

SKILLS

"HISTORICAL SKILLS: FACT OR FICTION?"*

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"We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries, but to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge." (J.S. Bruner)

INTRODUCTION

As we draw nearer to comprehensive curriculum reform in South Africa, the fate of school history lies in the balance. In many schools in South Africa the subject is perceived as a catalogue of irrelevant factual material presented by uncommitted and badly-trained teachers. Yet, ironically, the poor methodology practised by many teachers has ensured that in many schools it remains a popular examination option because facts can be learned and regurgitated *ad nauseum*. Reasonable results can easily be obtained by students who are capable of memorising masses of facts.

PARADIGM SHIFT

This situation cannot continue for much longer. When the curriculum is re-negotiated, history is going to have

to answer for itself as a discipline which can prepare young people for the world of work and leisure. To achieve this the emphasis will have to shift, once and for all, to an approach which is skills rather than content-based. This is going to be a difficult process to effect because it entails a complete paradigm shift. We are going to have to demonstrate very clearly that a skills based approach is not an idealistic vision but a necessary and realistic policy for the future.

THE UNITED KINGDOM EXAMPLE

Perhaps we can take some comfort from the thought that as recently as the 1960s and 1970s, history was

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perceived by teachers in the U.K. as a subject in which facts played a dominating role. Writers like Unstead insisted that the role of the history teacher was largely to impart information and facts to children. With the advent of the Schools Council Projects in the mid 1980s the whole emphasis in the U.K. changed.

BRUNER

These projects were based on the premise that history should not be seen as a body of knowledge which must be learned, but a method of analysing the past through the application of particular skills and concepts. This approach was a reflection of Bruner's assertion that for children of all age groups "there is an appropriate version of any skill or knowledge." This is Bruner's idea of the "Spiral Curriculum" which asserts that the same concepts and skills can be taught in different but equally intellectual honest ways throughout the school career of the pupil.

GAPS AND EMPATHY

Two important emphases emerged from the Schools Council Project's approach. The first was the "courage to leave gaps", an approach where pupils are not expected to learn the history of mankind from Plato to Nato, but can focus on selected areas of study. The second was the emphasis on people in the past. Because the facts of history cannot be shown to pupils for direct inspection, they can only be understood by projective imaginative experience. Similarly, people's motives cannot be seen but can only be grasped by intuition or inference. Thus the importance of empathising with people in the past was recognised as important.

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

In many respects the National Curriculum for History in the U.K. is a logical spin-off from the Schools Council Projects. However the new history curriculum is a far more complex and sophisticated way of tackling the subject and has aroused a great deal of resistance. It is my view that although we must attempt to follow the basic philosophy underpinning the U.K. initiative, we need to produce a simpler, workable model for the special circumstances which pertain in our country. It is the aim of this joint paper to do just that.

WHAT IS A SKILLS-BASED APPROACH?

This approach is an attempt to move away from the domination of facts in teaching to a method of analysing the past through the application of skills and concepts. In this approach, the skills acquired by pupils are based on reason and a "spirit of enquiry" which involves the critical use of source material. However, historical evidence is open to a variety of equally valid

interpretations and so, in order to interpret evidence, it is necessary to realise that not only does each historian have a different perspective of the past, but that people in the past were very different to us. People in the past lived in societies with different knowledge-bases, belief-systems, views of the world, and different social, political and economic constraints. It is therefore necessary to attempt to understand the minds and motives of people in the past by making historical **inferences** about them. This is called **historical empathy** an approach which must conform to criteria of validity. Pupils must be encouraged to "go beyond the evidence" because this is central to historical understanding. It is important to realise that content **does not become irrelevant** but that it is used as a vehicle to train pupils to become young historians themselves.

CONCEPTS

Although skills and concepts go hand in hand, for purposes of this discussion it is useful to separate them out. J.S. Bruner refers to concepts as the "**ideas and styles**" of the subject. Because concepts are difficult to define, teachers have tended to shy away from considering them. Dennis Gunning describes them as "**ideas, usually expressed in words, to describe classes or groups of things, people, actions or ideas having something in common.**" Educationists seem to agree that a concept is intangible and that it rests in the mind as a kind of trigger word, without precise shape or form itself.

Because concepts form the framework which makes historical enquiry possible, it is important that pupils are introduced to them. Hilary Cooper (1992), believes that it is wrong to introduce concepts to pupils **implicitly** but that they be given the opportunity to discuss them **explicitly**.

She divides concepts into different categories, all of which are important for history teachers to get to grips with. Some concepts, she asserts, are concerned with **space and time**, some are **methodological** : similarity and difference, cause and effect, continuity and change. Other concepts are **organising ideas** which run through human society : communication, power, beliefs, conflict. Concepts are created by historians to **encapsulate historical periods** : Renaissance, Reformation, Victorian. Then there are **closed** concepts which refer to a particular time (villa, elderman, Roundhead, Cavalier), and concepts which are **not exclusively historical** (trade, law, agriculture).

Vygotsky (1962) suggested that concept development can be promoted by **careful use of language** and Donaldson (1978) believes that pupils must be helped to develop conceptual thought by **recognising the**

abstraction of language. Indeed, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that **structured discussion, using learned concepts** is essential to the development of historical understanding.

Research has also shown that concepts **develop through a process of generalisation**, by storing an image of **abstracted characteristics**, and of **deduction**, by drawing from the stored image, adding to it and modifying it. It has indicated a pattern in the development of concepts, suggesting that concepts **need to be taught**, and that they are best learned **through discussion**. But research has also shown that pupils dislike **generalisations** so that we need to provide concrete and interesting examples when we discuss concepts with them. Let us discuss some ways to go about this.

The concept of **time** is extremely important in the study of history. Researchers have been concerned with how pupils comprehend first **sequence** and then time. Indeed, it is possible to view sequence as a general concept applicable to **all** learning, for when children are listening to a story, sequencing of events is necessary. To help pupils comprehend time, they could be introduced to **sequence cards** which depict familiar topics which have to be placed in historical time sequence. Pupils can relate sequence cards to timelines or timecharts placed on a classroom wall by the teacher.

As far as **space** is concerned, it is useful to introduce pupils to mapwork at an early age.

The whole concept of **space** should be discussed in details with the pupils. Different cultures have different perspectives of the concept "space". Primary school pupils can begin with a diagram of their classroom, then draw a map of the school buildings and later the school grounds and surrounding areas. These maps should be drawn according to scale. These exercises can be followed by mapwork locating pupils' town, province and country. Pupils should also be taught about direction and the four major points of the compass.

The concepts **continuity and change** are extremely important for history students. Pupils can perhaps be reminded that one of the only certain things about history is that change occurs all the time. However, although things do change, there is also continuity. Some beliefs and institutions of society remain to provide security and stability while others are either rejected or reformed. Pupils could be asked to bring certain artefacts belonging to their grandparents to compare them with their modern equivalents. Some items may be completely obsolete while others will have been adapted as a result of improvements in technology, eg. razors. Photographs are very useful for

this type of exercise and local history studies reinforce the concept of continuity and change.

There is a great deal of scope for the teacher when discussing a concept like **power** with the pupils. They could be reminded of the different types of power which exist. The power of nature is essentially neutral (e.g. a storm) but as soon as man enters the picture this changes. Man harnesses power for his own ends (e.g. hydro-electric power, nuclear power) and this has implications which are far-reaching and devastating. Then there is also political, economic and social power. People often forget about social power (e.g. the power of ostracism in many contexts) which dominates the lives of people. There is also military power, diplomatic power and the power of persuasion and propaganda. Once pupils are aware of how power can be used in so many different ways they are able to relate this to specific instances in history. Equally rewarding discussions can be held about other concepts like **beliefs and conflict**. Concepts like **trade, law and agriculture** also need to be discussed in some detail especially if they are relevant to a piece of work soon to be introduced to the pupils. However we must be constantly on our guard to ensure that the discussions are lively, pupil-centred and interesting. It is up to the teacher to ensure that **interesting examples** are provided to stimulate the pupils.

SKILLS

Bruner has reminded us that: *"We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries, but to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge."*

Cooper goes further when she says that it is **impossible** to learn history without learning the processes by which historians find out about the past.

However in promoting a skills-based approach I would like to caution that we should be wary of turning the whole exercise into a sterile, boring, scientific analysis. Woodley reminds us not to over-emphasise the "scientific" approach whereby scholars are encouraged to indulge constantly in negative scepticism. He believes that this produces a cold neutrality too far removed from human reality. Woodley is in fact making a case for empathy in history teaching.

The latest theories on empathy regard it as **both a cognitive and an affective process**. Research has also shown that pupils are capable of empathetic thought at a much earlier age than was previously believed possible. Isaacs has shown that very young children are capable of logical argument if they understand **how to tackle the problem** and are **interested** in it.

Bruner believes that the problems we introduce to our pupils must involve the right degree of uncertainty in order to be interesting, and learning should be organised in units, each building **on the foundation of the previous one**. He also believes that we must define the skills children need in order to learn effectively and so move on to extrapolate from particular memorable instances and to **transfer the skills** learned to other similar problems. This gives **confidence** and prevents "**mental overload**". Marbeau reminds us that we must provide a means for open and animated thought so that the child has intellectual autonomy, can take risks, exchange ideas and organise thoughts relative to the thoughts of others. Somehow we must also convince pupils how exciting it can be to discover new things. Clive Lawrance, writing recently in the *Natal Witness*, describes the excitement of Aron Mazel, the Natal archaeologist, reacting to a new find: "If you had been at a certain site near Nottingham Road recently you would have seen Mazel jumping up and down and running round like a footballer who has scored the winning goal." Mazel then pleaded with his staff not to find any more new things because he could not handle the excitement!

Keith Jenkins in his work **Re-thinking History** rightly reminds us that all history is theoretical and all theories are positioned and positioning. There is therefore the need for detailed historiographical studies. This would allow us to avoid as Tosh has warned of falling into the trap of ransacking the past to fuel a particular ideology. To sum up this analysis of skills, we can say that research suggests strongly that young children are capable to genuine historical problem-solving, that they are able to think historically in an increasingly complex way (this includes the ability to empathise), and that language is an essential element in this process.

In practical terms it is important to be able to "unpack" the skills which are necessary in particular lessons. Mr Nisbet will illustrate how this can be done in his presentation.

ATTITUDES AND VALUES

This is a controversial area because, if we would like to promote appropriate attitudes and values, who decides

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which particular values are suitable? It is also a dangerous area because it can be exploited by politicians who would like society to conform to certain norms and values. However it is impossible to avoid making moral judgements in history.

If we assume that society requires history in order to prepare for a better future, there is the implication that moral judgments have to be made about past societies in order to do this. An attitude can be defined as **a feeling or disposition to think or act in a particular way in relation to oneself and to individuals or groups in society**. An important feature of history is its power as a vehicle to clarify a range of attitudes. History has the power to transmit the attitudes and values that a democratic society finds important. As an example from history we can use the San people to illustrate the importance of values in society. The underlying methods of ancient San hunter gatherer societies was "sharing and tolerance". They developed mechanisms for "dispute resolution". They would talk and dance and try all ways of resolving problems. If they failed, they would move away rather than fight. Just as it is necessary to deal with concepts in an explicit way the same approach should be adopted with attitudes and values. With increasing pressure to prove to pupils and parents how valuable history can be we should not be afraid to spell out how history can prepare pupils to live in a changing and often dangerous world.

CONCLUSION

If we are to succeed in moving history teaching towards a skills-based approach, strategies will have to be devised to acquaint teachers with the tools to carry out the job. But we will also need to convince them that the approach is relevant, exciting and flexible. Great attention will so have to be devoted to devising sensible assessment techniques which will ensure that we do not revert to a content-based approach. Ideally we will have to discover the perfect balance between content and skills so that pupils will find school history relevant, interesting but also challenging. The time has arrived for us to rescue our discipline from impending disaster.

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