

The Role of the History Teacher

Gerard Moore highlights the importance of History and the role of History teaching

Uses of History

As teachers of history we need to ask ourselves what is the value of the subject as part of the school curriculum and why we should teach history. One of the most powerful arguments for the uses of history was put forward by Edward H. Carr when he stated that history had two functions, “to enable man to understand the society of the past and to increase his mastery over the society of the present”.

Many other historians have taken similar views about the connection of the past to the present. Writing back in 1984, PJ Rodgers stated “like the poor the past is always with us, not because we choose to tolerate it but because we cannot escape it”. One has only to scan the media headlines of the past six months from the Middle East to realise that we certainly cannot escape from the influence of the past on present realities.

Making sense of the Present

One of the most powerfully moving history books I



have ever read was one published in 1970 called *Bury my heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown. It is a Native American history of the American West, described by the *Washington Post* as a “shocking book which conveys not just how the West was won, but how the West was lost”. In his introduction to the book, Brown makes a strong case for a closer examination of the past in order to gain a greater understanding of some of the problems of the present. He wrote that it was “not a cheerful book, but history has a way of intruding upon the present, and perhaps those who read it will have a clearer idea of what America is, by knowing what it was”.

Some years after reading this book, I had an opportunity to visit parts of the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico and Arizona and after seeing the poverty and squalor of the area for myself, I could understand why. Therefore in my opinion, one of the strongest arguments for the study of history is to enable us to make sense of the present by looking to the past.

Value of History

In an essay on teaching history, Professor Elton addressed the issue of history teaching in schools and raised serious doubt about whether it should be taught at all. He argued that a measure of maturity was necessary before a student can really understand what is before him or her and that, since children or young adults have not reached this level of maturity, there is good reason to exclude history from the school curriculum.

However the bulk of research indicates that history is a very important element of the school curriculum and is of benefit for the emotional, social and intellectual development of the young person. Through the study of history, the student acquires knowledge in the factual presentation of history, biographies of famous people and historical fiction. Like other curriculum subjects, history also teaches skills but often

in more powerful ways. Skills taught include those of

- ♦ **communication** in writing and speaking,
- ♦ **research skills** such as collecting, organising and interpreting data;
- ♦ **thinking skills** such as comparing and contrasting
- ♦ and **interpersonal skills** such as seeing the points of view of others and dealing with conflict.

History also teaches **values** such as justice and equality that will enhance the students understanding of the world and hopefully enables him or her to fully appreciate the benefits of democracy to society.

Abuses of History

History certainly has benefits for young people but there are also certain dangers as pointed out by W.H. Burston in his essay on the place of history in education. He argued that history must be “as far as human scholarship can contrive, the past as it really was, and not the past distorted for some present political purpose”. A teacher from Kiev in the former Soviet Union explained that his job was not just about the education of his students but also teaching them that to be personally involved in building their communist world and that the highest type of patriotism was Soviet patriotism.

It is also the case that in the USA in the 1950's and 1960's, history textbooks were also distorted for political purposes and one has only to examine those books to see the portrayal of the “evil empire” of Soviet communism and the marked absence of the contributions of Hispanic, African-American and Native American communities to their own nations development.

One can certainly also look to the teaching of histo-

The Ulster American Folk Park



Is this your typical History teacher?

ry in Northern Ireland in the past. Catholic students were taught Irish history and Protestant students were taught British history and it is not difficult to see how this has contributed to the distrust and divisiveness between both communities. It is obvious that teaching a particular version of history is wrong and as history teachers we must seek out ways to present different points of view in order to help heal old wounds. The continuing distrust between communities in Northern Ireland can to some extent be explained as a consequence of policies supported by large numbers of people influenced by particular versions of the past.

Role of the teacher

In our schools today with the ever-expanding curriculum we really must ensure that the place of history is secure and I feel that a lot of this will be up to individual teachers. Also we must ensure that history remains part of the Transition Year programme in order to ensure that students consider it as a Leaving

Bunratty Castle and Folk Park



Certificate option. Therefore, it is essential that we history teachers must use a variety of teaching techniques in order to capture the attention and imagination of the student, and the younger the better! Over the years I have experimented with a number of different ways to make history more interesting for students and I am going to offer some examples of different things that have certainly worked for me.

Field Trip

In First or Second Year organise a Field Trip for a full day. I would highly recommend both the Ulster-American Folk Park in Omagh, Co. Tyrone <http://www.folkpark.com/> and the truly wonderful Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra, Co. Down <http://www.uftm.org.uk/> Both venues have excellent preparation material for use with students which can be downloaded from their websites and I feel that keeping students focused with different tasks makes the whole experience worthwhile.

I realise that geographically it is not possible for schools in all parts of Ireland to visit these but there are many other places in Ireland that are well worth a field-trip. For example a visit to Kilmainham Jail Museum

<http://62.73.177.39/en/HistoricSites/DublinArea/KilmainhamGaolDublin/> is an excellent idea for senior level students and there are also various Walking Tours of Dublin that can be tailor-made for students. The 1916 Walking Tour organised by Lorcan Collins is worthwhile checking out and the wit and enthusiasm of the man make it an unforgettable experience for students.

Internet

Make use of the Internet in your school and insist that all students taking Senior Level History have access at least one period per week. For example visit the Learning Curve site of the Home Front in Britain during World War Two at

www.learningcurve.gov.uk/homefront/ Students can take a multimedia journey through seven different aspects the Second World War and make up their own mind as to why it occurred and how it was fought. Along every step of the way the student has unrivalled access to the original documentation, gaining a real experience of 'making history'. Another excellent example is <http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/snapshots/snapshot21/snapshot21.htm> where students must study the evidence carefully, putting all the pieces together like a jigsaw and when



finished looking at the evidence write the story about what happened in Trimdon Grange in February 1882.

Ellis Island

Get your students to visit the Internet site of www.ellisland.org and their task is to "adopt a passenger" who emigrated to the USA between 1900 and 1920. Choose their own surname and first name and a date of birth from around 1890 and do a search. They may have to register and select a password. Choose one of the passengers listed and then they can start doing research of their own and this is an excellent way to get students examining primary sources for themselves.

The student can find the name of the ship and can then examine in detail the "Ship's Manifest" by using the enlarging tool. They should be able to find out the following information about their passenger – Age on arrival, Hair and eye colour, Condition of health, Ability to read and write, Occupation, Amount of money in possession if less than \$50, Name and address of nearest relative in the country of origin, Final destination information. They should also be able to find out how many passengers were on the boat and the numbers in First, Second and Third

Class. Also check out if the ship had a resident surgeon, what was his name and what did the affidavit he had to sign before leaving the European port state. For the record, when my grandfather, Edward Moore arrived at Ellis Island in November 1915, the resident surgeon had confirmed that “no one of the said aliens is an idiot, imbecile or a feeble minded person or insane person or a pauper, or is likely to become a public charge or is afflicted with a loathsome or dangerous disease”. It is also possible to use one of the many search engines such as www.google.com to research the actual ship to see where it was built, when it first sailed and what was its history. The ship that my grandfather travelled on was called *The California* and which was later torpedoed by a German U-Boat off the coast of Wexford in 1917.

History Project

Get you students to work on a History Project using the Internet. A good one is a title such as “*Working and living conditions in a factory town in the 1800’s*” and the following sources are excellent:

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRchild.htm>

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRaccidents.htm>

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRcarpenter.htm>

<http://learningcurve.pro.gov.uk/snapshots/snapshot20/snapshot20.htm>

<http://learningcurve.pro.gov.uk/snapshots/snapshot14/snapshot14.htm>

<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/snapshots/snapshot13/snapshot13.htm>

Students can use these sources to find where exactly the factory was located and what is its power source, the various types of jobs, working hours, pay, working conditions, punishments or fines, which types of accidents were common, the life of child worker Sarah Carpenter, where were most workers’ houses located and conditions both inside and outside.

Oral History

Organise an Oral History Project. There are many fine examples of simple but effective projects carried out by students in both rural and urban areas. Like all project work it requires careful planning and organisation but the effort is certainly worthwhile and a useful website to visit for guidance is to be found at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/> The value of oral history is not only in the fact that it gives ordi-

nary people a sense of worth and a place in society, but it also helps to develop positive relationships between young and old. Paul Thompson captured the essence of oral history when he stated “it brings history into, and out of the community. It helps the less privileged and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact and understanding between social classes and between generations”.

Films and Documentaries

Make use of good quality films and documentaries in class from First Year to Sixth Year. An excellent documentary to use in First Year is one called *Ice Maiden* which provides a fascinating look into the world of the professional archaeologist and a superb opportunity to highlight the important role of women in an ancient society in present day Siberia. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2517siberian.html>

I have also used excerpts of films such as the chariot race in *Ben Hur* and battle scenes from *Spartacus* and *Gladiator*. Various scenes can also be selected from *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* as well as the excellent first 10-15 minutes of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Documentaries that are well worth using are the excellent “Peoples Century” series and there is a website which can be used to plan classes. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/peoplescentury/> Another documentary series that I have found extremely useful is *The Great War* series from the 1990’s and narrated by Judy Dench. Once again there is an excellent website <http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/> to accompany the series and time needs to be spent selecting scenes appropriate for your class but this is now made so much easier with the use of DVD material. The section on the role of women in the war and especially the women who worked in the Woolwich Munitions factory, the “girls with the yellow skin” is truly unforgettable as is the section on the use of colonial troops on the Western Front.

Literature

Use some good quality literature and encourage students to keep a journal. I have used this when teaching a sensitive and important topic such as the Holocaust. One of the survivors of the Holocaust was Elie Wiesel and his memoirs are recorded in *Night* first published in 1960. This slim volume of around 110 pages is both moving and shocking and a powerful addition to any curriculum. In the book we are introduced to the horrors of the death camp through the eyes of a young adult. I have used this book with

students of a similar age and after reading each chapter, they expressed their feelings and reactions in writing individual journal entries. It works very powerfully in Transition Year and I have found that students feel great empathy towards the suffering endured by the author and a much deeper understanding of the Holocaust. An excellent website guide to the man can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/eliewiesel/life/index.html>

Conclusion - the challenge

In his foreword to the twenty-fifth edition of *Night*, Robert McAfee Brown states that Elie Wiesel tells his story “partly to honour the dead, but also to warn the living – to warn the living that it could happen again and that it must never happen again”. One has only to look at the recent upsurge in support for right-wing hate groups in various countries and the growing support for fundamentalist extremists to immediately recognise the need for the effective teaching of history to young adults in order “to warn the living”.

Our existing democracies are stronger when it's citizens know it's history, the practises and institutions that make it work, how these have evolved and what has threatened and strengthened them in the past. It is also important to teach tolerance and respect for others and to recognise different points of view. However, having said all that, I do accept that very often the teaching and influences the student is exposed to in the home may be very different to that being taught at school. But that is our challenge as history teachers – not merely to teach knowledge and skills but also attitudes, because long after facts are forgotten, attitudes remain.

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