

## History and the Transition Year Programme

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### **Aims of the programme**

The aims of the Transition Year Programme (TYP) are clearly outlined in **the** back-up material provided by the Department of 'Education.'

They are grouped under three areas:

- (1) Education for maturity with emphasis on social awareness and increased social competence.
- (2) Education through experience of adult and working life as a basis for personal development and maturity.
- (3) Promotion of general, technical and academic skills with an emphasis on inter-disciplinary and self-directed learning. It can be seen that history has most to offer under the aims expressed in (3) here. This is not to deny the place of history in promoting the other aims of the TYP.

### **What skills?**

The starting place for any TY history programme, therefore is an understanding that the aim is to develop certain defined skills. What are these skills? It seems to me the skills which the Junior Certificate seeks to promote (and possibly doesn't) are the best starting place. Again these are outlined in Department of Education documentation 2.

This is freely available and I will not go into detail on it here.

Teachers are free to choose which skills they think they might best promote in their own classrooms. But remembering that we are dealing with a *transition* year, it might help if we ask ourselves what skills fifth and sixth year history students lack or could develop more. We can use transition year to help us develop these. Indeed, remediation is put forward as one of the teaching possibilities of the programme. How good are your students at analytical reading, note-making, question analysis, essay writing, examining and using evidence and at revision? All or some of these might be developed in an appropriate TYP programme.'

## Varieties of TY history programmes

The first type of source is what I might call the "history can explain it all" approach. The starting point seems to be some current issue of importance, e.g. the situation in Northern Ireland, the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, or the civil wars in former Yugoslavia. Some schools offer courses which seem to give the historical background to these conflicts. The objective is obviously that a knowledge of the history will help develop an understanding of the present situation.

A second type of course is the "it's too important to ignore" approach. Here the reasoning seems to be that certain issues which the Junior Certificate failed to deal with but which are of such central value that they *must* be tackled. Northern Ireland figures prominently here.

Teachers are no doubt aware of students' tendencies to avoid questions on this topic not only in Junior Certificate paper but also in the Leaving Certificate particularly. This seems to worry some teachers. Another topic, which comes up in this context, particularly in girls' schools, is women's history. A number of schools visited designed courses, which promoted the place of women in history. Most dealt with Irish history and the approach was, in the main, through biographical studies of a number of figures seen as important but hitherto neglected. A third way of approaching the TY history programme was through a special interest of the teacher involved. Thus students might be offered a course on "the American Frontier and the Indian Wars". Where this type of course was found the enthusiasm of the teacher was usually much in evidence. If the resources are available a course like this will be as successful as any of the others discussed above.

While all the above programmes can incorporate the use of sources, some schools have designed courses specifically around documents. I have outlined the use of sources as a method of teaching a range of particular skills. Once the objectives are clearly defined in a course like this the actual content can be chosen from any period or place in history. Teacher knowledge and student interest might be the final determining factors in the choice.

A fifth type of programme, popular in certain areas more than others, is one based on local history. Again, depending on teacher expertise, this can be a very rewarding approach. It offers the further advantage that it can promote other aims for the TYP. It is an ideal cross-curricular module. Many schools offering the CERT Tourism Programme develop their history courses in this way. A local history study can also develop connections with the community around the school and can make use of local expertise by way of visiting speakers.

## **Assessment**

As with all elements of the TY programme the assessment of the history module is the job of the teacher. Students might be assessed in the usual variety of ways. A special word, however, about projects. There was a tendency in the past to take a very haphazard approach to project work. The TYP Resource Material is most helpful in focusing on the essential elements of good project work.'

## **Summary**

One of the great joys of the TYP is the freedom the school has to develop its own curriculum. In history schools have opted for a wide variety of approaches. This is good. The last thing we need is any form of national curriculum for transition year. I would simply maintain that the starting point for any history course is a clear understanding of what you are about. The course should help to further the aims of the TYP. The only way that can be done is through a skills-based approach to curriculum design.

FOOTNOTES 1. *Transition Year Programme Year Resource Material* (Department of Education, 1994) Section 1.

2. *The Junior Certificate - History Syllabus*, Aims and objectives pp 3-6.

3. For an interesting approach to tackling these problems see J.A. Cloake, V. Crinnion and M. Harrison, *The Modern History Manual* (Framework Press, Lancaster, 1987).

4. As an aside, I should point out that the enthusiasm and dedication of most of the teachers I met during my secondment to the In-Career programme was very encouraging. Teachers' willingness to take part in the TYP and design syllabi to suit the needs of their own students bodes well for the future.

5. Jim Byrne, "How can sources help us teach history?" *Stair*, 1982, pp 8-9.

6. *TYP Resource Material*, (Department of Education, 1994) Section 2, p 12.