

The Experience of Doing the Research Study

Ruth Gallen outlines the approach she took to organising the Research Study for her Leaving Cert class



Ruth Gallen's Leaving Cert History students at the Dachau Memorial

Challenges

The new Leaving Certificate Syllabus presented many new challenges to the History teacher, one of them being the Research Study Report (RSR). For the first time this was to be pre-submitted in April and teachers were asked to sign a P2 form stating that the work was the students own. This topic was to be taught, according to the syllabus, in 9 lessons, so how was I going to manage this task?

28 classes and one trip to Dachau later and I was finally in a position to sign the P2 form. So how had my students, fellow colleague Orla and I come to be in Dachau? After attending In-Service on the RSR I decided that I was going to 'lead' my students to do their RSR's on an umbrella topic such as 'Waterford Crystal'. It was intended that each student would write on an aspect of this and by doing a study within a larger study, I could gain some hope of knowing what they were doing. To my surprise (not) this suggested topic did not grab their enthusiasm; so

one weak moment later and fast forward to October 2005 when my colleague Orla and myself and our ten students are walking through the gates of the Dachau Concentration Camp.

The trip itself was not too difficult to organise, but a little time consuming. But thanks to the 'Lonely Planet' and the internet, we booked flights to Munich, hostel accommodation, a tour of Dachau, a cycling tour of Munich and a trip to the Olympic Stadium.

Preparation

Initial preparation for this trip had been done in the form of the students watching 'Schindler's List', 'The Pianist' and reading 'The Diary of Anne Frank'. I was also able to arrange a visit for them by a local World War Two veteran who had been at Dachau at the time of liberation; he prepared them in some way for what they would see in Dachau. The fantastic weather that we were fortunate to have in Dachau certainly helped to allevi-

*The entrance to
Dachau*



ate a mood of horror and dismay. (Though I cannot take the credit for this)

In Dachau

After watching a horrifying and upsetting movie in Dachau, we set about on an audio tour of the camp. Very quickly the students came up with ideas for their RSRs. The power of the mobile was not to be underestimated – students were texting me to meet them at such an area to see about the possibility of it as an RSR. It was great to see them helping each other and discussing whether or not an idea was workable as they walked around the camp. After a long day at Dachau we left, not only with RSR ideas, but with powerful memories of this camp.

Whilst still in Munich the students wrote a page on what they intended to do their study on, the ideas included ‘The Origins of the Dachau Concentration Camp’, ‘The Treatment of Catholic Prisoners in Dachau’, ‘Punishments in the Dachau Concentration Camp’ and ‘Dr. Rascher and the Medical Experiments carried out in Dachau’.

Writing up

Once back in Waterford it was time to begin writing it up. I gave 4 classes to this, and once again they were able to help each other by saying that they had come across information that may be useful to another student. After several draft copies of the essay had been written and corrected they were ready to be put into the booklet.

Before this could be done the Outline Plan, Evaluation and Review had to be written. I spent 1 class on how the Outline Plan should be written, going through each paragraph, and get-

ting them to write it in class; these were then corrected and refined. (I must admit that the Outline Plan was written after the essay, and not before!) Another class was spent on the Evaluation; the problems the students encountered in this were that some of them were using the same books, and they found it difficult to say that the book was ‘comprehensive, accurate, thorough, well written’ in different ways. They also found it difficult to evaluate three books in a comprehensive manner on one page. Another class was spent explaining how the Review should be written; this was not too difficult, as they went back to their aims in the Outline Plan and showed how they had achieved them. The students typed up their RSR’s on their computers and this made the task of rewriting (or cutting and pasting) and editing much less time consuming.

The booklets

However, once all of this had been done they had to be written in the booklets, this in itself took 7 class periods (students gave up their lunchtimes to do this). This was probably the most frustrating part of the RSR, students were trying to squeeze words on the page for the Outline Plan and Evaluation, and they were very conscious of being neat and accurate. But eventually it was done, and it was still only January. (For some reason they had been lead to believe that this was the deadline as laid down by the Department!)

Due to the fact that the students had typed up their essays we then decided to compile all of the essays into their very own book, which now takes pride of place in the school library and on each History teacher’s book shelf!

Arrangements for the trip to Dachau

We booked the flights with Aer Lingus, but did not go online to do this as we couldn't get a booking for 12 people, so we did it through a travel agency. Direct flights from Dublin to Munich were €180 each, this might seem a lot, but you must remember that we booked 8 months in advance. The hostel we stayed in was Meininger Hostel, Landsbergerstrasse 20 (www.meininger-hostels.de), (I found this with the help of the Lonely Planet), it was ideal, the rooms were twin with ensuite, and breakfast was included, it was only 10 minutes from the city centre.

The bike tour was again found with the help of the Lonely Planet (this was a definite hit with all of us) – Mike's Bike Tours (www.mikesbiketours.com), they also arranged the tour of Dachau for us, they met us and put us on the train and explained how to go about the tour of the camp, advising us to leave the exhibition until the end.

We also visited the Olympic Stadium and did a Soccer tour (again with the aid of the Lonely Planet), the BMW Museum is very near this, but unfortunately it was closed for renovations.

The total cost of the trip was €400, it was for three nights and this included all of the above, and the coach from Waterford to Dublin Airport. It was pretty time consuming booking it independently but it can be done. However, in October when we go to Krakow and Auschwitz we are going through NST Tours.



Presentation

After they returned from Dachau and the RSRs were written the students gave a presentation to the senior students in the school, in which they spoke of their reactions to Dachau and showed photos on a PowerPoint presentation. The Leaving Cert History students from a local school also came to the school to hear a presentation, and as a teacher it was great to listen to my own students engage others in their work.

A life of its own

The RSR undoubtedly took on a life of its own. In total I spent 28 classes on it (bear in mind that I'm the lucky teacher with 9 students in the class, all of you with double figures have my sympathy), and while this included the visit from the WWII veteran, the presentations and feedback from the trip I cannot see how it could have been completed in the suggested 9 classes. As I have already said the actual writing up of it took 7 class periods alone, and I cannot see how it could be done in less than 20 classes.

While a lot of work was required to complete the RSRs, for me it was the most interesting part of the new syllabus. Hopefully the students will gain their 20% from this section of the paper, for effort alone they deserve it. They certainly did learn how to engage in historical research, to read sources and to write objectively. Such skills will stay with them for a long time. The experience was a sombre but worthwhile one, and one that will surely remain with the students, long after they have forgotten the dates, facts and names from their History course.

Personally, I think the idea of getting the students to do a topic within a topic makes it more manageable for the teacher, and I could certainly sign the P2 and verify the authenticity of their work. The trip was a huge success, which was in no small part due to the help of my colleague Orla, and to the students who were a pleasure to be with. Within my school the profile of History has been raised and I am now about to become one of those teachers with a class of double figures!

Next stop Auschwitz!

In October I'm off to Auschwitz with the new Leaving Cert students; there are now direct flights from Dublin to Krakow. This time I have booked through a tour operator, which has certainly lightened the workload. Hopefully the students will also come back with RSRs and memories to last a lifetime.

Ruth Gallen teaches History in the Presentation Secondary School, Waterford