

**THINKING SKILLS AND THE
LEARNING OF PRIMARY
HISTORY**

Thinking Historically through Stories

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July 2003

Preamble

This is one of a series of papers derived from a piece of research undertaken in an Oxfordshire primary school in the summer of 2002. The major aim of the project was to consider how thinking skills might enhance the learning of history. This paper focuses on the potential of narrative, and in particular counterfactuals, in this respect.

Narrative, fiction and faction

“Historical understanding is the exercise of the capacity to follow a story, where the story is known to be based on evidence and is put forward as a sincere effort to get at *the* story as far as the evidence and writer’s general knowledge and intelligence allow”. (Gallie, p51)

When Gallie refers to *the* story he hints at the unknowable that is assumed to be part of any historical narrative, the part that the historian ‘invents’. Evidence, in this context, is more or less secure as attempts are made to ‘fill the gaps’ in order to create as sincere and as evocative impression as possible. Lang (2003) when writing on an extract from Simon Schama’s *Citizens*, compares his approach to writing narrative with that of a film maker where the central character is tracked through a landscape that the historian creates. The good historian, and Schama is a good historian, is careful to ensure that time and place are accurately represented, but bold enough to paint pictures with prose for the sake of historic evocation. This does not make the former ‘hard evidence’ or the latter ‘a flight of fancy’. In fact, the prose can often have a better grounding in actuality because it is the outcome of the historian’s reflection. As Lang writes “What might seem the historian’s vivid but unsupported imagination at work can have a surer basis in evidence than one might think”(2003,p - 12). If we want children to imagine the past they, too, must take on the mantle of the history writer. They need to experience the problems of maintaining a historical stance while allowing the creativity of the story-writer to evoke a past that will be vivid and real to the reader. We had a firm belief that narrative is still the key component to much of the learning of history in primary schools and is the way most teachers expect children to imagine the past (Vass, 1996). The techniques adopted by many teachers and the approaches suggested by Bage (1999) testify to improving practice in classrooms. However, the thinking skills employed by children when experiencing stories need to be placed in a clear historical context. Only in this way will historical knowledge and understanding be the outcomes of their labours.

Starting positions

For a definition of historical narrative we took, as a starting point, the words of Jack Hexter, who described the outcome of the historian’s labours thus “any patterned, coherent account, *intended to be true*, of any past happenings involving human intention or doing or suffering”(Hexter,p3). This definition fixes ‘historical storytelling’ as he describes it, at the centre of the historiographical process. Making connections, establishing coherence, creating order out of the chaos of past events are, he argues, all skills required of the historian. He allows a degree of latitude in the way historians interpret from their sources as long as the ultimate aim is “to convey knowledge, understanding and truth about the past as it actually was”(Hexter, p238). That the historian’s ‘intentions’ should be to tell the truth is interesting here. Hexter recognises that ‘truth’ in history is in the mind of the historian; in the writing of historical narrative, what he or she believes to be true is about as good as it can possibly get. This, at first glance, might seem far removed from some of the fictive approaches we employed in our teaching. However, ‘truthfulness’ in our case was

established by the children through their researches into the subject not by a requirement to discover a definitive position of certainty.

If historical narratives are an attempt to convey the truth of the past then historical fiction needs to be seen as the creation of a writer, set in the past and portraying that past, but imagined by them. The thought processes involved in constructing these narratives is of particular interest here. The division of the *logos* from the *mythos* in ancient Greek thought provides a useful starting point for considering the role narrative plays in human thinking about the world. The *logos* encompasses those areas of knowledge that can be demonstrated through observation and examination. This distinction has provided the basis for scientific explanation that is now such a significant feature of Western thought. *Mythos*, on the other hand, is related to speech, dialogue and, most significantly in our context, narrative. These ideas have been developed by Bruner into what he calls the narrative mode of thinking (Bruner, 1986). It is the narrative mode, he posits, that makes experience meaningful through “good stories, gripping drama, believable, though not necessarily true, historical accounts” (Bruner 1986 p13). He develops this thesis further when he argues that, whilst devoting much time to teaching the sciences and developing rationality in children, we live our lives according to the rules and devices of narrative. By this he means that we make sense of experience through the stories we tell and the stories we have told to us – the narrative construal of reality, as he calls it. (Bruner 1996 p 130f). This thinking is as true for children as it is for adults.

Evidence from artefacts

We decided that artefacts should play a major part in the formulating of the narratives. Our requirement was for children to create historical fictions from the objects, not re-tell old stories. We also wanted to establish the notion that artefacts can testify to the past in which they were made and used. More than that, they can have special meanings to individuals that can transcend place and time – family heirlooms are a good example of this. But most importantly we wanted children to recognise that objects have a provenance i.e. an origin, a history, a story to tell, and it was their stories, set in the context of war-time London, that we asked them to imagine.

For primary aged children evidence usually needs to be tangible and concrete. For this reason we chose artefacts that have become icons of their time around which to structure their stories. These included a gas mask, a ration book, a section of blackout curtain, a rattle that ARP wardens would use in event of a gas attack and an authentic World War Two teddy bear that had accompanied its owner on many nocturnal trips to the Anderson Shelter! Session Two began with a discussion of these items, the offering of theories as to their possible use and what they tell us about the way people were living in Britain during the war. The children were then given an event frame (see next section) and asked to organise a story about one of the artefacts set in the context of Home Front London.

Some of these objects re-appeared from an ARP warden’s haversack in the third session as props to his anecdotes and experiences during the Blitz. This teacher/roleplayer technique was familiar to the children and they understood the conventions of confronting characters this way. There has been much progress in this approach since my plea for teachers to make this a more explicit feature of their practice (Vass, 1993). For many children these objects – the gas mask, the rattle, the

ration book provided firmer evidence of the actuality of the past than the stories. Interestingly, the children accepted without question my role playing of my grandfather but the veracity of his stories was viewed more suspiciously. "Charlie Vass's stories were good and I'm sure some of it was true, but how can you actually know? He was biased, wasn't he? When you've got an object though, a thing, that can't lie". The question of provenance resulted in some interesting thinking on narrative, particularly when the children invented their own stories. "Because the object was real it sort of made the stories real even though we made them up." "The place was real, London was real and the Teddy was real which made the story real." This form of thinking history has resonance with the literary voice functioning as historical evidence rather in the way that Zemon Davies (1985) employed it in her researches into the 16th Century story of the deserting soldier, Martin Guerre.

The inter-relationship of fictive and non-fictive worlds should be as important to the historian as the mindsets of those that lived them. A phrase that emerged with the children during the course of the project was the notion of the narrative 'feeling right' in the context of the times. It is certainly true that some historical fictions persuade us of their veracity through the sheer power of the narrative and the writer's attention to detail; *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulkes is a good example of this. In the same way, some historical films evoke a sense of authenticity because of their look and style despite their fictive elements. Evidence, in this context, is not only about the reliability of the sources but also the persuasiveness of the narrator. As a child put it, "I think Jodie's story was more like it was than mine. There was more evidence." The children were discovering that evidence, in historical terms, was not as tangible or obvious as they imagined.

Event Framing

The children organised their fictions using a system of event frames that the teachers and I devised. These were not unlike 'story boards' which has been a feature of storying in primary schools for some years now. The frames imposed quite a rigid structure and we were ambivalent initially about imposing something that might inhibit their ideas. However, as our intention was to keep historical thinking to the fore, and the deployment of a literary format enabled us to include a chronological feature which would help the children order their stories through passing moments in time. It was very important for the children to appreciate the relationship between time and narrative for this is implicit in all historical narrative. As Muntz (1997,p852) writes "In order to do justice to time, it must be described in a narrative form...(it) is the only literary device available which will reflect the past's time structure". The children's use of the frames produced a variety of remarkable and highly imaginative narratives but it was through the ensuing discussion and debate in the plenary that the historical and generic skills they employed were identified. This focussed predominantly on questions of sequence and significance which feature in other papers in this series.

The ordering and organisation of these historical stories involved many skills which are not peculiar to history. These have been described by Nichol as being 'cross-curricular transferable' and have been identified by him (Nichol, 1999 p7) in the work of Feuerstein (1980). These skills involve the adoption of cognitive strategies which can help the child better understand the concepts that underpin it. Nichol highlights seven structural concepts that provide the framework for historical thinking namely;

cause, continuity, chronology, evidence, change, consequence and situation. These structural concepts are not only central to the epistemology of history but without their presence it is difficult to argue that children are actually going through the process of 'doing history'. For this reason we endeavoured to include them when circumstances allowed without making them central to the activities. However, cause and effect are such important features of any historical study we insured they took precedence in the children's stories.

Causation and Narrative

“ A cause is something that operates in the real world; it is what it is, whether people understand it or not. The milk turns sour because of the presence of certain bacteria. The fact that everyone believes it is sour because a witch put a curse on it affects not the milk at all”. (Sandford, p193)

This 'scientific' distinction between actual cause and believed cause highlights a key problem for the historian in the study of mentalities for it is belief that often provides the greatest insights into historical perceptions. For the children in our project the recognition that historical narratives are more focussed on belief than scientific certainty or 'truth' evolved as a major objective. Causation, therefore, began to emerge as a key element in their thinking. In Session 3 most children were able to decide on the key factor that determined the origin of the stories. In many instances it was a dramatic event that caused the central character/s to lose the artefact e.g. a rush to an air raid during which a child dropped her teddy bear or a ration book that was stolen by a burglar in the blackout. Causes were also a major feature in the structuring of the event frames. Event 2 required the children to say how the artefact came to be lost, 3 how it came to be found and 4, how the artefact got the finder into trouble.

It is interesting that in his standard text on the study of history, Sandford writes about cause in the context of 'history as sequence'. (Sandford p193). In a thorough examination of both historical and philosophical positions, he not only differentiates thoughtfully between causation and explanation but also raises some key questions about causation in history. These include 'Why do things happen as they do?', 'Can there be more than one cause?' and, most interestingly in the context of the next section, 'How can we explain unique events?' and 'What is meant by 'counterfactual?'. The questions here were emerging not out of any procedural system but a genuine desire to establish the historical veracity of the narrative. What is also interesting is the close relation between the structural thinking of the historian and the historical fiction writer. The ordering and sequencing of narrative depends as much on the successful answering of these questions as it does on the careful and critical textual analysis. These questions, and others like them, provided the foundation for the reflection by the children on their Wartime London event frame narratives. The following answers are drawn from field notes and children's interviews and we used some of Sandford's questions as a focus.

Why do things happen as they do?

“I think my story explains that. It all makes sense. How the teddy was lost, how it was recovered, how we've got it today. It all makes sense.”

“My story's a good adventure, it's about a greedy person and a forgetful person and someone who takes chances. People are like that now and were like that then”

How can we explain unique events?

“All events are unique. No two stories are the same even in history books. Someone might write such and such a thing and someone else write something else. It depends on who is writing the story.”

Do some things happen by chance?

“Most things do. They did in my story. It was a chance that the air raid took place. It was a chance that Sheila forgot her Teddy and it was a chance it was found 70 years later”.

“There was always a good chance of an air raid in London during the war and that people would be killed and things get lost. That happened a lot. But you never know, do you?”

Thinking Counterfactually

‘Today one need not be ashamed of telling a story, so long as it is as true as one can make it. One feels free to speculate as to how things might have gone if a crucial decision had been taken differently, or if the fortunes of war had swung the other way in a key battle, or if this man had lived longer or that one died earlier. One can give due (but not undue) weight to human choice and human error, and to sheer contingency.’ (Woolrych, 2002 p52).

So writes Austin Woolrych in a review of evolving perspectives on the English Civil War. A feature of the article is that today he feels that the historiography of the period has been liberated from the ideological straight jackets of previous generations and that contemporary historians have room to speculate and imagine in a way that would not have been acceptable in the past. This attitude and approach to writing history has evolved in a climate that recognises that our knowledge of so much of the past is built upon individual, often strange and peculiar narratives, that give a complex and contrasting view of human experience. This notion of idiosyncrasy can trace its genesis back to the pioneering work of Robert Darnton (1984) who analysed the intriguing and perplexing world of ordinary people in France in the 18th Century and Natalie Zemon Davis (1985) whose speculative stories based on likeness ran parallel to the literary voice which has a key role to play in understanding particular and peculiar mindsets. The focus here is more on *mentalities* and belief rather than hard historical fact. In writing about her most famous book ‘The Return of Martin Guerre’ Daniel Snowman says “ Davis believes that, by allowing an element of fabrication, or ‘creative fiction’, into her writing, she has probably come closer to the truth than anyone else who has written about what remains a supremely enigmatic historical episode.” (Snowman 2002, p19)

However, the process of historical speculation gained greatest credibility with the publishing of *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* by Niall Ferguson in 1997. He argues for a ‘chaotic’ model of historical forces where the actuality of the past is seen as only one of many possible outcomes. Ferguson compiled a collection of essays which speculate upon alternatives to history – ‘What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union?’ and ‘What if Home Rule had been enacted in Ireland in 1912?’ to name but two. Ferguson’s intention is to sink, firmly and finally, the credibility of deterministic methods of historiography and in his introduction he

presents a formidable indictment on the failed attempts to formulate general rules for history. This approach has its critics, most significantly Richard J Evans (Butterfield, 2002) who rounds on Ferguson for using counterfactually to lambaste the old school of left wing history and condemn their methods. Certainly it is no coincidence that many of the essays included in *Virtual History* come from, what Evans describes as, the ‘young fogey’ school of history. However, it is the implications these ideas had for teaching and learning history that provided particular food for thought. It was clear, from reading the essays, that these were no mere flights of fancy by the contributing historians. All their reasoning was based on a thorough knowledge and understanding of their subject and they argued that the exercise actually helped them understand it better. If this was true for historians, could it also be true for children? And if true, could the skills they employed in ‘thinking counterfactually’ be ones that give them a greater understanding of history? In order to answer these questions it is important to identify the thinking skills involved.

Thinking skills as defined in the History Update 2000 recognises the creative aspect of ‘doing’ history. The business of generating and extending ideas, suggesting hypotheses, applying the imagination and, most significantly, looking for alternative outcomes are given proper emphasis. But how can this translate into practice in classroom teaching? We decided to make counterfactuals a significant feature of our Home Front topic.

The Scenario

Making stories had already been a feature of their work in Session 2 (see Inventing Narratives). The business of ordering and sequencing narrative had been discussed and practised, as had the process of event framing. It was in Session 5 that the children utilised this narrative structure to organise a counterfactual narrative of their own. The decision to place this activity near the end of the project was a conscious one in order that the children could draw upon recently acquired knowledge of the subject. As the previous session had focussed on The Blitz it was logical that the story we chose should centre on an air raid. The incident in question was the attack on Bethnal Green that took place on an evening in March, 1943. The firing of a recently installed rocket battery from a roof-top in the district precipitated panic as hundreds of people rushed to get off the streets. The vast majority made towards the tube station where deep underground platforms offered safety from attack. However, there was only one small entrance and in the ensuing crush 143 people, including 62 children, died.

We described the historical scenario to the children up until the point when the rocket salvo was fired and then asked them to speculate on what happened next. We told them that this was a true story and there was only one actual outcome, but that at that particular moment in time any one of a number of things might have happened. We asked the children to draw up a list of possible conclusions and then select from that list their ‘most likely’ outcome. The reasons for their choice were discussed at some length and an interesting debate on likelihood, possibility and probability ensued. We then asked the children to organise their narratives chronologically using a series of Event Frames (see diag 1). This sheet allowed children to select 6 key moments in the historical time of the narrative culminating in an event 30 years after the original incident. This mirrors the outcome of the actual historical scenario when the victims

of the accident were commemorated with the unveiling of a plaque at Bethnal Green Station in the 1970's.

Although this activity is far removed from the counterfactual and alternative essays collected by Ferguson, the sort of thinking required to imagine an outcome are, in many ways, the same. The starting point, for both historians and children, is the historical scenario. Certain circumstances in time and place have evolved through previous events to produce a precise and particular historical location. Clearly, the children's scenario is not a 'big event' in the same way that the American Revolution or JFK's assassination were big events but, for the children, they can be imagined in the context of a subject recently studied and understood. They were then required to suggest hypotheses, again using the historical scenario as a starting point, by reflecting on the scenario, its features and possibilities. This not only focussed their attention but also helped them to understand the scenario better. For historians, a true understanding of a historical moment can only be achieved when there is speculation about the alternatives that were available at the time. As Ferguson writes, "to do this (construct plausible alternatives) is a *historical* necessity when attempting to understand how the past 'actually was'.... as we must attach equal importance to all possibilities which contemporaries contemplated before the fact, and greater importance to these than to an outcome which they did not anticipate."(1997, p87)

History Update uses an interesting word in the creative aspect of thinking. It suggests that children might look for alternative *innovative* outcomes in their history activities. Given that innovation is about 'novelty' and 'change' it seems that unless tasks are specifically designed by teachers for this purpose they are unlikely to have this experience in the normal course of 'doing history'. Our counterfactual activity gave them that opportunity and they responded remarkably.

Learning History – understanding the context

A requirement of the narratives created in the event frames was for the children to make them as true as they were able in the context of the particular historical time. We found very few anachronisms or 'howlers' and, in the vast majority of cases, the final frame in the 1970s was invariably appropriate by being different without being contemporary. The range of ideas produced by the children was testimony not only to their imaginations but also their newly- acquired subject knowledge. They included an American plane being hit by accident (interesting modern parallels here), a curious girl who pulled back the black-out curtain and precipitated an air raid and a gas attack that was hushed up for fear of creating panic. All the stories had qualities of 'likeness' that meant that the children had clearly understood the historical context. The vast majority (91%) were variations on a theme of destruction. They ranged from rockets hitting the planes that then crashed on Bethnal Green to a phosphorous attack resulting in a fire storm and a deadly gas attack. When asked to consider likeness the children thought, and predicted, logically. Their enquiries into the Blitz and the likely outcomes of an air raid, led them to believe that the narrative that followed would be one of material destruction of buildings and the death of many people. For most children the 30 year frame correctly predicted commemoration although 7 concluded their narratives with the discovery of something archaeological – the wing of an aeroplane, a fuselage and, in one case, an unexploded bomb....which blew up!

The event framing activity gave the children the opportunity to consider carefully the outcomes from a particular moment in time. The decision, on our part, to put times to

the frames did, to a certain degree, shape the narratives they constructed. However, the children were prepared for this as we had discussed earlier the relationship of time to historical stories and how the writer/historian selects significant elements for inclusion. We emphasised that their decision making, though imaginary, used the principles adopted by historians to create their historical narratives.

It was the rockets that did it

An interesting outcome of the event framing activity was the degree to which it intensified interest in the real event. By the time we got round to telling the children the actual outcome of the 'raid' on Bethnal Green, there was a powerful and excited air of anticipation. The overall reaction was one of genuine amazement. Many were surprised at the 'un-war' like nature of the accident. "I was expecting something.... that was more like the war. I expected bombs to drop and hit something, something important, perhaps" said Jade, while James commented, "Yes, I could imagine my story but your story didn't seem to be in the war. It didn't seem like it happened". The sessions we taught and the enquiries the children undertook seemed, in some cases to have created in their minds a stereotype of war. The Blitz was a rolling event of raid, destruction followed by a sort of recovery before the next raid. Anything outside that pattern wasn't contemplated and why should it be? It's not the stuff of popular history. It might also be argued that this is testimony to the success of the government's propaganda machine at the time. The children were quick to pick up on this. One child commented in the plenary, "You just hear the war stories. Stories like that (Bethnal Green) might make people question what the government was doing so they'd have to keep it quiet". Most children felt their stories were much more likely than the real event and they were, of course, correct in that. However, the most telling statement came from a boy who had thought long and hard about the new rockets and asked a number of questions about them. He said " It was the rockets that did it. The sirens worried the people but it was the rockets going off that caused the panic. You said when you told us the beginning that the rockets were new. People had never heard that sound before. It made them panic. It was the rockets that did it."

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