

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

Introductory Paper

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An Introduction

This is an introduction to a series of short papers that have arisen from a research project carried out in an Oxfordshire primary school in the Summer of 2002. A major aim of the project was to consider how thinking skills might enhance children's learning of history.

Thinking about thinking

The perceived usefulness of thinking skills as instruments for curriculum development has fluctuated over the years, usually as a result of the stance of any one particular government at the time. The importance given to them is inclined to occur when more formal approaches to learning are perceived to have failed and, in this respect, it has become something of a holy grail. I was reminded of this recently when reading the DfES's evaluation of the literacy and numeracy strategies which asserted that too much time in a maths lesson was being dedicated "to test practice and refining test techniques"(TES 9-2002). The alternative suggested was "a focus on thinking skills, which would move away from the present concentration on English, maths and science". These skills, "based on the psychology of learning", would "involve a variety of methods but all encourage pupils to grasp a topic at deeper level than simply recalling information".

The idea of thinking skills as being fundamental to learning has a long and illustrious history. There is a considerable canon on the subject much of it influenced recently by the work of Robert Fisher (1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2000) who seeks to establish approaches to help children develop critical, creative and imaginative states of mind. He argues that this can be achieved by improving their thinking skills, thus helping them make more sense of their learning and their lives. The work of Guy Claxton (2002) has extended thinking in this respect in order to give children a better understanding of themselves as learners. These principles have provided the focus for much recent work on thinking skills and learning history (Dean 2002, Wallace 2003) but Fisher's ideal of the 'philosophical classroom' has been seen by some to be counter-productive to the infusion of skills within a subject-based curriculum. In an important article Beyer (2001) differentiates between solution strategies, critical thinking skills and 'thinking dispositions' while advocating the "infusing (of) disciplined thinking into history and social science courses" (Beyer p321). This principle of infusion is a central precept of Carol McGuinness's 'Thinking Skills and Thinking Classrooms' programme which include some of Fisher's ideas about the 'philosophical classroom' but suggest strategies whereby "the teaching of curricular content is infused with the explicit instruction of thinking skills"(McGuinness 2002, p2). These positions are important and will be developed later in this paper.

Thinking about History

In history education the relationship between thinking and historical learning was given particular definition by a seminal paper by Jeanette Coltham in 1971 (Coltham, 1971). In this she extended historical thinking beyond the Piagetian into social areas of learning and understanding. This prepared the way for an important collaboration with John Fines (Coltham and Fines, 1971) which resulted in the HA pamphlet,

Educational Objectives for the Study of History. Using the idea of a taxonomy, similar in principle to that originated by Bloom and Krawthol (1956), they devised a model around educational objectives for identifying key skills for the study of history. They posited that educational outcomes resulting from historical study included features such as 'insight' and 'knowledge about values' – areas normally associated with the affective domain. The pamphlet linked thinking with developing attitudes towards learning and historical knowledge in a novel and harmonious way. At the time the teaching of history was under particular scrutiny and their intention was to re-establish the relative value and place of their discipline in the school curriculum. They also wanted the subject to be engaging, well-taught and made relevant to children's lives. There are clear resonances here with the sort of rationales that Dean, Wallace and others are advocating for thinking skills now. Jeanette Coltham's concluding statement could be taken from any recent text, "If, by use of their interests and through work aimed to develop their understanding, children gain satisfaction from their study, then the urge to continue is kept alive and motivation is strengthened – and what more can teachers of history ask!"(Coltham, 1971 p43).

In more recent times the debate has been focussed on how best to incorporate these skills explicitly within the history curriculum through consistently applied methods. The work of Cooper (1992,1993,1994) in the early 1990's focussed attention on primary-aged children's thinking in history through a series of thought-provoking books and articles. Her points of reference at the time was the cognitive psychology of Piaget, Peel and the early work of Bruner but her key principle was "that if children are taught consistently, applying the same teaching strategies to new material, they learn patterns of thinking which can be transferred to new evidence independently of the teacher, and that the quality of thinking improves" (Cooper,1992 p12) .

The skills of learning history

In the 1990s some history educationists turned their attention to discovering ways in which a systematic approach to thinking skills could result in their productive incorporation into the history curriculum. Some have advocated (Nichol, 1999) the importance of students discovering over-arching skills that transcend the discipline and contribute to other areas of learning, whilst utilising those skills in their growing understanding of history. These are fine principles but the danger is that processes and practices will be adopted not because they are appropriate to children's learning, but because they are deemed to have a property that solves, at a stroke, the problems of educational achievement. The central question remains as to whether it is more desirable to develop a thinking state of mind in children, independent of subject constraint, or whether thinking is better 'infused' into the curriculum through subject teaching.

My concern is that generic thinking skills, whilst being laudable in respect of children's intellectual development, do not necessarily help them understand history better. What, I feel, is needed is the identification of those skills which are particular to the learning of history, and the incorporation of these into the curriculum. This, of course, raises broader and more wide ranging questions about the purpose of history education in the 21st Century – in simple terms, what history is worth knowing – but

whatever the outcome of this debate I feel that the explicit use of thinking skills as a feature of historical enquiry will need to be included somewhere.

The key problem, therefore, when devising programmes that use thinking skills as an integral part of pupils' work, is to ensure that the learning of history is kept to the fore of the activity and not subsumed in a series of tasks that, though worthy in themselves in terms of developing their cognitive abilities, do not necessarily enhance their historical understanding. Consider, for example, 'predicting' as a thinking skill in a broader strategy for learning. In this a number of key questions can be identified and offer a framework through which the child can 'think through' the strategies they need to employ to solve a problem. Some of the questions that arise will be appropriate for speculating on a historical situation e.g. Which are the most important ideas? What are the arguments for and against? Others are less so. The difficulty is that 'predicting', in terms of learning history, is a very specific skill requiring an understanding of the historical context, a consideration of this when weighing options and, finally, the use of the historical imagination in order to arrive at a conclusion. The student needs to recognise that any historical situation can result in a variety of 'more likely' and 'less likely' outcomes; an elaborate and particular form of historical thinking which is explicitly bound up with an understanding of the times. The fourth of these papers will consider this mode of thinking in some detail. In the devising of programmes for teaching history it is essential that children are given an understanding of a particular time and place and also have revealed to them something of the nature of the historical process, the way history is made. This is a sophisticated intellectual activity, but not outside the capabilities of mainstream children. However, for it to be managed successfully there needs to be clear understanding on the part of the teacher and the learner on the nature of the concepts being studied.

Appropriate tasks for children?

The key factor in ensuring this comes about is task design. The devising of activities that are sufficiently engaging and interesting to give children genuine insights into the historical past. QCA(1999) have gone some way to addressing this problem. Their SoW for history at Key stages 1 and 2 provides a structure and coherence to planning as well as offering some good sessions for teachers to teach. The problem is that, in many schools, they have become *the* curriculum, as opposed to being a structure to enhance and develop it. For this reason it is important that the curriculum be kept flexible and open. The development of positive attitudes to learning is, of course, fundamental here. If we believe that developing children's capacity to think is the single most important purpose of any teaching session, then the curriculum needs to be continually modified and adapted to accommodate thinking skills. It was this premise that provided the starting point for our teaching/research project undertaken last summer.

Up until recently, most studies of thinking skills and cognitive strategies in learning history have been centred in secondary education (1). The development of more sophisticated modes of thinking and cognitive skills evolved as Key Stages 3 and 4 priorities in order for students become more directly involved in their own learning. However, it is easy for programmes of this kind to get bogged down in a morass of structural and organisational concepts, cross-curricular transferable skills, cognitive

strategies and syntactic knowledge as well as fall foul of the current government priorities for the curriculum. Nichol (1999) recognised this when he reviewed the 'state of the art' in thinking skills in history and, whilst finding much to recommend, was somewhat inconclusive on how best to proceed. He writes "The links between a thinking skills course and the teaching of history is apparent. The National Curriculum of the 21st century will challenge us to integrate history within programmes built around key themes such as literacy and citizenship. However, while working with other disciplines we need to accept that each has a unique contribution to make to the rounded education of citizens in the 21st Century." (1999,p13). Since that time programmes for helping children to organise their learning have begun to emerge in primary history. A good example of this is the work of Dean (2001) and Nuffield Primary history. In what she calls 'The Real E-Learning' she identifies four key skills for thinking and learning history in primary aged children. The features she identifies; engagement, enquiry, examination and evaluation provide a model for children to learn history whilst, at the same time, keeping historical knowledge and understanding in sharp focus. Belle Wallace has also been active in this area (Wallace 2000, 2001i, 2001ii, 2002) and has turned her attention recently to history (2003). She takes a similar structured approach to Dean through the use of TASC, Thinking Actively in a Social Context. She provides a 'Problem – Solving Framework' which takes the children through a series of structured stages in order to carry out an historical enquiry.

Approaches to Learning

There is currently in vogue a belief that only through meticulous and detailed planning can the process of learning be carried out, and be seen to be carried out, successfully. There is no better example of this than the use of learning objectives. In the TTA guidance for training teachers (TTA 2000,2001) the trainees teaching history before the camera submerge their planning in a deluge of learning objectives, some related to the learning of history but many linked to associated areas, literacy, geography, ICT etc. It is easy to see how thinking skills could produce another batch to ultimately confuse both teacher and learner simply because they can not all be achieved or assessed. In many ways, the approaches advocated by Dean, Wallace and others are thoroughly laudable. They provide a framework for learning that can help children organise their enquiries in a most useful manner. However, they do little for preparing children for studying the complexities of the discipline at Key Stage 2. For this reason there is some reference made in the following papers to students learning history at Key Stage 3. History teachers in secondary schools have been wrestling with this problem longer than primary colleagues and we have a lot to learn from their experiences! Both Dean and Wallace recognise the importance of infusing the skills within the discipline. As Dean writes, " Thinking skills are not exercised in a vacuum: we need something to think about, and a context to think within."(2001,p1) However, it is important to keep to the fore of our thinking the distinction between skills which help children understand the historical process and those which help them organise enquiry. The problem with models and frameworks is that they can artificially shape study not necessarily for historical purposes but because the child (and/or teacher) feels it expedient to apply the routines rigidly. The tasks we designed tried to balance historical knowledge and understanding of period with an experience of the process through which we have come to know about these times. In this way we intended to give children the opportunity to 'think through' the difficulties and complexities of

‘making history’ as well recognising the process by which public knowledge comes to be known. The use of key conceptual words and phrases are essential here and the papers that follow highlight these and explain how they were developed through the tasks.

Much of the organisation of this research /teaching topic features familiar activities, whilst others break relatively ‘new ground’. This is because we felt much of the construction of this topic was intended to examine the new orthodoxy that has been unintentionally established by the QCA and their units of work. For many schools, where performance and achievement is assessed on pupils’ standards in literacy, numeracy and to a lesser extent, science, developing the history curriculum has become a very low priority.

The Project

The project arose from two concerns that I had about the teaching of history in primary schools. The first, as I have outlined, was the impact of history QCA ‘s units of work on classroom teaching and the second was the lack of thinking, historical or otherwise, in the activities taking place. For this reason two teacher-colleagues and I decided to devise a unit of work which would prioritise dynamic and interactive teaching methods which would focus on utilising thinking skills as an explicit element of the work. (see Appendix 1). They both teach in a large suburban primary school in Oxfordshire. We chose a Year 6 class for, by this age, the children would already have a good grounding in history and we would be able to develop areas of thinking that had been part of their earlier history learning as well as introduce new ones. The topic we selected was Home Front Britain 1939-1945, as it was the only National Curriculum history topic they hadn’t already studied! We decided to teach 6 one and a half hour sessions to take place in the latter part of the summer term with an introductory session taking place before half term. Our approach was not to make thinking skills overtly explicit but introduce them as a feature of the lessons as and where they arose as a feature of the study. We also wished to make historical fiction a significant element in our sessions for the role of narrative, and in particular the relationship between fiction, faction and historical fact are important, and largely unexplored, features of the way children imagine the past. (2). Fictions appear, therefore in a number of contexts; in the artefacts stories in Session 2, in the anecdotes and ‘memories’ of Charlie Vass ARP warden, and in the culminating activities, inventing the counterfactual and making the tableaux (see appendix 1). The ordering and organising of these stories was through a system we called ‘event framing’ which will be explained in more detail in a later paper. We chose a range of research tools to determine the children’s learning including semi-structured interviews of six selected children, our own field notes of class discussions and individual comments, lesson observations and the children’s own writing and illustration. Analysis and extracts from these will appear throughout these articles, drawn from the evidence we collected, our commentaries and observations.

In the sections that follow I highlight different types of historical thinking, describe the activities promoted them and reflect on children’s responses to them.

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Notes

1. My initial interest in this area stems from the work of a secondary teacher colleague who was studying for an M.Ed. with me at Exeter University in the late 80s under Jon Nichol. His dissertation adapted Feuerstein's programme for Instrumental Enrichment and the Somerset Thinking Skills Course for use in the teaching of history.

Hoare, J. (1989) The Potential of the Somerset Thinking Skills Course for the Teaching of History. University of Exeter, M.Ed (History) dissertation.
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2. The March 2003 of Teaching History has some very interesting articles on this subject, most significantly Sean Lang's 'Narrative: the under-rated skill', pp8-17. TH 110.

