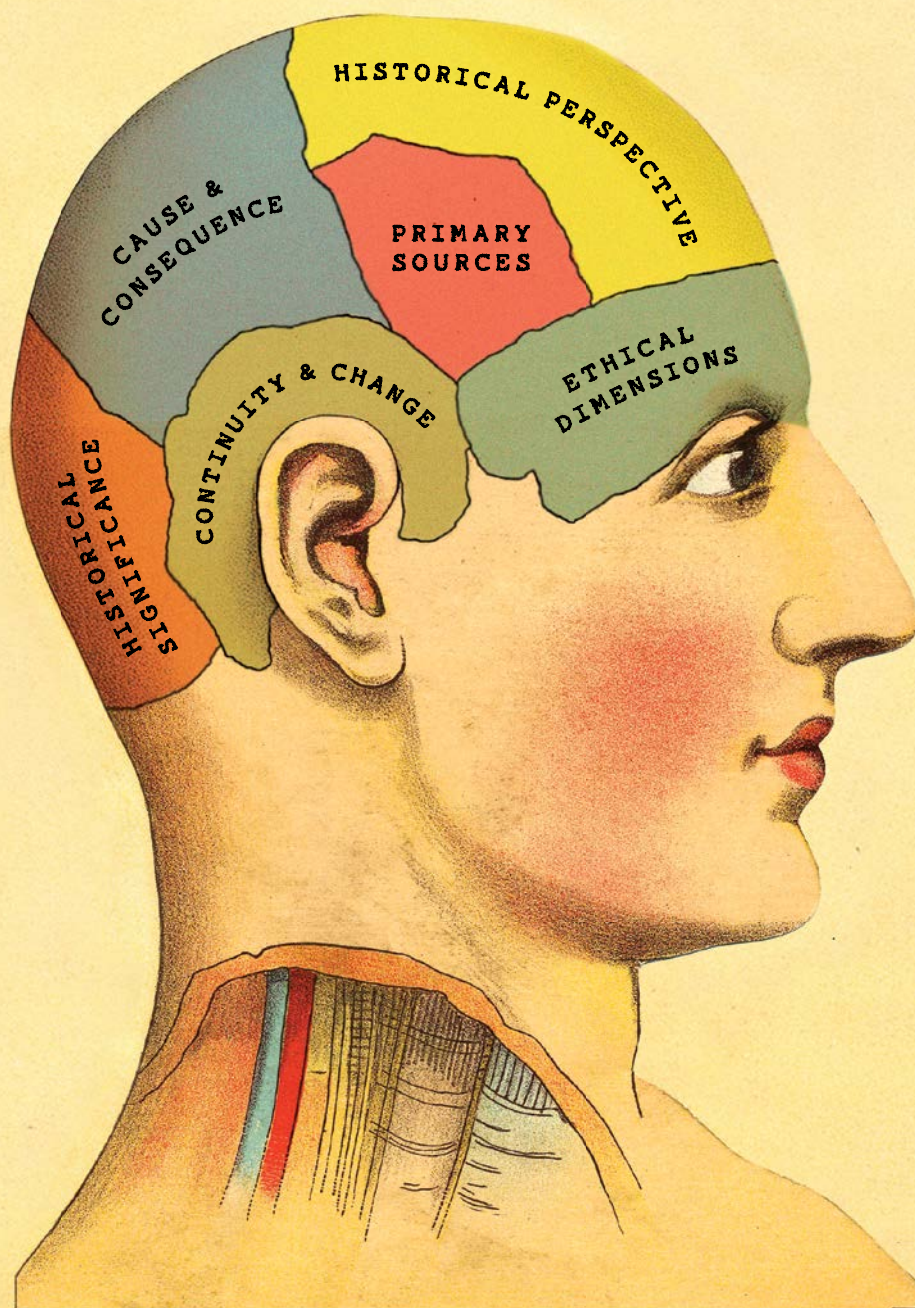


# TEACHING HISTORY

Journal of the History Teachers' Association of NSW (HTANSW)

First published in 1961

ISSN 0040-0602



HISTORICAL  
CONCEPTS & SKILLS

2024  
Volume 58  
Number 4



# Can We Teach a Hopeful History?

*Professor Keith C. Barton, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana and Professor Li-Ching Ho, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, US*

The world today faces innumerable crises, around issues of war and international relations, domestic politics, poverty, health, education, the rights and well-being of marginalised populations, and of course the most pressing existential threat of them all, climate change. Given the enormity of these problems, it is easy for both children and adults to feel a sense of despair, as though nothing they do could have a significant role in putting things to right or bringing about a better future.<sup>1</sup> As educators, we cannot turn our backs on this problem.

We must provide students with a sense of hope: the belief that a better world is possible, and the knowledge of how they could bring that about. If we delude ourselves into thinking that our mission is the more 'noble' one of imparting academic knowledge that transcends the messy world of everyday life, we will quickly doom ourselves to irrelevance – or indeed, to extinction, along with the rest of humanity. History, in particular, as one of the subjects most directly concerned with how people have influenced the world around them, should play a central role in the quest to provide hope. Should.

At present, it would be difficult to say that History education does play much of a role in developing a sense of hope. Much of what we teach in History is, understandably, a record of what has gone wrong in the past – a steady stream of war and destruction, death and disease, tragedy and turmoil. Even those events that were once considered triumphs, such as the rise of modern nations or the development of industry, are now seen in light of their disastrous impact on people and the planet.

Ironically, even when people see history in terms of lessons for the present, they typically do so only in negative terms, as when they assert that we study history to 'learn from the mistakes of the past'. Leaving aside the fact that there is little evidence anyone uses history this way, this evaluation assumes that everything in the past was a mistake, and that with our present-day insights we can avoid the inadequacies



**Figure 1.** Student climate strike in Melbourne, Friday 21 May 2021. Source: Wikimedia Commons / John Englart / CC-BY-SA-2.0

of our predecessors. But where would those insights come from in the first place?

Surely there are positive examples from history: times when people decided to work toward admirable goals and successfully brought about a better world. Most curricula do include some examples, such as the fight for women's rights or against the oppression of Indigenous and minoritised peoples, both of which have had notable (although still incomplete) success. But beyond these canonical movements, hopeful examples in History education are few and far between. We can do more both to include hopeful examples and to highlight the specific aspects of them that provide hope for the present.

## Where does hope come from?

Hope has become a common trope in both popular and academic writing in recent decades. Yet the meaning of hope varies widely (and is not always fully explained), and not all



**Figure 2.** On 11 March 2021 the Wadumbah dance troupe performed on Whadjuk Noongar/traditional land outside the WA Premier's office in Boorloo/Perth to urge the government to cease all native logging. Source: Wikimedia Commons / Nancye Miles-Tweedie / CC-BY-SA-4.0



**Figure 3.** Indigenous American marcher during Pride Parade in California, USA (2016). Many Indigenous groups in North America historically recognised gender roles in addition to or transcending male/female dichotomies. Source: Wikimedia Commons / Quinn Dombrowski / CC-BY-SA-2.0

its meanings are useful for History teaching. Some people see hope in passive terms, as though the world will get better if we simply wait patiently. This is hardly an inspiring approach for educators, because it suggests people need not learn or do anything to bring their hopes to fruition.<sup>2</sup> Only somewhat more helpfully, some people portray hope as a personality disposition: a person with a hopeful attitude will work for change, while those without this characteristic will despair of the possibility of affecting the world around them, at least in any positive way. While personality traits may be important, this view of hope provides little guidance for formal education, which is not well-suited for developing students' personalities.

A more productive view of hope emphasises knowledge that enables a belief that human action can change the world for the better, so that it is more just, equitable, or harmonious.<sup>3</sup> Notably, in some cases 'change' may also mean stopping the social, political, or economic forces that are destroying what already exists. Some things we have are worth preserving, such as Indigenous languages and cultures or mutually beneficial relationships with others and with the environment. History can provide hope not only that the world can be transformed, but that undesirable transformations can be avoided or even turned back.

This kind of hope can be divided into two broad types: 1) visionary hope, which imagines a fundamentally different social world (including environmental relations), one that can only be achieved in a distant – but still imaginable – future; 2) pragmatic hope, which emphasises feasible outcomes in the near future and depends on currently available strategies and resources. Neither of these is just a warm feeling, though; both depend on the kinds of knowledge that students can engage with in their History classes. Three areas of knowledge are particularly important for developing hope: knowledge of goals, possibilities and pathways.<sup>4</sup>

## Goals

Students need to learn about the societal and environmental aspirations that have motivated social action over time, so that they have a better sense of what objectives people have envisioned and worked toward. These could include idealistic goals of individuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx, or Aldo Leopold, or of groups such as the Diggers, Anarchists, or South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement. Students should understand that groups and individuals have developed well thought-out, comprehensive visions of what the world could be like – ways of existing in the world, relating to others, and interacting with the environment, other than everyday 'common sense'. The point is not to force any one vision on students, but rather to help them see that there are a variety of reasoned positions that can guide our actions.

Students should also understand more pragmatic objectives, such as times when people have worked to change laws, reform social policies, enlighten attitudes, or bring about higher wages or better working conditions. Although history curricula usually include cases of labour struggles, changes in oppressive laws or racist attitudes, development of social welfare policies, and so on, students sometimes interpret these in narrow or misleading ways. In the United States, for example, students often believe that the Civil Rights Movement aimed to transform the attitudes of individuals rather than to change specific laws and institutional practices. Similarly, they often believe that the story of Rosa Parks is important as an example of 'standing up for what you believe in' – without knowing what she did believe in. These events provide hopeful guides for action in the present only if we know what it was that people were trying to achieve; otherwise, there is no way of evaluating their impact, and any implications for the present would be tenuous or misguided.



**Figure 4.** (Left) Rosa Parks, with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the background. The importance of Park and King lies in their contribution to a large and complex social movement that used a variety of strategies to successfully change specific laws and institutional practices. Source: Wikimedia Commons / National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the U.S. Information Agency Record Group 306, record ID: 306-PSD-65-1882 (Box 93) / PD



**Figure 5.** (Right) Empress Suiko, 33rd monarch of Japan (reigned 593 – 628). Women in pre-modern Japan often held political power. Painting by Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1726) from Eifuku-ji temple in Taishi, Osaka. Source: Wikimedia Commons / PD

## Possibilities

One of the chief obstacles to hope is the perception that the way things are is the way things must be, and that nothing meaningful can be done to change the world. People often believe that the economy has always revolved around capitalist, free-market principles; that people everywhere and for all time have been materialistic and self-serving; that gender roles are fixed and dichotomous. If these are built into human nature, then efforts to change the world are destined for failure. One of the great strengths of history, though, is that it provides innumerable examples of the differing ways that society can be organised: Societies (including present ones) that have recognised multiple genders, and different gendered behaviours than those that are prevalent today; that have depended on cooperative management of natural resources; that have revolved around harmony and mutual aid. By learning about these, students can better understand the flexibility of humanity rather than feeling locked into current arrangements.

Students should also learn about examples of times when efforts to change (or preserve) the world have been successful, so that they can see that with the right choice of strategies, people's efforts to improve the world are not doomed before they begin. Existing curricular examples of achieving rights for women and minorities are important, but there are many other examples, in other areas of life. Students could learn how small farmers in Central America have successfully opposed multinational seed corporations; how scientists and environmental activities were able to bring about regulation

of some persistent organic pollutants; how producer and consumer cooperatives have provided buffers to market economies; how Indigenous people in regions around the world have managed to save their lands and natural resources. Believing that such actions are possible depends on knowing that others have had success, even though these may have been partial or incomplete.

## Pathways

Knowing what people want to achieve and believing that it is possible to do so are not enough to provide an effective sense of hope; students must know how people have achieved these things: They must understand the pathways between existing states of affairs and desired ends (whether now or in the past). History has an especially critical role to play in this aspect of hope, because history centres around evidence-based reasoning. If students believe that adhering to an admirable vision of a better world is enough to bring about change, or if they have an inaccurate or oversimplified image of what it takes, then they will have false hope, and they will quickly become discouraged when a social media post or school recycling campaign has no impact. As educators, we can help students understand the shortcomings of romanticised ideas of social action so that they have more realistic knowledge of the process of change.

For example, no laws were changed in the United States simply because the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a speech; laws were changed because of a massive campaign that involved thousands of protests, extensive media coverage,

sustained litigation, economic pressure, and systematic political organising and lobbying. The same could be said for the anti-Apartheid movement or any similar campaign that succeed in changing laws and practices in significant ways. Indeed, it is the extent of activity that in many cases determined the success of such movements. History can also help students evaluate the relative contribution of a given strategy, such as an economic boycott, to broader efforts and to analyse under what circumstances it does or does not have an impact. And crucially, history can acquaint students with the wide range of strategies that have been used over time, so that their perceptions are not limited to those they are most familiar with already.

And history can certainly help students understand the importance of collective action and its relation to individual efforts. Too often, schools promote the purportedly motivational belief that ‘one person can make a big difference’. This is almost always untrue, and it often serves to blunt change rather than promote social action. Individuals may serve as public faces or inspirational leaders within social movements, but behind them are highly organised networks of activists. Moreover, activists work in a wide variety of ways, not only by giving speeches or manning barricades but by making lunches and arranging transportation and printing signs. By understanding the extent and complexity of social action, students can better understand the role they themselves could play someday and develop a better-grounded belief that when many people work together, change is possible.

## Conclusions

As History educators, we can do a better job of providing hope for students who face a world in crisis. This will involve reprioritising some of the content we teach – adding new topics and examples, even if it means omitting some long-cherished ones – as well as emphasising more directly certain elements of that content, specifically knowledge of goals, possibilities, and pathways for hopeful social action. None of this requires steering away from the intellectual abilities we hold dear – creating evidence-based accounts, understanding historical perspectives, understanding the complexity of causality, and so on. But it does mean using these to counter the sense of despair that for many people stands in the way of believing in a better world. ♦



**Figure 6.** Protest by Klamath Basin Tribes and allies in 2006 calling for removal of hydroelectric dams to restore salmon runs on the Klamath River (Oregon and California, US). The last of four dams was removed in 2024, and salmon have begun to return.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons / Patrick McCully / CC-BY-SA-2.0

- <sup>1</sup> Kathryn Stevenson and Nils Peterson, ‘Motivating Action through Fostering Climate Change Hope and Concern and Avoiding Despair among Adolescents’ *Sustainability* 8, no. 1 (2015): 6; Charlotte A. Jones and Aidan Davison, ‘Disempowering Emotions: The Role of Educational Experiences in Social Responses to Climate Change’, *Geoforum* 118 (2021): 197; Maria Ojala, ‘Young People and Global Climate Change: Emotions, Coping, and Engagement in Everyday Life’, in *Geographies of Global Issues: Change and Threat*, eds. Nicola Answell, Natascha Klocker and Tracey Skelton (Singapore: Springer, 2016): 329-46.
- <sup>2</sup> Jane Goodall and Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times* (New York: Celadon Books, 2021); Charles Snyder, ‘The Past and Possible Futures of Hope’, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2000): 11-28.
- <sup>3</sup> Keith C. Barton and Li-Ching Ho, *Curriculum for Justice and Harmony: Knowledge, Deliberation, and Action in Social and Civic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> Li-Ching Ho and Keith C. Barton, ‘Centering hope in social studies education’, *Social Education* 88, no. 6 (2024): 334-40.