

The Ordeal of the Academy: Teaching History to Pre-employment Students

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To be invited to address the H.T.A.I. and to submit the text of the presentation for publication in your distinguished journal is for me a great honour. But it is an honour which prompts me to enter a preliminary apologia in that, while, quite literally my best friends are history teachers, I myself have no qualification whatsoever in the subject. As a practising teacher, however, I have behind me at least the authority of some ten years of hard toil in the class-room. Also to find, in the 1983 edition of *Stair* in Margaret Lennon's fine article, echoes of my outsider's observations on the subject encourages me to hope that professional teachers of history will find some value in what follows. Moreover, history teachers may be interested in my non professional's view of what constitutes the case for the inclusion of history in the school curriculum. After all there need be no more compelling reason to teach any subject than the fact that thousands of individuals enjoying security of tenure and trade union protection are already teaching it. The justification for the teaching of history which is offered here is clearly secure from the imputation of special pleading in defence of what it is, for the history teacher, his livelihood,

A brief word on pre-employment. These are young people who stay on in school for one year after the Intermediate or, more commonly, Group certificate examinations in order to improve their chances of finding employment - so the course is oriented towards work experience and the practical skills of the work place, and improving standards of basic literacy and numeracy. The rest of the curriculum consists in what we might call General Studies - divided into a somewhat utilitarian programme of vocational/social education and a more liberal programme of personal education which we call Humanities. It would be very wrong to imagine that the genesis of this interesting and worthwhile new course lies in the adoption by educational authorities of creative pedagogic ideals responsive to the deficiencies in our educational provision. The genesis of the course lies in the social imperative of providing some activity for an increasing pool of economically redundant youth. If I may indulge in a sweeping historical generalisation, educational ideals do not determine what happens in schools but the realities of economics do.

Often too, of course, in Vocational and Community/Comprehensive schools, pre-employment pupils were drawn from socially deprived areas, some of them victims of what I call urban anomic, that is conditions of severe financial, emotional, and imaginative deprivation and impoverishment. In many cases even the schools they attended were without roots and tradition, afterthoughts on the

great suburban tracts of desolation which grace the fringes of our cities and towns. Certainly I have taught classes which have contained, in significant numbers, pupils from backgrounds most uncondusive to academic and socio-economic success. This has meant that teachers have had to deal with the more difficult pupils - those least amenable to the kind of discipline necessary for a school to function normally. I will say this - that for a teacher in a crowded class-room it can be very hard to feel sympathy for pupils on account of their backgrounds of deprivation. This, if I may be so boring as to make it explicit, is the point of the title, which is that teaching pre-employment pupils is an ordeal in the sense of being a trial or test both of the teacher's pedagogic adaptiveness and of his patience and stamina,

From these preliminary observations I turn now to the main subject matter of this paper which consists in a case-study account of the efforts of the team of teachers in the Senior Comprehensive, Ballymun, to provide an educational programme for the classes of pre-employment which we were faced, or landed, in the late seventies. Regarding time-tabling, the whole General Studies programme is allocated six hours or nine class periods but the actual disposition of periods between Humanities and Social/Vocational education varies from year to year. Every year, however, the main work of the Humanities programme takes place in a treble period - that is the last three classes on one afternoon, usually with one preparatory and one follow-up class. This arrangement allows us to provide the pupils with significant learning experiences in an emphatic and concerted fashion and it also facilitates outings and the showing of films.

The main problem for the teachers involved in teaching the Humanities programme was to occupy, as usefully as possible, from forty to eighty young people for some four hours that is six class periods per week. This meant that the course was, of necessity, child-centred in that our priority was to teach what might be of enrichment value to the pupils. In the first year we concentrated on personal and on community/civic education and the aim of the course units was to improve the quality of the pupils' relationship with those in their immediate circle of human contacts and also with the community in general. From the second year' onwards we included the explicit aim of trying to increase their sensitivity to their natural and architectural environment. In personal education topics have come to include relationships with parents, peers, the opposite sex and the handicapped. In community education we deal with themes such as prejudice, racism, equality between the sexes, trade unionism, Third World Studies, and politics. Content for the third aim is provided by Local Studies, and projects on Dublin, Bull Island, and the Burren.

At first the historical input into the Humanities programme was somewhat random and haphazard, which is really an euphemistic way of saying that the specifically historical aspect tended to be

invoked, if at all, merely in passing and where the teacher felt it was appropriate. It is from no desire to ingratiate myself with history teachers that I say that by the third year of teaching pre-employment (1977/78 was the first) we decided that specific attention needed to be given to history. The reasons for this are interesting. Firstly community/civic education, which includes Third World Studies and current affairs, demands the teaching of a component of explicit historical fact. Secondly, our aim of cultivating in our pupils an enhanced sense of personal identity involved getting them to explore their own family history, the history of their locality, and of Dublin, their city. Finally we found that at least some of our pupils had a distorted sense of national identity. I am thinking of those young people who identify in a facile and emotive manner with violent, anglophobic nationalism yet whose chauvinism does not dull their enthusiasm for such aspects of English culture as the rubbish press, television, and English soccer teams nor does it serve to inspire them with positive attitude towards the Irish language and Irish culture generally or even towards native soccer clubs.

As is clear from the foregoing our emphasis is on increasing understanding and on changing attitudes, on what might be called the education of the emotions, and not on the development of the historical skills of analysis and interpretation of texts and documents. Our programme hence represents somewhat of a retreat from the more rigorous stringencies of academe. In respect too of the above emphasis the thrust of our programme differs from that of the project 'Teaching History to Slow Learners' which is produced by the Learning Resources Unit, Stranmillis College. Here the starting point is history itself and a conviction of its value, whereas we start from what we perceive as useful and valuable to the pupil. This distinction must not be exaggerated as in many respects the aim of our Humanities programme corresponds with that of the Stranmillis project.

In trying to cultivate in our pupils some personal sense of history our approach is interdisciplinary and calls upon contributions from literature, conceived in a broad sense, from geography, and from music. One of my own favourite units is one on aspects of recent history built around pop music and songs of social protest. Normally I have grave reservations about the value of interdisciplinary curricular contrivances such as Integrated Studies or Humanities but I believe that in this and similar circumstances a case can be made on practical rather than on epistemological grounds for such programmes. That is, that a topic rather than a subject based approach to learning can serve to engage the interest of pupils whom the traditional curriculum fails to reach. Such an approach also facilitates the importing of factual information without which it is impossible to speak of having any sense of history.

Our systematic attempt to promote a more positive and accurate sense of cultural identity has also an inter-disciplinary basis. To this end we introduced a programme called Irish Studies to run in parallel with the general Humanities programme but organised on slightly different basis in that two class periods per week were devoted to the subject. This arrangement allows for the communication of factual information of a survey nature without knowledge of which the notion of cultural identity is a vague aspiration. Covered in this latter programme are such subjects as Irish music and dancing, some oral Irish, and the study of myths and legends. Here too, detailed and sustained attention is paid to family, local, civic, and national history and this is reinforced by outings or major activities which we schedule for the full afternoon session.

With regard to teaching methods, most units are structured around fact sheets, and a major impact session during the treble period followed by questionnaires/work-sheets. The impact session consists in a film, an outing, an outside speaker, or a combination of written texts, cassettes, and role- playing. The fact sheets are usually covered in the preliminary class and work-sheets are used during the impact session but more usually in the follow-up classes. As an example of a typical unit and one in which history contributes an essential dimension I will deal briefly with our unit on Northern Ireland.

We have two introductory forty minute classes, the first presents a fictional story of a romance across the sectarian divide, while the second is of an expository nature ideally based on question/answer type fact sheets. The main part of the unit is the two hour impact session during which *Victims*, part of the Eugene McCabe trilogy *Heritage*, is shown, with pauses for comment, reaction, questions and answers. Later there are two follow up classes with a short questionnaire/work-sheet and further discussion, for which the pupils are divided into small groups with rapporteurs from each group presenting short reports to the full class group. Each pupil is then required, in the class-room, to write a short piece on what he/she has learned about the situation in Northern Ireland. This ensures that each pupil is obliged to express something of his/her own feelings which is obviously important as some pupils contribute little even where the groups are small. Some weeks or even months later there is a further two hour session on Northern Ireland during which the R.T.E. programme *Victims of Violence* is shown. This session, and the full unit, concludes with brief discussion and with improvised drama/role-playing.

Time permitting, this year we propose to video record these playlets as it can be startlingly revealing to see how different groups conceive of and dramatise the same situation.

Some concluding observations on the course suggest themselves to me. Basically a Humanities programme requires much time, co-operation and effort so it is important that due account be taken of the extra demands which working on such a programme make on teachers by allocating to them

adequate group and individual planning time. Failure to provide such time-tabled facilities can lead to a greatly increased work load for interested and committed teachers. In respect of educational improvement and innovation failure to make available the necessary financial resources bespeaks a lack of real seriousness on the part of administrators and politicians. Mere benign intentions regarding improved educational provision for the academically less able cost nothing and are worthless. Only allocation of resources counts. Need I add that resources of time and money should primarily be given to teachers themselves and not to the armchair generals in the educational commentary industry who don't themselves actually teach pupils at all.

More positively we have found that working with pre-employment classes has made available materials and expertise which can be used in classes of a pastoral nature, for general studies in secretarial classes, and in classes in current affairs which we offer to pupils not taking history as a Leaving Certificate subject. My regret is that much of what we have developed, this pedagogy for the deprived, cannot be exploited more widely in the general school curriculum. Unlike in medicine where the innovations of the field hospital can come in time to improve general medical practice, methods and materials designed on active service with pre-employment courses are of little use in teaching the traditional curriculum. But teaching this new curriculum only to these pupils excludes the more academically able from many enriching educational experiences. And this is a great pity.

NOTES: 1 Curriculum Development Unit, T.C.D., The catalogue of resources and materials produced by this Unit is an invaluable source of reference.

2 Vera Gillespie, 'Recent Publications for History Teachers produced in Northern Ireland', *Stair*, 1983. This very helpful article deals with the Stranmillis project and also mentions a forthcoming project on *Experiences of War in the Twentieth Century* which seems ideal for pre-employment.

3 Margaret Lennon, 'Teaching History in Community Schools', *Stair*, 1983.

4 Kevin Williams, 'Pre-employment 1977-1981; The Ballymun Experience' *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 1, 1981, 'Humanities at Senior Level', *Guth agus Tuairim*, vol. 11, 1981.

Teaching History to Pre-employment Students: 2

By Eugene A Coyle, Senior Comprehensive school, Ballymun, Dublin 9

To be asked to address a symposium of history teachers would be an honour for any historian but for a science teacher with absolutely no qualifications in history, it was a daunting prospect. However, I was encouraged by the very tolerant reception given to my talk on what I consider constitutes 'history' for students in Pre-Employment and perhaps some readers may be interested in my experiences of teaching this group.

I teach in a large Comprehensive school in a working-class area on Dublin city's North side. The school is divided into three administrative units - two junior (up to Intermediate & Group Certificate) and one senior school. The senior school in which I teach has this year 450 students, coeducational from the age of 15 upwards. The curriculum offers the traditional range of Leaving Certificate subjects and in addition, Secretarial and Pre-Employment courses. The Secretarial course is an intensive Post- Leaving Certificate course while the Pre-Employment Course is designed for weak post- Group Certificate students. The number of students enrolled in this year's Pre-Employment course is 90. The Pre-Employment courses currently on offer in Community/Comprehensive and Vocational schools are designed for young people who stay on in school after Group-Certificate in order to improve their chances of gaining useful employment. The course is structured to introduce the students to the practical skills of the workplace while improving their basic standards of literacy, numeracy and social behaviour.

The course therefore offers a 'Humanities' course of personal education, the content of which is chiefly determined by the background of the students. It is a broad course ranging from personal development to civic and community responsibilities. Topics covered would include politics, trade unionism, racism, attitudes and students' relationships with authority such as an employer.

A local studies module includes a brief outline of local history of the area, visits to museums and Art Galleries, field trips to historical sites in the area - Dunsoughly Castle, Swords, and Lusk. Further field studies include trips to the Civic Museum, day trips to Drogheda, Monasterboice, Mellifont, Newgrange and Slane and a full week's sojourn to the Burren in Co. Clare.

The students attending the Pre-Employment course are generally drawn from socially deprived areas and often come from backgrounds of financial and personal hardships. Teachers involved in the course may find themselves with a large group of poorly motivated and difficult students. I found myself in this situation last September when I was faced with a triple period with a group of such students. The objective was to impart 'something' which would enrich the lives of the students

and hopefully to improve the social qualities latent in such a group by increasing their contact with each other and their environment in general.

What follows is an outline of the local history input of the Humanities section of the Pre-Employment Course held this year in Ballymun Senior Comprehensive School. Class contact during this section involved team teaching with about 48 students initially shared between two teachers. After some discussion we decided that the best approach to start with was to deal with our own school's history. The school itself is just seven years old standing on a site of a much earlier building - a Georgian House called Stormanston House. This led into a general discussion about our local area, that of Ballymun. How old was Ballymun, how did this area get its name what was here before the high rise flats and are there any of the old buildings left in the area and so on? Responses were slow at first but slowly they did respond as their curiosity was aroused. Then the questions came fast and furious; wanting to know about the derivation of the names of the roads, avenues, Tower Blocks and even their own surnames.

We had prepared information sheets and worksheets including local OS maps, documents and drawings and reinforced the process by questionnaires based on this information. Progress was slow but nonetheless interest was sustained. Our first field trip was to Dunsoughly Castle in Finglas. We guided the students around the Castle in small groups and at the same time told them about the Castle and the people who had lived there'. Small groups climbed the battlements and viewed the surrounding countryside - we found that field binoculars are very handy.- and various geographical and historical sites were pointed out. Apart from a few minor mishaps - such as bronco-riding on reluctant cows - most of the students were fairly well behaved. The following week, in school detailed questionnaires were handed out and the group were expected to discuss the history of the Castle; why it was built, who built it, who lived in it, the social customs of the inhabitants in medieval times to the present, its architectural design and structure.

Our local history information sheets were expanded to cover nearby areas such as Finglas, Santry, Glasnevin, Drumcondra and in general the Fingal area of North County Dublin. We found that Wren's little book of the *Villages of Dublin* most useful in this regard. We expanded to include the history of Dublin City with particular emphasis on social development up to the present times. The reasons given by town planners for satellite towns such as

Ballymun was subject to much lively discussion. The next big test of our skills, tenacity and patience was a day trip to Meath and Louth. Since it was an all-day trip it involved a great deal of preparatory work such as designing information sheets, maps, worksheets and questionnaires. In addition the group had to be prepared and this involved a session of explaining the purpose of the trip and how they could get the most benefit from it. We also sought the support from other

teachers involved in the Pre-Employment course in particular the Art and Irish Studies teachers, who designed programmes and projects based on the outing.

Our first stop was Drogheda with a visit to Oliver Plunkett's tomb, followed by Mellifont with its ruined abbey, celtic crosses and Round Towers, then to Monasterboice & Townicy Hall and the site of the Battle of the Boyne. In the afternoon, we continued onto Newgrange where we had an official guided tour of the tumulus and finally onto the Hill of Slane and home. At each stop, the students were given a short talk and followed by information sheets and when they returned to the coach they were expected to complete a questionnaire based on their visit to that site and on their previous visits to earlier sites in the day. They were also expected to complete drawings of the Celtic Crosses and the Round Towers of Mellifont in addition to a sketch of the carvings on the Standing Stones at Newgrange. We found that taking a camera along with us was invaluable for the preparation of the Art Projects some of which have been submitted to the National Slogadh competitions.

Later on in the module, trips were organised to Swords, the Civic Museum and the medieval tombs in Lusk. For these latter trips we had the services of a ,guide who was a member of a local History Association to explain to the group details about the site and its artefacts. At Lusk for example, paper rubbings were taken by some of the group of the effigies. These trips were half-day and the students got to their destinations by public transport.

It is debatable whether an increased interest in local history would increase an awareness in these students of their place and role in their community or perhaps even vice-versa. Perhaps as they mature, exposure to a module such as this, will help to foster a legitimate pride in their local surroundings. This awareness may help to change attitudes and prejudices prevalent within such a group - such as simplistic jingoism based on a false sense of nationalism or help to dispel their cynical views of their own lives and their own surroundings. It is extremely difficult to assess the value of meaningfulness in measurable terms of this module - the *raison d'être* for history being included in such a course is essentially an educational one. If history is to be meaningful it should be relevant and impart to the individual an adequate opportunity to develop some of his or her latent humanity through curiosity and questioning.