

THINKING SKILLS AND THE LEARNING OF PRIMARY HISTORY

Determining Historical Significance

Peter Vass

February 2004

A problem that faces primary school teachers, presented with a historical theme or era to teach, is seldom what to put in unit of work but rather what to leave out. Some subjects are so rich and fascinating, ancient Egypt for example, that to omit any aspect seems to somehow diminish the historical context. The selection of appropriate subject matter at Key Stage 1 or 2 is, in some ways, as much an exercise in determining historical significance as an historian weighing the factors that brought about the 1st World War. The difference is that one has a priority to devise a curriculum that will be both appropriate and accessible to pupils, whilst the other requires an academic prioritising of events in the light of historical evidence. However, the nature of the thinking is, in many ways, very similar.

The broad sweep of history

The business of determining significance is a key historical skill and one that historians, teachers and children need to exercise not only to appreciate ‘the broad sweep of history’ as it is often called, but also better understand the process by which events become part of the historical record. This process is one that is intrinsically bound up with questions of how events are selected and remembered and, occasionally and more darkly, chosen to be forgotten. These areas emerged as particular features in our study.

The question of historical significance has been an on-going pre-occupation of secondary history educationists for many years (Hunt 1999, Phillips 2002, Hunt 2003) and, once again, their ruminations remind us of the contribution that history makes not only to the development of children’s thinking but also their ethical and moral stance on past events. We cannot pretend that moral and social education, or more correctly nowadays citizenship, will not be part of any worthwhile history education. More than this, its value is in recognising that the study of history creates opportunities for young people to evaluate and consider their own perspectives on historical events and how their values affect their views. As Hunt (2000 p52) puts it, “the consideration of significance promotes not only the ability to explain and support a case, but also encourages teenagers to consider where they stand on some significant and enduring issues that arise from the study of people in the past”. Year 6 children have different perceptions to teenagers but the basic message that no historical study is ‘value-free’ can be usefully introduced to older Key Stage 2 children. In the research I recently undertook it was this aspect that provided a starting point for the study of the topic.

Significant events

In the preliminary session we began by asking the children what they already knew about the World War Two. This, unsurprisingly, varied enormously. Some had considerable subject knowledge for children of their age. Chas had gleaned a lot of information ‘from my dad and family and other people’ whilst a significant percentage (41%) recorded only single pieces of knowledge about the war. Kerry wrote ‘all I know about World War Two is the man, Adolf Hitler’. Many children knew about particular subjects like evacuation but were unaware that they were features of World War Two. The most common sources of information were the TV and children’s fiction. Most children had read, or had read to them, ‘Goodnight Mr. Tom’ and over half had seen the film. Many cited the study of World War Two by elder brothers and sisters as ‘having got them interested’. As this session took place

just before half-term we set the children a homework to discover, what they felt were, the eight most significant events of the war. They could glean this information from any source they chose although several children were confident that 'it would all be on the internet'. The idea for this activity was taken from Hunt (2000 p.49) which he recognises as having an 'element of gimmickry' as well as being 'a thought provoking exercise'. For these younger children we felt it was important to establish that the subject was, despite its range and complexities, one they were all capable of studying. However, it is the latter 'thought-provoking' quality that Hunt identifies that makes it such a useful one in their understanding of history.

In the first session we discussed the words 'event' and 'significance' and what they meant in the context of history. As with most historical study there is always the necessity to consider the semantics; it is an essential part of conceptualising by defining the language that helps explain the discipline. In the case of 'significance' the word is easily interchangeable with 'importance' and for children of this age it was not necessary to make too fine a distinction between the two. However, some children recognised that 'significance' hinted at 'something being particularly special, for example a football manager might say 'this is a very significant match' rather than 'this is a very important match'. In terms of 'events' they were content with their own definition of 'something that happened that was remembered' ('or **not** remembered!' – Chas). In the context of this study it was important that the process of establishing some sort of 'pecking order' of events took place in order that 'the big picture' could be determined. We felt the children should be involved in deciding which events are perceived by historians as being significant and why that should be. This mode of thinking appears, at first glance, to be largely logico-deductive but the crucial element proved to be one of interpretation. As one child commented, "It is difficult to say that one event is more significant than any other. D-Day was important at that time and dropping the atom bomb was important at another time and things would have been different if they hadn't happened." This statement is a profound one for an 11 year old. Not only is he recognising the relative nature of historical significance but also that, at any given time, a number of outcomes could have emerged from a single event. Any one of these could spark off a chain reaction culminating in a major historical phenomenon – the assassination of Franz Ferdinand precipitating the First World War springs to mind – or merely end up as one of the forgotten episodes of history. This might be a useful introduction to the study of cause and consequence in history. As Hunt (2003 p35) points out consequence is a more immediate response to an event whereas significance needs a longer and broader view. He writes "While the consequences of an event will contribute towards its significance, it is often the wider issues that arise from an event that give it significance". I will be considering this form of thinking in a later section. The discussion that took place gave children a language with meanings that they could use when 'collecting' their events. It was to play an important part in future work.

Children determining significance

The whole of the first session was largely an exercise in determining historical significance. Each child had a list of eight events which were recognised as significant within the broad time-frame of World War Two. At this stage it was not important for the children to know if D-Day was more or less significant than, for example, the Battle of El Alamein or even to understand the precise nature of these events, although many had discovered a great deal about them by searching through websites, encyclopaedias and talking to parents, older siblings etc., but that these events

were features of a larger historical event, the war itself. They needed to recognise that World War Two should be perceived as a significant historical event in its own right (see note 1).

As a class we discussed the sources (a word they knew thanks to National Curriculum history!) that were most productive in supplying information. Over half the class had visited web-sites although, interestingly, 'Dads' did supply a significant amount of subject interest and knowledge. However, the key activity in this first session was to determine the most significant events in order to place them on a time line. This engendered a great deal of discussion including deciding the 'size' (i.e. scale) of the events and their results (i.e. the effect the events had on other things). Voting was dismissed early on for this implied 'favourites' and the children recognised that their knowledge of the war was very limited. However, they felt they were in the right area when they talked about 'size' and 'result'. They also recognised that their secondary sources, particularly when they were books on the subject, would always be a key indicator of the significance.

It was decided that the best way of determining significance was to see which events appeared most in children's selections. They contrived a system which recorded their choices as a tally on the blackboard. The list was comprehensive and showed a considerable range. The event which 'topped' the list was, unsurprisingly, the Holocaust which featured in over 95% of the children's selections. Also scoring high was the dropping of the atom bomb, the D-Day landings and the evacuation of London. On considering the outcome of this activity, the children were in agreement about the key reason in determining the significance of events were those events which are still remembered today. As one child put it, 'it's the things that are still effecting people's lives today'. This reminded me of Lomas's deliberations on the subject when he questions the significance of events which only have 'a recognised relevance to people today' (p42). This opened up the debate for the children into those events which people felt were important at the time being more or less significant than those that are recognised today. Lomas cites the Falklands war as his example and I referred to Princess Diana's funeral, but his point remains the same, '...if something is topical we cannot know how long lasting will be the effects'. (Lomas, p42)

Significant to who?

However, this leads on to a most interesting feature of the children's thinking that evolved as the project developed. In Session 4 the children experienced a role play session where they met an ARP warden, a character loosely based on my grandfather. This man described 'his war' and communicated to the children those features that were most important to him. Many children picked up on this and referred back to the first session commenting that 'the things that were important to Charlie Vass weren't all the things that we remember today' and "they weren't the things that you see in history books". These children were discovering, in Lomas's terms, that 'assigning significance to something involves subjective judgment'(p41) and that the idiosyncratic individual experience can have a particular significance **for that individual**. The role of the historian is, of course, to see the bigger picture and we discussed this in some depth. By doing this, I would not claim that the children were gaining any particular insights into the broader concept into historical significance in the way that it is perceived by Phillips and Hunt. However, they were able to make a most important observation on the historical process and gain a clearer understanding of how the word is used historically.

The level of thinking was further enhanced in the next session when the children examined propaganda. Here, they looked at various modes of propaganda and why it became a feature of Home Front Britain. They learned about a 'suppressed history' and why some events never made the historical record. We considered the moral implications of this. When devising this part of the programme, the teachers and I had discussed at length when and how to introduce the moral perspective in the writing of the historical record and it was here that we decided to place this emphasis. The work of Hunt 2000, 2003, Lomas 1990 and Partington, 1980 has secondary schooling as its context but much of what they write has a relevance for primary aged children. The children began to recognise that, through our discussions and the class debate, the compiling of histories, however honest the historian, can not draw on all eventualities, for some never made the public record. This has implications for citizenship as well as social and moral development (Hunt 2000 p45). This was never more true than the incident at Bethnal Green Tube Station (see appendix (i)) the narrative of which was the climax of the project.

Debating significance

The debate section of Session 5 opened with us asking the children why they felt we had chosen the Bethnal Green story when there were many other 'Blitz' stories to choose from. There were a range of answers including 'because it was dramatic', 'because it was terrible' but more interestingly, 'because it was unusual' and 'because it was hushed up'. We collected the children's responses on the blackboard and then asked them if any of these reasons made the event significant. Amy remarked that it was important because it was unusual. She had expected the story to be about a terrible air raid - hers had been - but in the real situation a great many people had been killed without a bomb being dropped! "It was their fear that killed them", she observed. Jade felt the event had to be significant because it was 'hushed up'. She recognised that it would have been bad for morale if the story had become public and "the government would have been blamed for not providing the people of Bethnal Green with proper shelters." However, it was Claire N.'s comment that seemed to sum up the general feeling of the class. "It only became significant when the people who died had a memorial."

The unusual nature of the incident and the secrecy that surrounded it has made the story a most interesting one in the context of the history of the London Blitz. However, whether or not it made it significant in a way that Robert Phillips might perceive it, is somewhat debatable. We felt we had highlighted the unpredictability of historical circumstance as well as illustrating how narratives become a matter of public record, or not as the case may be. The stance taken by the government of the day became the major talking point and the children were able to draw on their earlier debate on propaganda to inform their arguments. The concluding discussion centred on whether governments in war-time are more secretive, drawing on the information we receive from governments today. "They only tell us what they want us to know" an astute 11 year old observed.

Counterfactuality and significance

Determining significance has been on the 'agenda' for doing primary history for many years, in fact Tim Lomas emphasised it as a key concept for understanding history (Lomas, 1990, pp41 - 46) before the formulation of the National Curriculum. One of

his suggestions for teaching significance he describes as *counter-possibilities* advocating pupils should consider what might have happened if circumstances had been different. He cites examples of what might have happened if Peter the Great or Bismarck or George Stephenson had never lived. He argues that “this helps reinforce the significance of what **did** happen”. (Lomas, p44). He also gives examples of “significance questions for younger pupils’ which require primary-aged children to prioritise reasons and order areas of importance.” However, most interestingly, he suggests an alternative where pupils are “asked to consider something which did not happen regarding an actual event and get pupils to discuss possible variations.” (p44). This mode of working is very similar to our counterfactual exercise which asked children to imagine the outcome to the Bethnal Green scenario. Quite how this relates to developing notions of historical significance is unclear but certainly, as an exercise of mind, counterfactuals do engage children in speculations that enhance and intensify the historical context. In a preamble to the Radio 4 series ‘What If...’ which was transmitted in March 2002 the following rationale was presented which seems to sum up its value. “ Prof. Chris Andrews of Cambridge University asks what if the major turning points in history had taken a different turn. By altering a single plausible fact, he re-examines the events of the day. The result is always thought-provoking and refreshes our memories of what actually did happen. In suggesting alternative history we can reflect on how extraordinary it is that things did indeed happen as they did.” (Radio 4, 2002)

The determining of significance is a key skill for developing historical understanding in children. More than that it helps think about historical events and features from a cognitive, moral and social perspective. Although there are opportunities within National Curriculum history to do tasks of this nature but, sadly, very few are taken. Citizenship education, for example, offers clear guidance for children at a primary age to engage with these sort of dilemmas. It is important that older aged primary school children are given opportunities to experience work of this type for, unless they do, they will be lack the necessary skills and understanding to undertake history in their secondary schools.

Notes

1. Robert Phillips has some interesting things to say on this subject in his Teaching History article TH 106, *Historical Significance – the forgotten key element?* For example he asks the children why the 1st World War was called the Great War and uses the word ‘great’ as a mnemonic for Groundbreaking, Remembered by All, Events that were far reaching, Affected the Future and Terrifying. Activities like this are rather advanced for primary-aged children but the principles behind it can be espoused by teachers in their teaching sessions.

References

- Hunt M. (2000) Teaching Historical Significance in *Issues in History Teaching ed. Arthur J. and Phillips R.* Routledge.
- Hunt M (2003) Historical Significance in *Harris R and Riley M. (eds) Past Forward: A Vision for School History 2002 – 2012.* HA.

Lomas T. (1990) Teaching and Assessing Historical Understanding. Teaching of History series. no.63. Historical Association.
Partington G (1980) The Idea of Historical Education. NFER
Phillips R. (2002) Historical Significance – the Forgotten ‘Key Element’? Teaching History 106. HA.

Appendix i

The Bethnal Green Tube Station Disaster

On the night of 3rd/4th March 1943 there were 10 air raids on London. This was part of new ‘hit and run’ tactics by the Luftwaffe whereby groups of low flying aircraft sped to pre-determined targets, dropped their bombs and then returned quickly to their bases. One of these raids took place at Bethnal Green in the east end of London. At 8.15pm the sirens sounded and people made their way to the tube station shelter. Buses stopped and local cinemas emptied as 1500 people descended the narrow staircase which led down to the platform. At 8.30 one of the new anti-aircraft rocket batteries opened up in a nearby park with a terrifying roar. These installations had not been heard before and many assumed bombs were dropping. This caused the crowd to push forward into the narrow station entrance; a woman near the bottom of the staircase fell and within 15 second the stairs were jammed with hundreds of fallen people. A total of 173 people, 84 women, 62 children and 27 men, were suffocated in the crush. There was scant recognition of the disaster at the time for it was felt that reporting the accident would be damaging for morale. In fact, it only became ‘official history’ in 1973 when a small plaque commemorating the event was placed at the entrance to the tube station. Some files on the incident are still closed today.

