

# Living history: learning through re-enactment

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## Introduction

We are interested in the ways in which adults learn through engaging in leisure pursuits that have educational outcomes. Specifically in this paper we are interested in learning history; and second, we are interested in learning about history through *doing*. The phrase 'living history' is now commonplace, and refers to – inter alia - engaging in re-enactment of history. All around the world living history is a popular pastime as history is being regularly reconstructed as a popular contemporary leisure activity. As part of a larger project investigating how people may learn about history through popular culture, this paper will report on some initial research that is seeking to examine the processes of informal learning that take place around participation in historical re-enactment. The core research focus is on the learning that takes place through entertainment. In short, we are seeking to discover the significance of informal adult learning through play, dressing up and having fun. But we are also interested to see in people's lived experience of doing history impacts on their historical awareness and raises issues of historiography.

## Learning through leisure

As adult educators, we are very familiar with the arguments that suggest that much learning takes place through living life, such as in the workplace or in the sphere of leisure and hobbies. We have yet to fully develop our theoretical position on leisure, though we wish to allow the possibility that learning is not an alternative to leisure. On the other hand, depending whose history is read, it is possible to trace the expansion of mass leisure to more or less the same period of British history as the expansion of mass education developed from the mid-nineteenth century. Yet such an analysis would need to be gendered and be differentiated according to social class. In telling the story of the English adult education movement from 1790, Harrison (1961, pp.76) is aware of possible connections between learning and leisure in the second half of the nineteenth century, but has to concede that this is class-based:

As long as leisure was regarded as the pre-requisite of the middle classes and the aristocracy, and the length of the working day afforded little opportunity to the working classes to do anything but work, it was natural that there should be but little provision for leisure-time occupations of the workers.

In more recent surveys of the use of leisure time for learning purposes, some commentators, such as Sargant (1996, pp.198), wish to differentiate those voluntary activities that adults might engage in that have little to do with occupations or professional development, whilst at the same time suggesting that adults 'choose actively to construct their learning as leisure, often providing a different perspective to the rest of their lives'. In the same place, Sargant is keen to make the point that 'many people learn from their leisure activities without realising the knowledge or skills they are gaining' (pp.198). Her perspective on the relationship between learning and leisure is influenced by Tough's notion of 'learning projects' in trying to identify informal learning that takes place through leisure. There are two reasons for pointing this out: to critique government adult education policies that differentiate between 'really useful knowledge' (and skills) that will make a

contribution to the economy, and therefore should be supported through public expenditure, and – second - to measure more accurately the amount of adult learning that is taking place informally, but not contributing towards government targets on lifelong learning.

Richard Edwards's view on 'learning and leisure' is closer to our own view in this paper. He is critical of Tough's concept of adult learning projects, not least because of their connotation of individualising learning (1997, pp.82). Edwards (1997, pp.47) suggests that there are 'resonances to be found between developments in consumer culture and the growth of interest in lifelong learning'. We have taken this perspective in considering how history has been re-packaged for consumption (Armstrong and Coles, forthcoming). Edwards recognises leisure as a cultural construct, as a 'civilising influence', as - quoting Rojek (1995) - 'a legitimate and progressive feature of social civilised life', 'a central means of life-satisfaction, of expressing freedom and choice' but 'closely bounded and strictly policed', subordinated to work – indeed a 'reward for work, a 'form of rational recreation' (1997, pp.101). The differentiation of work and leisure is problematic, as is work and learning and leisure and learning. Here, says Edwards (pp.82), we encounter notions of 'edu-tainment' and 'info-cation'.

Within this frame we seek to investigate living history in terms of informal learning, its relationship to formal learning, its possible relationship with work, and consumerism. Knowing that the engagement with re-enactment can be expensive, and that the learning we identify is a middle-class construction, we are interested in this paper as to whether through living history participants are aware that they are 'learning through doing', the degree of intentionality to learn, and whether through engaging in re-enactment, they are *learning about*, or *playing at*, history.

### **What is meant by 'living history'?**

The term 'living history' can be interpreted in various ways. Participants see themselves as actually living history, i.e. living through historical events which they are re-enacting. They present past events as though they are contemporary and thus make history come alive. Handler and Saxton (1988) explain:

on the one hand, enthusiasts claim that living history facilitates the achievement of authentic historical re-creations because it allows people to experience what others in the past experienced. In others words, living history can overcome the subjectivity gap that lies between us and the past (pp.247)

However, some participants describe particular incidents which seem real to them themselves. Handler and Saxton argue 'these two claims are not equivalent':

One speaks of replicating the experiences of others in order to understand those others, while the other focuses on the authentic experiences that one achieves or 'has' for oneself. (pp.247)

More than twenty years ago, Jay Anderson defined living history as 'the simulation of life in another time' (Anderson, 1985, quoted in Handler and Saxton, 1988). Anderson believed this simulation could be divided into three areas; that is, connected with museums, archaeology and re-enactment.

Today there is a certain ambiguity around the usage of the term; some enthusiasts use it in the broad sense, as did Anderson; some tend to use it to refer to the activities of historical

re-enactment groups. Even within such groups there is a variation. Some participants differentiate between living history - the term they use to describe the re-creation of everyday living, and re-enactment, which is usually of particular battles. In this paper, we are using the term to refer to all re-enactment activities undertaken by organised groups, whether of a civil or military nature, whilst aware of its limitations.

### **Researching living history**

The initial stage of the research is an exploration of reasons for participating in living history through documentary analysis. We will be examining what those who participate in re-enactment have to say about their activities that can be clearly identified as learning processes, and how their reflections on participation raise a range of further questions about the nature of history.

The research project is undertaking an ethnographic study of living history events, by meeting with and interviewing a sample of those who belong to, and participate in, one of the many re-enactment societies, in our quest to discover whether as some historians argue, that this is the most effective way of learning about history – through doing history. We consider the contrary views suggest that they are not really doing history – they are *playing at* doing history.

### **Living history organisations in the UK**

Although the enthusiasm for historical re-enactment is seen by some as a relatively recent phenomenon, it has in fact been around for a considerable time in different manifestations. The medieval Mystery Plays, for example, and annual re-enactments of other religious and secular 'events' have been performed for centuries. In recent decades, however, the number of living history and re-enactment groups has increased dramatically and their themes have become more diverse.

Today there are around four hundred re-enactment societies in the UK. In size, purpose and organisation these groups vary considerably. Perhaps the most famous in the UK is *The Sealed Knot*, Europe's largest re-enactment society, which focuses on the English Civil War. Founded in 1968, it now has a membership of 6,500. By contrast, some societies are much smaller: *Histrionix*, for example, which is interested in the domestic life of the eighteenth century, has only a couple of dozen members (Elliot-Wright, 2000, pp.6). The oldest societies tended originally to concentrate on military re-enactment and 'the early stages were more about enthusiasm than authenticity' (Elliot-Wright, 2000, pp.6). It has to be said that even today this could apply to some groups; however, many strive to re-enact events as accurately as possible - one such group is *Regia Anglorum* which concentrates on Viking, Saxon and Norman re-enactments.

On its website, *Regia Anglorum* describes its purpose as attempting 'to recreate a cross section of English life around the turn of the first millennium'. There are well over 500 members, about ten per cent of whom live in North America. The society concentrates on the years AD 950 – 1066, though there is occasional flexibility. It clearly aims to be more than just a re-enactment society as it says on its website:

We are not purely a combat society and have come a long way from the old hack and bash image associated with many re-enactment societies. There is always a certain glory to be found in recreating and reliving famous and the not-so-famous battles of times past - but they are not the sum total of history. They are specific points in time which were interspersed by long periods where the people living then, got on with their normal existence which is equally fascinating. In this way, we are not in fact just

a 're-enactment' group, but a 'living history society'.

This shift away from being 'combat society' may have influenced who participates in such societies. According to Hunt (2004, pp.394), the social background of participants have become less working-class and more 'family orientated' as the emphasis on 'masculinity' was weakened with organisations becoming 'increasingly middle-class', along with a more evident 'educated element'.

The activities of the organisation fall into various categories, but the society regards the arranging of, and attendance at, public events as its 'principal business'. Typically at such events, the society organises battle re-enactments involving over 200 people. The membership includes experts in many crafts, including weaving, cabling and shoe-making, iron smelting and metal forging, ship building, leather working and cooking.

The society is also involved in film and television work. Members have appeared in films such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Gladiator* and in television programmes ranging from Simon Schama's *History of Britain* to the archaeological series, *Time Team*. The society also provides replica artefacts for museums and interpretation centres and claims to be able to 'produce such things from our own research to the highest guaranteed standards of accuracy.' On a larger scale, the society owns land in Kent, where members are constructing 'authentic replica buildings of the early medieval period' which eventually may be a life size, living museum. Some members visit schools and give demonstrations relevant to topics in Key Stage Two and Three of the UK's National Curriculum.

According to its website, striving for 'realism' makes it stand out from other re-enactment groups:

Our basic tenet is Authenticity. To this end we will not portray any image, support any ideal, or make any item of kit which we cannot provenance from contemporary sources. This sometimes requires us to re-evaluate how we look and why we make or wear certain items, and to alter them or our habits to hone the image we depict. Our members invest large sums of money and thousands of man hours capturing the detail. From our experiences over the years in the field of re-enactment, we are certain that no other society from our period of interest takes this matter so seriously.

They go on to state what they mean by authenticity:

It is Regia's aim to portray the life, costumes and crafts of our period as accurately as possible within the constraints of safety and feasibility. You will hear the word 'authenticity' a lot. What we mean by this is that as far as reasonably possible, you will try to look like an Anglo-Saxon, Viking etc to a person standing close to you.

### **Learning from living history**

The issue of authenticity is for us a key element of what we might expect those participating to be learning if the engagement in re-enactment is more than playing, but is genuinely educative. Whether or not it is educative is open for debate, as Hunt (2004) prefers to talk about 'serious leisure pursuit' and avoids any reference at all to learning. Whilst accepting the possibility that living history institutions with fixed locations and permanent displays may be largely educational, in reference to re-enactment of the American Civil War in the UK, he says

re-enacted events, certainly in the case of a male-dominated 'living history' society, are not primarily an educational exercise. Rather, they are meaningful for the individuals involved, sustaining and enhancing their life-style interests and a 'serious'

hobby through camaraderie, collective involvement, and a subjective understanding of authenticity (Hunt, pp.387)

The majority of enthusiasts, however, insist that they learn a great deal from participating. Heather, for example, a member of *Regia Anglorum*, had been very interested in history at school, but knew little about the early medieval period until she joined the organisation. Her subject knowledge has increased considerably as a result. In addition she has learned social skills such as team work; and craft skills, which in her case are textile based – she is learning to spin, naalbind [a type of knitting] and tablet weave. She has also learnt about the diet and food preparation of the medieval period. She commented that she still watches historical films and television programmes, ‘but now appears in them as well!’ In an interview with *The Guardian*, Helen Naylor, also a member of *Regia Anglorum*, described her passion for her hobby:

My character is Aelfwyn, a widow and mother, who works in the household of the local thain, so I do lots of cooking, crafts and childcare. I also demonstrate an Anglo-Saxon and Viking craft called naalbinding..

I make my own costumes, which is fairly straightforward. Between 800 and 1066, fashion wasn't as fickle as it is now! As soon as I put on the costume, it's like stepping into another world.

I'm usually quite reserved, but when I play Aelfwyn I develop a new persona and speak in a way I wouldn't normally do. I feel as if I have stepped into the past. There's something magical about it. It's so rewarding to feel you're bringing history to life for people, particularly children. (*The Guardian*, 12 February, 2008)

Helen had always been fascinated by history. As a member of *Regia Anglorum*, she was given a handbook with some historical background but is not required to do any further reading – however, re-enactment has given her ‘a thirst for historical knowledge’. In addition to the handicraft skills and subject knowledge she has acquired, it could be argued that her social skills have developed. She points out that the social mix within the organisation is comprehensive: as well as an age range from two to 48 ‘we've got archaeologists, research scientists, craftsmen and binmen.’

Ian, a former member of *The Sealed Knot*, had similar learning experiences: he had learnt some skills such as swordplay, musket and pike drill and, almost unwittingly, developed some leadership skills, ‘I managed to gain promotion, organised a few events and was regimental adjutant, something must have rubbed off!’ Before joining the Sealed Knot, though he liked history at school, he had only a ‘passing interest’ in the Civil War, and only a ‘basic knowledge’ of the subject. Now, however, he has ‘a greater knowledge of the complexity of the political situation of the period and the implications for today’. As a result of participating, he considers that his attitude towards history has changed with his ‘deeper understanding of the implications of events’. He too still watches historical films and television programmes, but significantly is now ‘less tolerant of inaccuracies!’

## Conclusion

Is participation in re-enactment educative? Whilst Hunt prefers to talk about ‘serious pleasure pursuits’, we believe on the basis of the research we have done so far that it would be difficult to argue that learning is not taking place: not only by the participants, but by members of their audience, whether this is members of the general public or a class of primary school children. Much of that learning may, of course, be general life skills, artistic and creative skills, research skills and so on, with little that is specific to the process of *living* history. It is interesting that Hunt links his negative analysis of re-enactment as a

learning experience to commodification, playing and performing, as we have argued elsewhere that whilst there is little doubt that history has been commodified, this does not mean that it does not involve learning about history (Coles and Armstrong, 2007; Armstrong and Coles, forthcoming). And because participation in re-enactment may involve having fun, and just because *doing* history is entertainment and pleasure, should the educative elements be neglected? The separation of living museums as being educational, from living history as being fun, is over-simplistic in our view. Besides as one of us has previously argued, learning should be fun (Armstrong, 2002; 2004). Hunt is critical because this is *playing*, it is *performance*. Goffman's 'dramatic metaphor' is used both by Hunt and others (Snow, 1993; Enscoe, 1996) to give an impression of authenticity. Again, one of us has previously argued, scripted and improvised performance has much in common with teaching (Armstrong, 2003).

However, we do agree with Hunt that this issue of authenticity needs to be problematised. In our research we are aware that many participants were striving for authenticity and accuracy, without necessarily pondering the historiographical issues which this commitment raises. In our research, Ian does suggest that participation in re-enactment has impacted on his view of history, and has made him less tolerant of historical inaccuracies. However, we believe that there is a further distinction still to be made, which goes beyond this paper, as well as the work of Hunt, and that is that there is a difference between re-enactment and *reconstruction*. But that must wait – as historians would say - for another time, in another place.

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