

Making history more than 'just one damned thing after another'

Lee Jerome describes a curriculum project developed at Langdon Park School, Tower Hamlets, UK. As head of history he developed a global perspective to key stage 3 teaching that aimed to incorporate development education within a historical framework.

What history has to offer

When Henry Ford dismissed history as 'just one damned thing after another', he provided a challenge to historians to justify their subject. To warrant its place in schools, history has to be able to offer more than an ever increasing bank of facts about the past. So, when challenged by pupils with the familiar enquiry, 'Why do we have to learn about history?' most historians will respond with a variation on the following theme: 'because we can learn from the past and use it to help us explain the present, and therefore to understand what the future might hold.'

Whilst most history teachers may well believe in the relevance of their subject, they often feel under pressure to 'cover' a lot of the history content. The occasional tabloid panics about the inability of children to regurgitate the 'correct' dates and names about important aspects of British history, serve to remind us that these teachers are not alone in defining history teaching largely in terms of knowledge.

Linking history and development education

Such knowledge of course is not always narrowly defined as mere lists of names and dates. Concepts also function as key organising features of school history – thus history teachers are concerned with establishing familiarity with terms such as monarchy, government, power and inequality as well as general organising concepts such as causation, interpretation and significance.

At these various levels it is possible to identify some of the important ways in which history and development education strengthen each other. First, history teachers make or break the links when they select the events and case studies for their history schemes of work. Second, the ideas that form the conceptual foundation for history units of work – power, government etc. can be used again and consolidated in further study about contemporary development issues. And finally, students' historical understanding (about how one judges significance, constructs explanations of complex phenomena and understands the variety of interpretations of single events) can inform their understanding of the kinds of complex issues they will be discussing from a development education perspective.

Making the links explicit

My contention is that if history teachers are really serious about developing their rationale for history – to help young people understand the world around them – they have to grasp the nettle and make some tough decisions about what content is in, and what is out. In short, some content must be sacrificed, or at least taught in very different ways, in order to develop the wider potential of our subject. To support this 'pruning exercise', although the national curriculum 2000 programme of study for history retains the broad chronology of British history, it does leave schools much more freedom to make their own decisions about what is studied in depth and what is subsumed in overviews.

The introduction of citizenship has also provided an additional rationale for developing the links between history and contemporary issues more explicitly. There has been a temptation in some history departments, as a consequence of citizenship audits, to assume that covering concepts in the past (for example, democracy and voting

through a study of suffragettes) develops citizenship understanding (in this example, the nature and importance of voting in Britain today). It is this explicitness, or lack of it, that seems to make or break the links between the subjects, and we have to be careful not to assume that students will be able to make the links for themselves between their history learning and their emerging understanding of contemporary issues. All those history teachers who have struggled to get decent essays out of students who seem to be able to write perfectly well in English, or who experience problems drawing a bar chart with young people who have few problems presenting data in maths, will know that using skills and knowledge across the curriculum has to be consciously planned and developed rather than assumed.

An example

In developing the National Curriculum themes and concepts within key stage 3 history at Langdon Park School, I was able to build on historical foundations to investigate contemporary global issues. In one example with year 8, we extended the traditional project on slavery (part of the 1750-1900 unit) to look at the changing forms of exploitation and

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bonded labour that emerged after the formal abolition of slavery in the Caribbean and USA. Students studied the lives of the poor, dispossessed black labourers, many of whom found themselves caught in a cycle of debt (this covered part of the Black Peoples of the Americas unit, which we completed the following year in our own unit on struggles for equality). They also considered the plight of South East Asian 'coolies', over a million of whom emigrated to the American and West Indian plantations in the century following abolition.

In extending traditional units to look beyond the fixed parameters in the text books, we were able to extend our real understanding of how 'abolition' from a British perspective really impacted on people's lives. Because the 'story' also ran on, beyond 1833, we were also able to understand how slavery never really ended but has shifted and transformed itself to adjust to the times. This curriculum project ended with students discussing campaign material from Anti Slavery International, which is still campaigning against slavery around the world today.

The traditionalists would be happy that William Wilberforce was present in our scheme of work, as was Oloudah Equiano (the ex-slave, ex-slave trader and anti-slavery campaigner). The Jamaican Maroons and Toussaint L'Ouverture also featured (fighting for their freedom and independence), to flesh out our understanding of why attitudes to slavery in the nineteenth century changed. But in order to understand the continuing history of slavery, we had to move beyond the regular icons of the history books to find out about children weaving rugs in India, babies born into the sex industry in Thailand and domestic servants locked away from the outside world. We considered the conditions of these people's lives in the majority world and in Britain today.

The year after, in year 9, the same group explored development issues more explicitly when we studied the second half of the twentieth century. War tends to dominate the end of key stage 3 history, and whilst not seeking to minimise the wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45, we also wanted to provide other perspectives on the twentieth century. In the latter half of the century, the Cold War and the end of empire provided two important themes to explore. By focusing on the development of the UN, post 1947 India and Pakistan and the emergence of the non-aligned movement we were able to explore some complex issues and ideas related to

development, underdevelopment and globalisation.

Because of their study of empire in year 8, pupils were already familiar with some aspects of history that were relevant to these case studies, and it would have seemed odd and artificial to have only considered India (and later Pakistan and Bangladesh) in so far as it formed part of Britain's empire. By extending these case studies, we tried to provide students with a wider perspective on the twentieth century, to enrich and extend their appreciation of what was really happening in history, and at the same time help them draw the links between their historical understanding and their interpretation of the world around them.

Achievements and challenges

In attempting to give serious consideration to development education through history we must have certainly made some content cuts. The truth is that several years on, it is difficult to remember quite what was cut, because I, and the students, were so gripped by what we did study. That seems to me the ultimate measure of what is important to include in a history scheme of work.

In our final class discussion we talked about the world today. In particular we discussed the extent to which we had responsibility for tackling the inequalities that have resulted from the historical processes we had studied. As is often the case a consensus emerged quite quickly, most students agreed we should buy fair trade goods, make donations to charities, and support debt cancellation. But a lone student described her own interpretation of what we had studied, and dared to tell us that she didn't really think she would undertake the kinds of actions we thought might help. In thinking this through, developing and giving voice to her own opinion and having the confidence to speak up, she articulated much of what the project had been about. Of course, we can't dictate what students should believe, but if we can help them connect the past and the present within a global perspective and to consider this in formulating their own opinions and judgements about their place in the world, we will have achieved something to be proud of as historians and development educationalists. The rest is up to them.

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I made all this up. Historians and physicists "please do not spit on me in the street. 'History is just one damned thing after another'". Arnold Toynbee. Contents. The first occurred when, after another disruptive day at school, I stood in front of my head teacher, Mrs De Winter. I'd done the sullen silence thing and waited for expulsion, because I was long past three strikes and you're out. It didn't happen. She said, with a strange urgency, "Madeleine, you cannot let your home circumstances define your entire life. The form 'One X after another' refers to a series of X's; as in, eg, One Monster After Another, or in Arnold Toynbee's comment about 'the dogma that History is just 'one damned thing after another...'. share | improve this answer | follow. Asking for help, clarification, or responding to other answers. Making statements based on opinion; back them up with references or personal experience. To learn more, see our tips on writing great answers. Draft saved. Things just happen, one after another. When asked, at the age of 92, if he could summarize the lessons of history into a single sentence. As quoted in "Durants on History from the Ages, with Love," by Pam Proctor, Parade (6 August 1978) p. 12. Durant is quoting Jesus (from John 13:34) here, and might also be quoting Jiddu Krishnamurti: "Love is the most practical thing in the world. To love, to be kind, not to be greedy, not to be ambitious, not to be influenced by people but to think for yourself" these are all very practical things, and they will bring about a practical, happy society." "One of my friends once Let no one ever say that Just One Damned Thing After Another is a book that fails to live up to its title These books are so perfectly bingeable." "B&N Sci-fi Blog. I confess that I enjoyed this book more than I thought I would. I thought it would be more cutesy or one big chick. "Just One Damned Thing" isn't hard-boiled, but it has sharper edges and kept my interest. Which was piqued right way, incidentally, in Jodi Taylor's Introduction: "I made all this up. Historians and physicists "please do not spit on me in the street." Find many great new & used options and get the best deals for Chronicles of St. Mary's Ser.: Just One Damned Thing after Another by Jodi Taylor (2016, Trade Paperback) at the best online prices at eBay! Free shipping for many products! The first thing you learn on the job at St. Mary's is that one wrong move and history will fight back--sometimes in particularly nasty ways. But, as new recruit Madeleine Maxwell soon discovers, it's not only history they're often fighting. Let no one ever say that Just One Damned Thing After Another is a book that fails to live up to its title These books are so perfectly bingeable." - - B&N Sci-fi Blog "Max is a thoroughly hilarious and confident narrator and the sense of real danger, interspersed with copious amounts of tea, pervades the story.