

# history coordinators' dilemmas

## Drama, creativity, literacy and the curriculum

### dilemma

I'm a newly-appointed subject leader for history. Before that I was the co-ordinator for the creative arts and I thought I had some excellent ideas on how history teaching could be much more creative. The headteacher though is not so sure and has knocked my confidence a bit. She has said that I should keep history simple following the basics of the programme of study. Because she does not see history as any kind of priority when our literacy results are as mediocre as they are, the best solution she has is to keep on what we are doing at the moment. Staff are already exhausted with the focus on the core subjects.

#### Introduction

The only thing I can really sympathise here is with the current demands placed on staff. All the evidence suggests that many teachers and support staff are working long hours and there are many stresses. Obviously any good subject leader needs to be aware of that and there can be a tendency amongst some newly-appointed ones to expect major exciting new changes without considering the impact on the most important resource of all – the teachers.

That said, the rest seems to make little sense. Perhaps the case was not well-communicated to the headteacher and all she could see was more exhausted and demoralised staff. Your task could be more fundamental than merely suggesting a bit more creativity. In so many schools, the problem is that so many colleagues and senior leaders do not understand the essence of history.

It would be interesting to see what your headteacher regards as the basics of history. Most monitoring does suggest that it is still seen largely in content terms by many. Others still feel that the comfort blanket of the QCA schemes of work is the way to stay focused.

#### Creativity, History and Drama

There is a strong argument that suggests that history should be one of the most creative areas of the curriculum. A structured imagination might be regarded as one of the strongest indicators of progression. If history is taught well, pupils need to imagine historical scenes and situations, they have to imagine how events seemed to those involved and the range of choices people had in making decisions. They have the really challenging task of trying to forget hindsight and seeing historical situations – not as neat and inevitable – but as confused, mysterious, inconsistent and with the participants having mixed emotions and feelings.

If history is not about people in their various guises, it is not complete. It is about people responding to a range of circumstances spread over time, theme and location. This simple message that justifies the place of history in the curriculum as one helping develop pupils' understanding of their fellow human beings and their behaviours is often the one that has the most impact with curriculum planners. In this sense, the creative arts become not just a desirable companion for history but something much more essential.

#### Imagination, Drama and History

Good history should give pupils the opportunity to use their structured imagination to imagine themselves in historical scenes – for example, imagining what their grandparents felt about going to school or at the Greek Olympics or at a Tudor masque or as a child labourer in the Industrial Revolution. Role play and hot seating are seen as key parts of the repertoire in many classrooms. Giving pupils the opportunity to imagine things from different viewpoints is one of the essential components of history. Your headteacher needs to understand that using the skills and techniques of the creative arts is one of the most effective ways of developing learning regarding historical interpretations – one of the mandatory components of history.

#### History, Evidence and Literacy

Another requirement for history is that pupils use evidence. Again the ideas you intend to import from the creative arts help standards and enjoyment in history. Sources should



not be depicted as dry artefacts or written accounts for extracting information. One of the best ways to ensure both greater motivation and deeper thinking is to make the sources come alive – for pictorial evidence to be probed not just for what is observed but for what people in the scenes were hearing, smelling and thinking. Pupils can re-enact events from sources possibly reconciling differences in sources. They can imagine the life and feelings of the compilers of sources. One of the key ideas that pupils should grasp is that sources do not provide us with all the information we need, so we have to use our imagination to fill the gaps, to imagine what might be missing. *And, crucially through working intensively and with commitment on sources pupils are hitting a range of advanced literacy targets.*

### **Causation, motivation and explanation**

If that were not enough justification for the closeness of the creative arts and history, there is also the link with the important concept of causation and motivation. History is centrally concerned with explanation – not just what happened but why it happened. What better ways to ponder the reasons for human action and reaction than through the use of drama and other techniques. It helps people become three-dimensional. It allows pupils to make that all-important link between people in the past and themselves – sharing the idea of common humanity. It helps past people to come alive with their own feelings, emotions and values. Pupils can put themselves centre stage and be involved in decision-making. Comparing their decisions with those actually taken certainly moves historical thinking to a much higher level.

### **Communication of understanding [literacy]**

The “basics of history” which your headteacher is so keen to emphasise actually requires pupils to communicate their historical understanding in different ways. There is still a tendency amongst many that history must inevitably involve a great deal of writing. There is no reason why the use of drama techniques, role play, debates, re-creating events, planning speeches and the like should not be a central part of the way that history and the creative arts are connected.

### **Standards and the core curriculum**

Almost everywhere we go, schools are preoccupied with the standards in the core subjects and it would probably cut little ice to be a thorn in the flesh of your headteacher arguing that schools are required to offer a broad and balanced

curriculum, that excessive concern with testing is having a detrimental effect on pupils’ well-being and that the current agenda is more focused on the needs of the whole pupils. It may be worth arguing though that the evidence from Ofsted and others is that good history has a positive effect on literacy and other areas of the curriculum.

### **Standards, Oracy and Literacy**

If you can convince your headteacher and staff of the benefits and the fact that it need not involve much more work on their part, the opportunities are endless. Just some I have come across in recent years include the teacher taking on the role of a historical character such as Howard Carter or Florence Nightingale with children preparing questions, pupils role playing an evacuation complete with spam sandwiches and gas masks and another as part of Boudicca’s army and one where pupils are in the cellars under Parliament with Guy Fawkes. Such approaches can be adopted with even the youngest pupils through play areas dealing with houses, shops and roles in the past. Children can be involved in organising and equipping their play area.

### **Conclusion**

A final word of warning though. Just telling pupils to put together a Tudor feast or a scene involving Greek democracy will not automatically lead to good history. There can be a danger that it leads only to dressing up. The historical ideas behind it need carefully thinking out and there needs to be opportunity for the pupils to research and prepare for it, *i.e to force them to think and use a range of genres and communication modes/genres*. There needs to be an emphasis on authenticity with a strict regard for evidence. Linkages across curriculum areas can be effective but they can equally be tokenistic, lacking clear objectives and coherence. The overall aim must be to use linked dimensions because they improve understanding and link naturally together rather than as a means of saving valuable curriculum time.

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