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TEACHING HISTORY TO TEN-YEAR-OLDS IN ENGLAND AND ROMANIA

Carol Capita, Hilary Cooper and Gheorghita Halalau

Three history lessons taught to ten-year-olds in Bucharest, Romania and three in Cumbria, England were video-recorded, in an attempt to identify common characteristics of good practice, irrespective of differences in cultures, schools, resources and curriculum, as a positive foundation for further dialogue between the participating schools. The transcribed texts were analysed using categories of historical questioning. This paper outlines key findings, then focuses on a comparison of one English and one Romanian lesson in which whole class teaching was supported by group discussion. It is suggested that further exploration of the links between whole class questioning and group discussion using the framework devised could support teachers in different countries to work collaboratively to develop pupils historical enquiry.

Bucharest

Olivia Manning's descriptions of Bucharest in 1939 in *The Balkan Trilogy*, vividly evoke the cultures of both East and West, before Romania was plunged into the Second World War, followed by the long period of Communism, which ended with the revolution of 1989.

These buildings had been almost the last of the Biedermeier prettiness bestowed on Bucharest by Austria ...

It was almost dark, the stars grew brilliant in the sky ... 'The Arc de Triomphe', he said, 'the Paris of the East' ...

'We are going to walk in the Cismigui'. Guy told her that it had been the private gardens of a Turkish water inspector ...

Yakimov had now reached the edge of Europe, a region in which he already smelt the Orient ... this seemed confirmed by a statue in Boyar's robes, wearing a turban the size of a pumpkin ...

Background to the Project

Olivia Manning's descriptions of the Arc de Triomphe, the fin de siècle buildings and the Cismigui Park in 1939, all of which still remain in Bucharest, seemed poignant when in May 2000 we began a small-scale research project. Our aim was to identify common features of good practice in teaching history to ten-year-olds in England and in Romania, irrespective of differences in curriculum context, resources or types of school. We hoped to devise some frameworks, based on observations of existing practice which teachers in different countries could use collaboratively to analyse, discuss and so develop their history teaching. This, we thought could raise awareness of shared aims in different countries, as well as of differences in perspectives and constraints, and lead to further supportive collaboration and shared understandings of history teaching in the 'new Europe'. Ambitious? Certainly!

Lesson Observations

A small research grant made possible reciprocal visits between the Romanian and the English researcher. They were privileged to be allowed to video three history lessons taught to ten-year-olds in Bucharest, Romania, and three in Cumbria, England, which they considered to be typical good practice. On the joint visits to the schools they also interviewed the teachers and the classes they had taught about what they thought was the purpose of teaching and learning history, the approaches they preferred, and the difficulties they encountered. This was to see whether their responses were reflected in the lessons observed and also to compare the Romanian and English teachers expressed aims in teaching history.

The project turned out to be an unexpectedly moving experience for all of us. Although there have been many international conferences on history education in Eastern Europe the Romanian teachers and children said that this was the first time that anyone from outside Romania had visited their school. They were generous with gifts of flowers and one headteacher said that for her this meant the beginning of European integration. What a responsibility.

Video Analysis

The six video tapes were transcribed and translated. It was decided to focus the analysis on the process of historical enquiry, since, irrespective of teaching approaches or resources, learning to ask and answer questions about the past lies at the heart of the learning and teaching of history: questions asked of historical sources, making inferences and deductions about causes and effects of change, using specialised vocabulary.

Categories of Questions

The first analysis was based on a framework in Brown and Wragg (1993: 15) 'What kinds of questions do we ask?' The generic categories were modified to apply to historical sources, and the use of specialised vocabulary.

This analysis showed that each of the six teachers used numerous questions involving observation and requiring thought. Some questions were 'broad' others 'narrow'. The examples below are taken from a Cumbria lesson on 'The Vikings' (C) and a Bucharest lesson on the end of the Roman Empire (B). This paper focuses on these two lessons.

* Questions requiring observation

- (C) So what can you say from the map about where the Vikings settled?

- (B) Look at the map: why is Constantinople in a good position?

* Questions requiring thought

- (C) Can you think of any other evidence to back up what we found?

- (B) What do we mean by crisis at the end of the Roman Empire?

* Broad questions

- (C) Can you find a place-name ending in 'BY'?

- (B) Did the people like the way the Emperor was behaving?

Special Vocabulary

Each of the six lessons used specialised vocabulary concerned with the process of historical enquiry. For example in the Cumbria lesson on The Vikings the teacher referred to 'sources', 'incomplete sources' and 'corroborating evidence'. The Bucharest teacher talked about 'analysing documents', 'forming an opinion' and the need for a 'critical eye'. Each of the six teachers also used concepts devised by historians to characterise periods: 'Viking settlement'; the 'Fall of the Western Roman Empire'. And all the teachers used vocabulary integral to history although not exclusive to history: the Viking legacy; Viking settlements; the 'trade' and 'economic power' of the Roman Empire.

Higher Order Questions

A second framework (Kerry 1998) analysed categories of thought, or higher order questions in more detail. In all six lessons there were questions in each of the following categories. (The examples are again from the Cumbria lesson on The Vikings and the Bucharest lesson on the End of the Roman Empire).

* Application questions

- (C) So now you know how to look for place names ending in BY on your maps you can find other Viking place name endings ...

- (B) What other buildings have you seen which look like this (photo of St Sophia, Constantinople)?

* Analytical questions

- (C) Colour code the different Viking place-names on your map. What do you find?

- (B) In what fields is the crisis in the Roman Empire evident?

* Questions requiring synthesis

(C) So what can you tell me about where the Vikings settled?

(B) What abuses led to injustice?

* Evaluation questions

(C) So why is our evidence incomplete? What can corroborate our evidence?

(B) Is this description real? Is it exaggerated?

Links Between Whole Class Questioning and Group Discussion of Sources

However, when the patterns of questioning which underpinned the structure of each lesson were analysed using diagrammatic representation, (Wood 1988) all six lessons varied in structure, in spite of similarities in question types. Three lessons consisted entirely of whole class teaching, in which several key 'higher order questions' were investigated through clusters of subordinate questions distributed around the class. In these lessons the number of pupil utterances and teacher's questions was almost identical and the teachers spoke considerably more than the pupils. Therefore although it is claimed that whole-class teaching is associated with higher order questions (DES 1992) there was little opportunity for pupils to explore alternative suggestions, extend or develop their ideas, listen to the views of others, or learn why there may be no single 'correct' answer.

By contrast questions in one of the English lessons were initiated entirely by pupils working in groups with little opportunity for teacher interventions to extend or challenge their thinking. It could be argued that in spite of a questioning approach, neither the whole class teaching, nor the group investigations were teaching children the processes of historical enquiry.

However, the Romanian lesson on the end of the Roman Empire and the English lesson on Viking settlements combined whole class questioning with small group discussion. In this way children had the opportunity to learn how to ask and answer historical questions through whole class teaching, then to explore the process in small group discussions about sources (Cooper 1993).

For the Romanian researcher and teacher this was seen as a particularly significant development. The new Romanian history curriculum includes a large amount of content because of the need to re-establish the integrity of history in the curriculum following its abuse during the Communist period, when it was politically

manipulated (Capita 1995). But in the new curriculum great emphasis is also placed on the use of primary sources as a basis for discussion and to explain events, because this will give pupils the intellectual skills to re-examine the past, to develop communication skills and to discuss controversial issues. At present most of the sources discussed are given in the class text books because this is a cost-effective solution, in the current financial crisis in the education system.

The Romanian Lesson – Crisis in The Roman Empire

This lesson investigated the causes and effects of the eventual split between the Eastern and Western Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries A.D.. There were three stages in this investigation. At each stage the teacher asked a key question, and distributed brief extracts from selected Latin texts, which the children read and discussed in groups, in order to respond to the teacher's follow-up questions to the whole class. The key questions addressed the political causes, the economic causes and the consequences of the crisis in the Roman Empire.

The texts were demanding; Augustus describing the Emperor Gallienus, Marcellinus and Heroditus describing the breakdown of the Roman army; Salvianus on the destruction of Trieste, Augustus again on the retreat of the Romans from Dacia, Livy on the barbarians in the army ... There was also a 'role-play' discussion between the Emperor Diocletian and Constantine, using biographical notes written by the teacher. She used the wall-map of Europe, found in each of the Romanian classrooms to discuss the strategic significance of Constantinople 'between Europe and Asia' and asked questions about post-card photographs of Santa Sophia to elicit questions about the eventual Muslim conquest of Constantinople. Figure 1 shows the structure of whole-class questioning and group discussions.

The English Lesson

The English lesson investigated where the Vikings settled in Britain. The teacher first modelled how to find place-names ending with the Viking word 'BY' (a small settlement). She used a map and an overhead projector, and invited children to identify and underline place-names ending in 'BY'. The children then worked in groups to identify other specified Viking place names on maps of localities in Northern England.

BAY – meant gate

BECK – small river or stream

BY – a farmstead or village

FELL – hill or mountain

FORCE – waterfall
GATE – street
HOLM – island
SCALE – a hut or shed
SET – pastures
TARN – small lake
THWAITE – clearing

Then in a plenary session the findings from each group were collated on a large map of England, as a basis for a whole-class discussion to interpret the overall picture, consider the validity of the group investigations by comparing the Viking place-names on the class map with those in a book, discussing why they were different (children had only had selected maps) and what archaeological evidence they would look for in the next lesson to corroborate their findings.

Figure 2 shows the structure of whole class questioning and group discussion.

Teacher Interviews

At the end of each lesson the teachers were interviewed to see to what extent the lessons observed reflected their stated aims, preferred methods and perceived difficulties in teaching history to their classes of ten year olds, and to what extent the English and Romanian teachers had similar views.

The English and the Romanian teachers whose lessons are described above both spoke of the importance of teaching about change, how events happened, why people did things, what was the result and how the past affects the future. They both said that they asked questions about sources to teach children to think critically and analytically and to encourage them to ask questions. The English teacher gave a more extensive list of other strategies she had used: handling artefacts, role-play, oral history, visits to sites and museums and visits from experts. The Romanian teacher said that she would like the opportunity to use other sources. She said that her greatest challenge is differentiation and interesting children with lower abilities who find reading difficult. This makes the English teacher's claim that finding good quality resources is difficult seem overstated! Interestingly the Romanian teacher thought that the aim of history education is to 'understand changes in recent times in order to make good decisions in the future', and to 'prepare to adapt to society', while the English teacher spoke of 'giving children the interest and enquiry skills to find out about their heritage'.

What the Children Said

All the Romanian ten-year-olds spoke amazing English, although they had never met an English person before.

Some said they watch Time-Watch on BBC2! The quotations are in the original English.

'We need to study history so we can do comparisons between past and present'.

'To learn about civilisations'.

'To find out interesting changes about our past'.

They spoke of famous people, and battles and about discussions with grandparents about conditions in the past.

Both the English and the Romanian children spoke of the need to understand changes 'from past to present'.

The English children said that they most enjoyed working in groups, getting to touch and draw historical things, making things, ('dragons heads and weapons') looking for patterns in information ('census returns, place-names) and 'making models' (to rebuild Viking life. The Romanian children, while they had less opportunity for such practical activities in school talked about a variety of ways in which they found out about the past outside school lessons: families, television, the internet, museums, legends, religion. 'History' they explained 'is all around us'.

What next?

Firstly we feel that we have made a start in devising frameworks which teachers in different countries can use collaboratively to analyse the ways in which and extent to which they can develop embryonic but genuine historical enquiry in younger pupils: making deductions and inferences from sources in order to find out about the past and so construct accounts of the causes and effects of changes over time; constructing their own meanings of the world they live in and how it came about. We feel that such frameworks could enable teachers to develop cooperative approaches and an international awareness and shared approaches to teaching history which also reflect differences in national perspectives and curriculum. It is increasingly recognised that young children should begin to learn the processes of historical enquiry (Council of Europe 1995; Cooper 2000). Research shows that in most European countries pupils do not learn history until secondary school and that by then they have stereotypical views which are not influenced by history education (Angvik and Von Borries 1997). Based on the experience of this small study we have set up a network of history educators, researchers and teachers in a range of European countries. Our aim is to develop further small scale, classroom based collaborative studies, to devise and evaluate similar frameworks for analysis.

Figure 1: The structure of whole class questioning and group discussion underpinning the Roman lesson

What were the causes and effects of the crisis of the Roman Empire 3rd - 4th Century A.D.?

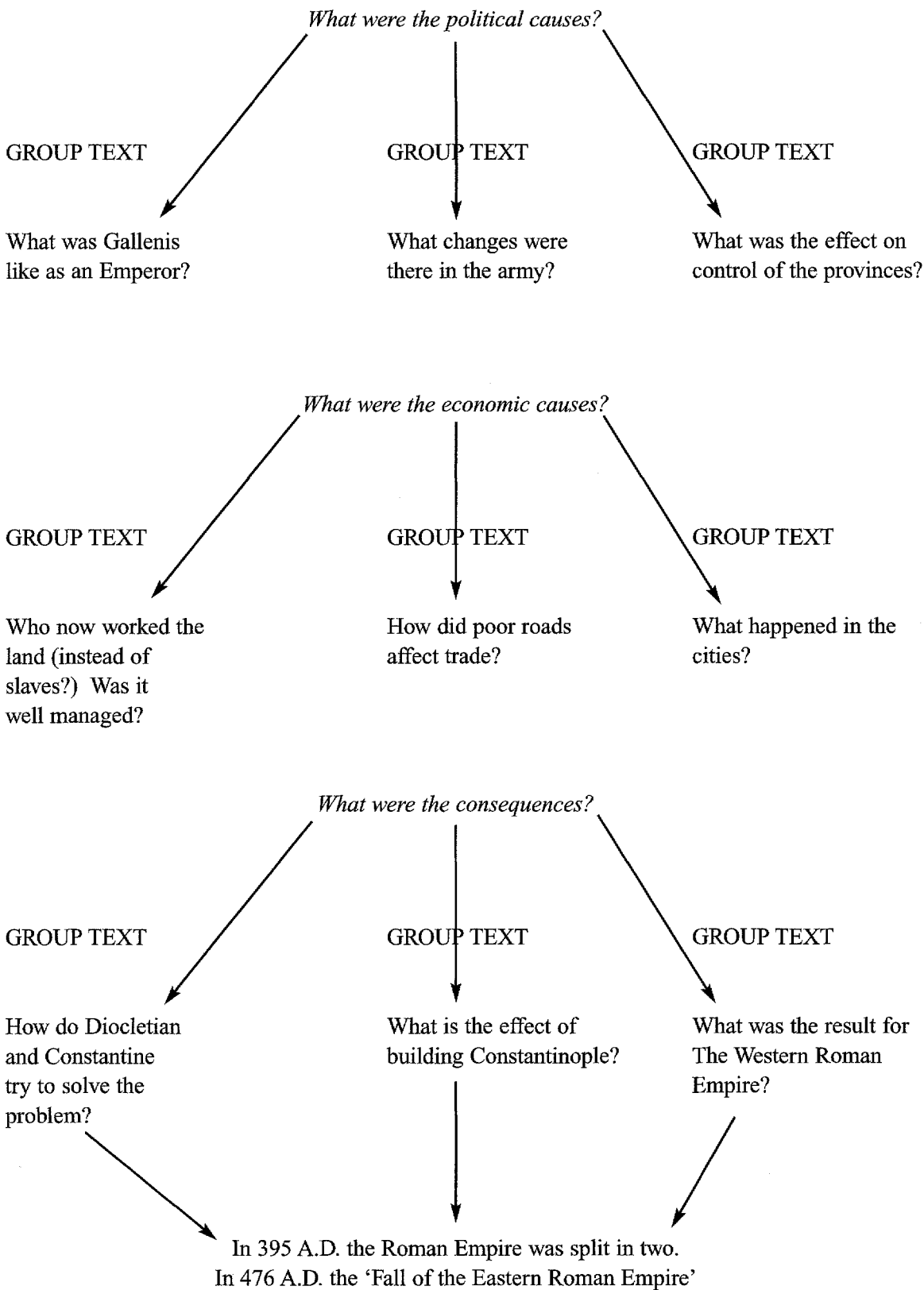
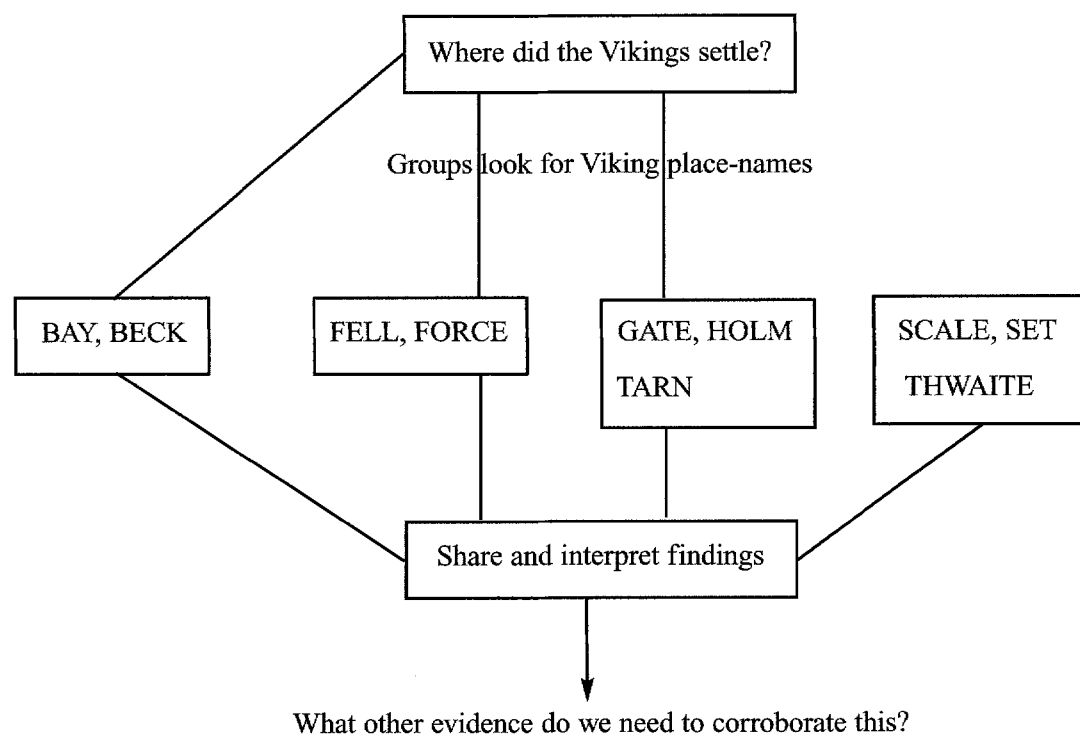


Figure 2: The structure of whole class questioning and group discussion underpinning the English lesson.



Secondly an unplanned outcome; the children in the participating schools were very keen to be put in touch with their 'partner schools'. One Bucharest school liaises with a Cumbria school through their web-site. Another pair of schools are applying for Socrates funding to support exchange visits. Children in the two schools on which this paper focused exchange photographs, letters and videos, yet the schools could not be more different.

The primary school just outside the centre of Bucharest, serves the children from the local community living in the surrounding tower blocks. In order to accommodate the 2,000 pupils they attend one of three sessions between seven a.m. and seven p.m.. The small Cumbria school serves a remote farming community. This certainly seems to endorse our attempts to develop shared understandings within diversity.

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