History, Children's Thinking and Creativity in the Classroom: English and Romanian Perspectives

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Abstract *The article arose incidentally from a research project aiming to identify common features of good practice in teaching history to 10-11 year olds in England and Romania, as a basis for further collaborative development. Analysis revealed lessons characterised by higher-order questioning in both countries, but also raised questions about whether children were learning the process of historical enquiry. One lesson in England, based on pupil activities which was not typical of this sample stimulated discussion of what is meant by `creativity' in history, and whether this is an integral component in historical thinking.*

Keywords

History teaching, Historical thinking, Teaching strategies in history, International comparisons, Questioning in history, Historical imagination, Activities in history, Creativity in history,

Background to the Discussion

The authors of this paper first met at a `Meeting of Experts in Educational Research on the Learning and Teaching of History' convened by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in 1995. (Capita, 1995; Cooper, 1995). The Council of Europe has for many years organised conferences to discuss principles and strategies for good history education. In recent years there have been seminars to support the writing of new curricula in the previously Communist countries of Eastern Europe, but these have had limited influence on classroom practice. It was suggested in Strasbourg that small-scale, classroom-based collaborative case studies may be an effective way of sharing, evaluating, developing and disseminating practice between countries.

Laura Capita and Hilary Cooper responded to the challenge. They began by investigating one of the questions raised at the Strasbourg meeting: what do young children know about the past before their formal history education Begins, and how do they acquire that knowledge? (Cooper, 1997; 1999; Capita and Cooper, 1998).

In the summer of 2000, a small research grant made it possible to undertake a new project based on reciprocal visits in order to video-record history lessons taught to three classes of ten-year olds in Bucharest and three classes in Cumbria in an attempt to identify common features of good practice irrespective of National Curriculum, resources or types of schools. These visits provided a rich context for developing shared understanding and dialogues. Images that remain of Bucharest: elegant Belle-Époque buildings as described in the Balkan Trilogy (Manning 1987); Ceausescu's Peoples' Palace; the collection of old wooden farm houses from all over Romania in the Muzeul Satuli which prove that traditional illustrations of European folk tales are true; the flowers and the warm welcome from pupils and teachers in all the schools, their wonderful English, and the ten-year old boy desperate to ask if I had seen Time Watch, `BBC2 - you should - it's very good'.

The Cumbria context included a visit to Hadrian's Wall, the North-West Frontier of the Roman Empire, symbolically similar to the South-Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire in Romania; the shockingly irrelevant approach to the past of the Smelly Histories, Horrible Histories, and `Roman bath oil' for sale at Housesteads; the five-year old overheard to ask, `Are all the baddies the other side the wall?'

Data capture and analysis

The aim of our project was to identify common features of good practice in teaching history to ten-year olds in England and in Romania as a positive foundation for further dialogue between the participating schools. In each of the 3 schools in Bucharest and in Cumbria a lesson considered by the teachers to be typical good practice was video-recorded. It was decided to analyse the lessons using categories of questioning, on the basis that the process of enquiry (learning the questions to ask and appropriate ways of answering them) lies at the heart of history as a discipline. Details of this analysis will be found elsewhere (Cooper, 2000; Capita and Cooper, 2003)

The Egyptian Day

However, one English lesson did not conform to the questioning pattern. When one of the English schools withdrew through illness at short notice, a teacher in another school generously allowed us to video-record an `Egyptian Day' which traditionally takes place in her Year 6 class on the last day of the Summer term - the very last day in primary school for these pupils - as a conclusion to a unit of study on Ancient Egypt. `It keeps the children busy right up until the end', she said. One hour during this day was recorded.

The children and teacher were all elaborately dressed as `Ancient Egyptians' in costumes they had made at home by copying wall paintings or artists' illustrations in reference books. The girls had spent much time on their exotic eye-make up; one explained how the cone on her head was designed to drip perfume throughout the day. Anubis had to remove his dog's head to speak on camera, and a rich merchant displayed his replica jewellery and his slaves. There was constant chatter as they undertook a variety of investigations, in rotating groups throughout the day, to investigate questions about life in Ancient Egypt.

The project had aimed to identify similarities between the English and Romanian lessons. It had developed frameworks for the analysis of questioning which could be applied to all the lessons. But it was differences between the Egyptian Day and the other lessons which intrigued the Romanian researcher. This gave rise to much discussion, both in England, and on her return, with Romanian colleagues. It seemed a very `creative' approach, she said. But what does this mean when applied to teaching and learning in history, and how important is it? Is it a dimension we should be aiming to achieve, or in fear of losing, and if so why? The discussion in England proceeded as follows.

What is meant by `Creative Thinking'

Both in England and in Romania the concepts of `multi-intelligences' and `emotional intelligence' are currently familiar.

The report of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (DfEE (a) 1999 p. 27-39) is a recent attempt to define `creativity' in the following ways:

* Creativity is multidimensional. Drawing on recent research on multiple intelligences (e.g. Boden, 1990: 259; Gardner, 1993; White, 1998), creativity is seen as involving all fields of activity.

* Creativity involves `playing with ideas' in all areas of work; conducting experiments in mathematics and science or `writing stories' for example, acquiring insights by making unusual connections. This echoes the work of earlier psychologists who saw creative thinking as the ability to think flexibly, provide a variety of possible solutions to a problem, and to tolerate ambiguity (e.g. Getzels and Jackson , 1962; Torrance, 1962).

* Creativity involves imaginative and affective as well as cognitive dimensions. Expressing ideas, values and feelings, is termed `emotional intelligence'. (Goleman, 1996).

* Creativity is purposeful, and directed to achieving an original objective.

Is Creative thinking an Essential Part of Historical Thinking?

* Historical enquiry is multidimensional. History encompasses all aspects of society: art, music, science, technology, religion, explored and communicated through language and mathematics. It involves making connections within and between societies.

* Finding out about the past involves `playing with ideas'; asking, and trying to answer questions about sources, the traces of the past which remain. Because what is known is often incomplete there may be more than one possible interpretation. Collingwood (1946, p. 198) defined the job of the historian as

`asking and answering questions; the `right' questions are the ones that lead to the larger, complex answers; there is no limit to the number and kinds of questions or to the relevant evidence'.

* Historical imagination is integral to the process of historical enquiry. This includes attempts to infer the behaviour, thoughts and feelings of people in the past. Collingwood (1939, p. 7) attempted to clarify the relationship between interpreting evidence and interpreting thoughts and feelings of people who made it. Mink (1968) clarified his arguments. Others (e.g. Jones, 1968; Watts, 1972) have stressed the constant interaction of deductive reasoning with imaginative thinking in history. Historical imagination may be defined as the ability to make a rich variety of suppositions about how things were made and used in the past, and so infer the possible behaviour, thoughts and feelings of the people who made and used them (Cooper, 2000 p. 147). Children will be constrained by their immaturity and limited knowledge, but it can be argued that participation in this process from the beginning is essential to the achievement of mature historical understanding. The importance of imagination as integral to historical thinking has been increasingly emphasised recently. Academically, even `the old Aristotelian distinctions between history and poetry, reason and imagination are becoming increasingly eroded' (Southgate, 1996 p. 122 in Bage, 1999).

* Historical enquiry must be purposeful and have an objective. Historians select, interpret and combine sources to construct accounts of the past. Similarly the English National Curriculum for history requires pupils to communicate their findings, in, for example, art, stories or Information and Communication Technology. (DfEE, 1999 p. 104-105).

It could be argued then that creative thinking is integral to the process of historical enquiry.

Did the Egyptian Day involve the `Creative' Dimensions of Historical Thinking?

It seemed unfair to apply these criteria for creative thinking in history to what was planned as a `fun-day', the last day of the school year. However when we watched the video, with the four aspects of creative thinking in history we had identified in mind, we found that they were all represented in the `Egyptian Day':

It was multidimensional and involved `playing with ideas' in mathematics, language, art, science and technology. James explained that he was using 3D mathematical shapes to try to find out how the pyramids were constructed out of blocks of stone, `to see how hard it was - to work out how they might have done it - the problem is we can't get the point on ...'

Shelley and John were making puppet models of an Egyptian prince and princess. They had movable joints so that they could re-enact a story written by an Egyptian scribe 3,000 years ago, in which the son of an Egyptian King wooed and won the daughter of the King of Naharin by leaping high enough to reach her in the tall tower in which she had been imprisoned by her father.

Paul and friends were playing senet - `Instead of a die you used coins. If you get 5 you start from 5 and move down the board and the first person to get 30 has to start going backwards on even numbers ... We don't know how they played it but they may have played it like this ...'

Peter explained the difficulties his group was encountering in constructing messages in hieroglyphics on the back wall of the classroom.

Andrea, Jack and Jason were designing tops for mummy cases - `looking in books to get ideas for the sort of patterns they used'.

Levi had made a model shaduf. `I'm trying to find out how they lifted water out of the Nile, and onto the crops. There's a bucket on one end and a weight on the other. When it comes down someone pushes it into the Nile and gets the bucket full of water and brings it back up - it flips down like that - and the bucket tips over'.

Jason was sitting in the sunshine. `We're grinding corn seeds into flour like they used to - with stones. I don't think they could have done it exactly like this - we could do some research to find out how they did it - it's not as fun as it looks - I think they must have used a bowl'.

The Egyptian Day involved historical imagination; considering, based on what is known, how people may have thought, felt and behaved.

For example Laura and her friends were writing a diary account of a farming family over ten years, suggesting how their lives may have been affected each year by different levels of flooding of the Nile. 'The levels are determined by a dice game', they explained, 'If you get a nine the water's too high and your house might collapse. If it's a three it's low and you won't get any crops'.

It was purposeful.

One activity with an original objective involved selecting, interpreting and combining sources found in wall paintings, books, on video and the internet, to construct an account of an Egyptian banquet, which was audio-taped for a `radio-programme' on Ancient Egypt. This account, created by a group of eleven-year old girls, demonstrated some awareness of the processes of historical enquiry. They were aware that sources are selected, depending on the focus of the enquiry and the interests of the historians. Being both fashion conscious and worldly-wise, the first source they used was illustrations of Egyptian fashion depicted in wall paintings, which they used as a model for their replica dresses, jewellery, hair-styles and make-up. The second source, which they discussed at length, was the myth of Isis and Osiris, and in particular how Isis became pregnant.

They were aware the validity of sources must be considered.

> `How could Isis become pregnant after Osiris had died - and he was away a lot - a mystery'. `We shall never find out. There are different versions'. `In one version she turned into a kite and flew over his body. We didn't believe that one!'

On the basis of their own knowledge of human nature they also discussed why Osiris was killed `by his evil brother Seth'.

> `If he was honest, tall, truthful, handsome and generous Seth probably would hate him. No one is that perfect'.

And they `filled in the gaps when facts are not known'. (Elton 1970).

> `We gave the Egyptian fashions modern names, like Versace and we had the sound of modern dancing in the background, and we made up jokes, like `how did you cook this hyena?'

On returning to Bucharest the Romanian research continued the discussion of the Egyptian Day video with the teacher in the partnership school. They explained their responses from a Romanian perspective.

The Ancient Egypt British Classroom Experience

The English teacher's approach to teaching Ancient Egypt in the video is quite different from the classroom practice in Romania, mainly because of the involvement of students in the learning activities. The use of drama in teaching stimulates much more creativity than debate. The use of primary sources as a basis for the drama enactment is interesting and is able to satisfy scholarly demands. From a Romanian perspective, the following characteristics are very significant:

· There is interaction between pupils; by means of drama and play, students team up and develop an holistic approach towards history.

· The student-centred approach enables students to develop their own perspective on the topic.

· Pupils use of information which is relevant to their interests; the 'abstract' character of ancient history is avoided.

· The development of communication skills should, in our opinion, underpin all classroom activities.

The Next Stage

This project identified both similarities and differences between the English and Romanian lessons. Similarities in lesson structure and classroom organisation are found in Capita and Cooper (2001). The original analysis showed that the lesson in the Romanian school which focused on the spread of Islam, was characterised by impressive questioning skills. It was structured around clear, open, key questions requiring thought: Where do the Arabs come from? What do you know about the Muslim religion? What do you know about the spread of Islam? What is the cultural legacy of the Arabs? These were supported by clusters of precise questions, differentiated, paced and distributed widely around the class, to scaffold pupils' thinking. The questions related to maps and a variety of written sources. Pupils learned and used specialised vocabulary (e.g. agriculture, polytheistic, manuscript. For homework, pupils were asked to look for more examples of Arab culture in art, literature and technology.

The Egyptian Day also revolved around key questions: what does the story of Isis and Osiris tell us about Ancient Egypt? What was the impact of the Nile floods on daily life? How were Mummies and pyramids made? Why? How did hieroglyphics evolve? It also involved the use of maps, written and visual sources and specialised vocabulary (e.g. hieroglyphics, myths, beliefs). English pupils had also done homework to research, design and make their `Egyptian' clothes. But since the children worked on the ten activities in rotating groups to investigate these questions, it was not possible to record teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions or analyse the extent to which discussion was supported, developed, challenged and refocused to extend and share pupils thinking.

The English and Romanian schools plan to continue to develop this partnership through their internet web-site, which will allow both pupils and teachers to share their work. Maybe Socrates funding will make exchange visits possible between these two extremities of the Ancient Roman Empire, and of the `new Europe'.

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