacy for knowledge. According to Jacobi, Hector’s lessons are inadequate because one cannot clearly measure their efficiency or usefulness. His teaching does produce some results, but it is difficult to precisely determine what these results actually are (77). This is how the Headmaster explains his perspective of Hector’s teaching to Mrs Lintott: “It isn’t that he doesn’t produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He well may be doing his job but there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing” (*The History Boys* 67). In other words, the end result of Hector’s lessons is immeasurable and unquantifiable, which makes Hector’s teaching unsuitable for the new economic conditions that require measurable results and data which are now used as crucial criteria for producing legitimacy for education (Jacobi, 76). With postmodern changes in political and economic reality, education lost its independence from the society or the State, becoming subordinate to different social systems.

Lyotard says that the disappearance of grand narratives as a means of legitimating knowledge is directly connected to the loss of autonomy in different educational institutions: “The moment knowledge ceases to be an end in itself – the realization of the Idea or the emancipation of men – its transmission is no longer the exclusive responsibility of scholars and students” (50). Ever since



education became a social subsystem, parties outside of the system of education now make major decisions about the production of knowledge that were previously granted to the experts and academics within schools and universities. This means that different social systems define education and give legitimacy to educational institutions that produce skills and knowledge that is efficient within those social systems. To go back to Lyotard, grand narratives, that were previously used to make knowledge legitimate, are now being replaced by new ways of producing legitimacy. The new criterion for producing legitimacy for knowledge is performativity, which means that the knowledge produced by the educational system is justified on the basis of how well it enables a person to perform in a given social role. Social institutions produce their own small narratives that legitimize knowledge according to how efficient it makes people perform their roles within these systems. In other words, as a social subsystem, the educational system has to produce skills that these social systems require: legitimacy is produced outside of the educational system and granted to knowledge and skills which make people efficient and operable within social systems to which education is subordinated. Instead of educating an elite that would be capable of leading the nation in its liberation (according to the grand narrative of modernism), which was seen as the end result of modern education, education today has to produce competent players that will sustain the given educational system as well as different social systems (48-49). Knowledge of low or zero performativity, i.e. knowledge that is not efficient or operable within the society and does not make its users embodiments of skills and knowledge that society needs, becomes obsolete and delegitimized. Furthermore, operability became closely aligned with profitability ever since the 1980s, when neoliberal ideology that "seeks to subject every aspect of social life to the logic of the market" was introduced by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (Callinicos, 6). Education became vulnerable to market forces that dictate the production of knowledge by granting legitimacy to skills that can be easily commodified. Ever since all aspects of society became governed by neoliberal logic, educational institutions that are subordinated to social systems were transformed to adapt to the new economic climate by being defined by rules and norms that govern those social systems, in turn producing commodifiable knowledge that society needs.

To further illustrate the changes in British educational strategies that Bennett's play tackles, it is necessary to comment briefly on the changes in economic policy introduced during the rule of



Margaret Thatcher. In the 1980s, the Tory government introduced a cluster of educational reforms which opened up the educational system to market forces. The cuts in public funding for education, effected with the aim to satisfy the demands of its users and increase the performance of schools and universities, gradually led to a commodification of education as tuition fees replaced university grants and educational institutions turned to producing knowledge according to market demands. Having lost financial resources previously provided by the government, schools and universities struggled to meet the demands of potential students who are now perceived as consumers free to choose from a market of universities, according to the neoliberal logic which “replaces citizens with customers” (Mirowski, “The Thirteen Commandments”). One of the crucial aspects of educational reforms of 1988 that was meant to provide standardized data about schools and universities to potential students and their parents was the introduction of different methods of assessment and accountability, such as the national curriculum and league tables. The national curriculum was introduced to standardize the content of teaching and produce statistical results which were to be published in the league tables. In other words, the schools and universities were assessed on how well they taught the national curriculum. These methods were meant to measure the performance of the educational institutions, and provide information about the efficiency of schools and universities to potential users. Schools and universities competed by aiming high in league tables to become more attractive to potential students and their parents who became one of the major sources of finance after cuts in public funding. This is the educational climate that is reflected in Bennett’s play *The History Boys*. Jacobi explains how league tables that assess student performance drive the Headmaster to employ Irwin (76).

To go back to the play, as already mentioned, one of the crucial proponents of neoliberal ideology in education is the figure of the Headmaster. Jacobi points out that the Headmaster reflects the adaptation of the educational system to the new political climate that is governed by marketplace logic. The students did not manage to get into Oxford or Cambridge the previous years because their knowledge is inadequate to get them into these prestigious universities. However, rather than being concerned about providing the best education for the students, the Headmaster is primarily interested in making the school more competitive and more profitable by attracting potential students (77-78). Getting into prestigious universities would bring: “League tables. Open



scholarships. Reports to the Governors" (*The History Boys* 8). These scholarships and seats at elite universities could pull the school up the league tables, an assessment method which is meant to serve as an indicator of efficiency of educational systems. As previously mentioned, Hector's teaching method is unsuitable for the future because its results cannot be measured according to any formal criteria. Since one cannot estimate the effects of Hector's teaching, one cannot predict the quantity of university scholarships it could win for the students or whether it is going to boost the school up the league tables. If we recall Lyotard's explanation of producing legitimacy by performativity, knowledge that does not clearly contribute to the operability and profitability of the educational system (or other social systems) becomes delegitimized. Callinicos points out that the idea of "the knowledge economy" remains central to neoliberal ideology, requiring the creation and exploitation of ideas and skills that can be turned into products and services according to market demands. Skills, knowledge and imagination which institutions of education produce are according to neoliberal logic crucial for the prosperity of national economies and companies (8-9). Education therefore has to develop skills that will boost the economic growth by satisfying consumer demands. To go back to the play, Hector's educational legacy that includes philosophy, literature, performance and movies, or knowledge of low performativity, becomes delegitimized and threatened to disappear from the educational system because it has no clearly predictable and measurable outcome. It has no transparent commercial purpose, since it does not produce skills which are necessary for the production of what Callinicos calls "human capital" (8-9), or a workforce that embodies knowledge that could be commodified on global markets, in turn boosting the prosperity of nations, economies and individuals, according to the neoliberal myth that commodifiable knowledge is crucial for society's wellbeing. Knowledge whose impact on the market cannot be clearly measured or quantified becomes delegitimized.

As already mentioned, the Headmaster who adapts to the new economic conditions by producing performative knowledge does not find either Hector's or Mrs Lintott's teaching technique satisfactory because they do not produce knowledge that is easily measurable and therefore performative and commodifiable. For this purpose, the Headmaster employs Irwin, who develops a special technique to make the students more interesting scholarship candidates to university dons. What kind of method is that and how does it affect their knowledge? In the introduction to the



play, Bennett claims that he based Irwin's method on a technique which he devised and used for exams at Oxford and Cambridge. The method which he passed on to his students included masking basic ignorance with generalities spiced up with unusual facts or quotations. Bennett admits that he considers this method to be mere "journalism" ("Introduction" XV). To go back to the play, can we compare Bennett's personal method to Irwin's teaching method? And what are we to make of his approach to history? As previously mentioned, Irwin encouraged the students to look at history from a different perspective or to find alternative ways to answering predictable exam questions. Finding a different approach to history will set the students off from numerous candidates who will provide expected answers to common questions. At first, the students react with skepticism to Irwin's teaching because they believe that such an approach to history which differs from officially authorized versions of the past is not true. A student by the name of Scripps describes Irwin's method as follows: "For purposes of the examination, truth is, if not an irrelevance, then so relative as just to amount to another point of view" (*The History Boys* 72). However, they eventually accept Irwin's teaching and use his method for producing answers to questions at the entrance exams. On the one hand, by embracing Irwin's method the students are taught to challenge the established version of history, as well as the authority that produced it, which was something that neither Mrs Lintott nor Hector allowed. The student Dakin says: "I didn't know that you were allowed to call art and literature into question" (*The History Boys* 47). On the other hand, offering a new perspective on established historical truth proves ethically questionable when the issue of the Holocaust crops up. Having embraced Irwin's teaching, the students try to find a different perspective of the dominant interpretation of history for the sake of entrance examinations. Hector objects to making the dominant historical view of the Holocaust relative: "Why can you not simply condemn the camps outright as an unprecedented horror?" (*The History Boys* 73). However, the boys stick to what they learned from Irwin: "No point sir. Everybody will do that. That's the stock answer sir... the camps an event unlike any other, the evil unprecedented, etc., etc." (*The History Boys* 73). The concentration camps should therefore be seen in the context of that policy. In addition, instead of looking at it as a unique historical event, the Holocaust should be treated as any other historical event, comparable to the Dissolution of the Monasteries (*The History Boys* 78). This provokes objections from the family of the Jewish student called Postner who mentions such a historical perspective of the Holocaust to his father. The family complains to the



Headmaster, threatening to report the school to the school governors. Is it possible to solve the ethical problem that arises from the two clashing versions of the past, one produced by Irwin's method, and another, which is dominant in the educational system as well as central to Jewish identity? Can we say that such a claim is true, or just? Lyotard points out that in the context of commodification of education, performativity remains the key criterion of legitimating knowledge, while competence is no longer defined by criteria such as true and false or just and unjust (51). In other words, the question whether the production of knowledge (and knowledge itself) by the educational system should be true or just becomes secondary to the criterion of whether it is efficient and easily turned into a commodity. To go back to Bennett's play, what becomes of primary importance is the ability to impress the examination board: knowledge is legitimized by the amount of scholarship candidates that it produces. Irwin's method of teaching is legitimate because it produces knowledge of high performativity and profitability. And what about the students of Bennett's play who are trained by Irwin to develop this special method for passing examinations? How are they affected by new ways of looking at history and knowledge that is legitimized by performativity and profitability?

Callinicos points out that students are also victims of neoliberal logic that subordinates everything to market demands, despite "official proclamations that they are the sovereign *consumers* of higher education" (6). Foucault claims that education moulds the students according to the demands of the society by operating on two principles: one is the function of exclusion and the other is the function of inclusion. The students are first excluded from a certain society and become part of an educational system, only to be reintegrated into the society after they have incorporated the values of that society: "[The student] will have been given socially desirable models of behavior, types of ambition, outlines of political behavior, so that this ritual of exclusion will finally take on the value of inclusion and recuperation or reabsorption" (194). To go back to Lyotard, postmodern educational systems which use performativity and profitability as the crucial means of producing legitimacy for education, aim to produce efficient players that will make different social systems operable. To go back to Bennett's play, the technique that Irwin develops is orientated towards passing on the method of producing performative and commodifiable knowledge to the students. The fact that it will help the students get into prestigious universities and make the school more



competitive by pulling it up leagues tables makes Irwin's technique legitimate. Since performativity and profitability became the crucial criteria of producing legitimacy for education, the students are taught that the only legitimate knowledge is knowledge that makes different social systems operable and profitable by supplying the market with products and services that consumers want. In addition, if we recall the contentious issues the Holocaust that opened up the question of producing legitimacy for education by criteria such as true/false or just/unjust, one can argue that the students also perceive knowledge legitimized by such criteria as secondary to knowledge that is performative and profitable. Besides embracing performativity and profitability as key criteria of producing legitimacy for knowledge, the students are consumed by the same society that claims to cater to their demands by being taught skills that social systems governed by capitalist values need. In the context of neoliberal ideology that perceives commodifiable education as the crucial factor for the prosperity and wellbeing of nations and individuals, education should produce "human capital", or a workforce that embodies skills and education that would supply commodities to the world market. The students therefore become "human capital", responsible for sustaining the operability of existent systems that are, according to neoliberal logic, the basis of economy, accountable for the general wellbeing. To go back to Foucault, during the period of exclusion, the students are first indoctrinated with values of the system that needs human capital and then reintegrated into the society when they are ready to be "consumed" by society that transforms them into saleable goods. In addition, the fact that postmodern educational systems prefer commodifiable knowledge could be responsible for the disappearance of people (academics, university staff, and students) equipped with knowledge of low or immeasurable profitability. Knowledge of low performativity and profitability will not be passed on to the students. Through this ritual of exclusion and reabsorption from society or social systems governed by capitalist values, such knowledge could gradually disappear.

To focus on the last part of this analysis, what are we to make of Mrs Lintott's way of looking at history, and is it comparable to teaching methods that the other two teachers employ? As Jacobi states, Mrs Lintott's teaching resembles Hector's method of teaching because it does not produce performative and profitable knowledge: her way of looking at history is too dull (79). Her ideas about history are on the one hand comparable to Irwin's approach to history, but on the other they



are also very different. Irwin practices a method that makes the official version of history relative, while Mrs Lintott only shows awareness of other possibilities of looking at the past, but sticks to her own teaching method that includes transmitting a well organized mass of historical facts. As already said, Mrs Lintott claims to be teaching pure history as it is, facts without any presentation. The student Lockwood describes Mrs Lintott's lessons to Irwin by mimicking her: "Miss Lintott discourages the dramatic, sir. 'This is history, not histrionics'" (*The History Boys* 18). Her perspective of teaching history resembles Benjamin's description of historicism which he distinguishes from historical materialism: "Historicism justifiably culminates in universal history. ... Its method is additive: it offers a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous and empty time" (262). However, she herself is aware that there is no such thing as objective history or past, and subverts her own principle of teaching by criticizing history from the perspective of gender. According to Lintott, women have been disempowered as well as excluded from history, which merely records past events from a male perspective: "History's not such a frolic for women as it is for men. Why should it be? They never get round the conference table. In 1919, for instance, they just arranged the flowers then gracefully retired. History is a commentary on the various and continuing incapacities of men. What is history? History is women following behind with a bucket" (*The History Boys* 85). In other words, Mrs Lintott sees history as a construction based on the exclusion of women both in terms of their access to public spaces as well as from the position of authority that produces history. Her view of history mirrors Benjamin's criticism of the chronicler's approach to history. A chronicler "empathizes" with the victor or presents history from the perspective of the ruling classes, ignoring the "barbarism" and violence that was part of history (256). On the other hand, historical materialism looks at history as a construction colored by the "here-and-now", and its method includes analyzing the dialectics between the victorious perspective of history and the suppressed past which should be brought out in the open (262-263). If we apply this distinction to the play, one can claim that the "five centuries of masculine ineptitude" (*The History Boys* 84), which Lintott claims to be teaching should be approached from the perspective of the hierarchy of binary oppositions between genders which history creates. However, her subversive perspective of history remains aborted since she never leaves the frame of the male perspective which she practices. She keeps teaching facts which are selected and organized by authority that excluded the female perspective of past from official historical records perpetuated in the present. To conclude,



Mrs Lintott's teaching method reveals social processes, which underlie the construction of official history by those in power who decide what will be remembered and what excluded and forgotten by imposing one version of historical truth. The educational system chronicles historical events with no empathy for those that were suppressed or excluded.

Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* raises numerous contentious issues about education and knowledge. Different teachers – Hector, Mrs Lintott and Irwin – provide different perspectives of the educational system which is reflected in their teaching methods. Hector and Irwin represent clashing methods of producing legitimacy for education, one which relies on grand narratives and the other which relies on performativity and profitability. With the disappearance of grand narratives as key criteria for producing legitimacy for knowledge, crucial decisions about education are granted to parties outside of institutions of education, turning education into a social subsystem. Since all aspects of society are governed by neoliberal ideology, knowledge that cannot be easily transformed into a commodity becomes delegitimized because it poses a threat to investment. This in turn leads to the disappearance of knowledge and skills whose impact on the market cannot be clearly measured. In addition, Mrs Lintott provides a different perspective on institutions of education by criticizing the official version of the past from the perspective of gender, and revealing the exclusion of women both from public places and from the position of authority that produces history. Having embraced Irwin's method of producing knowledge for the sake of the entrance examinations, the students acquire the values of the society from which they were excluded during their education, only to be subsequently reintegrated into the society when they are ready to be consumed by it. They become human capital which is transformed into saleable goods and services, according to market demands.

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