

What impact can developments in literacy teaching have on teaching and learning in history?

Mark Cottingham, Northcliffe Comprehensive School, Doncaster and John Daborn, Dinnington Comprehensive School, Rotherham

> Aim

To investigate the impact of literacy initiatives on teaching and learning in history. How successful have new methods to support extended writing been in raising the quality of work in history? How is reading approached in history?

> Dimensions of this Case Study

The project centred on two South Yorkshire schools following a focus group meeting with teachers from six other South Yorkshire comprehensive schools (all of whom had a particular interest in history and literacy). Research took place with pupils in six Y8 classes (three in each school). Two classes acted as control classes whilst the other four piloted new materials provided by the research team.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Students whose reading was supported with a model for gaining meaning from text were more successful in the final written tasks than those in the control group. Therefore history teachers had to focus on the process of reading and how students approach text.
- The students in our case study enjoyed and valued reading as a learning tool yet it was not generally given a high value as an activity within history lessons by either students or teachers.
- Students were not always clear as to why they were reading in history. As with written tasks, students' awareness of the purpose of a reading task raised the level of engagement of the student with the learning process.
- Praise and purpose were key factors in raising the importance of reading within a history lesson. The students in our research responded positively to a high profile reading activity which required engagement and a degree of independence.
- Writing frames encouraged more analytical writing in students across the ability range. When misused they became a short cut to helping students get the right answer without them engaging in any analytical thought.
- Post tests indicated that students who had studied the Civil War using our literacy-based enquiry method were more successful than students in the control group.
- A close relationship was noted between the development of skills in history and in literacy. History teachers came to recognise the importance of this relationship in their planning and teaching. The need to recognise their central role as 'literacy coaches' was also noted.

Our interpretation of the existing research

History teachers have been preoccupied with developing historical skills and improving students' writing at the expense of work on reading. Reading is regarded as an essential skill in producing autonomous learners. Reading and writing must be seen as 'opposite faces of the same coin' in the teaching and learning of history and literacy. The drive to improve literacy standards in schools has led many history teachers to explore ways in which the study of history could develop literacy. Much work has been done in supporting extended writing through the use of writing frames. Teachers have developed different ways of helping students prepare to write analytically (see the work of Christine Counsell, David Wray and Maureen Lewis).

This work has certainly helped improve the ability of some students to produce good quality extended writing in history.

Explanation of our findings

Writing

- Teachers in our study agreed on the common problems with students' writing in history. These focused on the students' inability to distinguish significant conclusions and supporting evidence from the irrelevant and superficial, and the resulting tendency to write an unselective narrative.
- Writing frames were seen as an aid to overcoming this problem but some teachers felt writing frames restricted higher ability students and led to formulaic answers.
- It was felt that some writing frames reduced opportunities to cross-reference or substantiate argument and therefore artificially lowered the historical quality of the writing.
- All teachers agreed that writing improved when there was a purpose and audience.
- Redrafting and self-correction were seen as important elements in improving students' writing.
- In this study students found the equivocal nature of many written tasks in history difficult. They were constantly asked to provide a balanced answer which required a range of specialist vocabulary, modal verbs and

connectives. They were more comfortable when asked to express a definite opinion or write with imagination. By providing examples or lists of common connectives and encouraging students to analyse their own writing we were able to support their development as autonomous communicators.

Reading

The study showed that by concentrating almost exclusively on the final piece of written work, history teachers were taking even greater shortcuts to 'get through' the reading tasks, where the students first encounter new knowledge.

This was confirmed by the teachers in our study who were involved in developing literacy strategies. Not only were there no strategies aimed specifically at the development of reading in history but the effort to develop extended writing was actually leading to lessons in which the teachers read more and the students independently read less.

All the teachers in our study felt that history placed greater demands on the reading skills of students than any other subject.

Reading, rather than writing, was identified as being the biggest literacy problem in our history classroom.

Despite this emphasis, teachers had not developed strategies to address these issues within history lessons. Most teachers felt that these reading problems had to be addressed at the whole school rather than departmental level. The emphasis was on improving the reading skills of the weakest, not on developing reading across the ability range.

The strategies

The use of story in history generated spontaneous involvement. This did not mean that students preferred fantasy to reality, rather the narrative form was more engaging. By contrast, students found decoding the meaning from a series of disjointed sources very difficult, if not impossible.

The students in our study responded positively to the opportunity to read a substantial story in a history lesson. This was the starting point of a literacy based enquiry method. The story was written to explain the causes of the English Civil War based on local characters.

A variety of techniques was used to engage the students with the text:

- directed activities related to texts (DARTS) procedure e.g. highlighting individual words relating to causes;
- the 'Shoot and Pass' game to encourage students to question the text; and
- peer support to create discussion around the text.

Students then used a variety of scaffolded exercises to extract and organise the main causes of the Civil War from the text. The final student outcome was an extended piece of writing, guided by a writing frame. Role-play *etc.* was deliberately excluded from the activities since we wished to concentrate on the extraction of meaning from reading alone.

Interviews with the pupils revealed that this was not a common occurrence in history lessons. The reading had a clear purpose and end product and the students identified this as being important. Students did not recognise reading as being a particularly important activity in history lessons. They were never praised for their reading in history lessons. This revealed a conflict between the perceptions of history teachers and their students. There was clearly a need to raise the profile of reading as an activity within history lessons.

History teachers who were involved in literacy schemes were not overly concerned with the readability of texts. They felt that most text books were pitched at the appropriate reading age but they were also in agreement that students did not always understand what they were reading. They could decode the words but lost the meaning.

This was supported by evidence in the two research schools. Students could often read fluently and with apparent understanding but struggled when asked what they could extract in terms of historical significance. This was particularly noticeable in relation to such issues as the motivation of a character.

Students in this study did not feel that reading in history was any more difficult than in other subjects but some did report problems with the vocabulary of historical texts which obscured meaning. Encouraging students to use glossaries and dictionaries and providing lists of key words helped address this problem.

There was a need for more attention to be paid to strategies that help students find meaning as they read. There were several models for helping students to gain meaning and understanding of text. The effectiveness of these models has not been explored

here. The evidence of this research as well as that of Lunzer and Gardner (1979) and Beck *et al.*, (1997) suggested adopting a strategy for analysing non-fiction text as the key to developing individual reading skills.

If the aim of education is to get students to become **autonomous learners** who can take control of their own learning, then it seems to us that **reading strategies have to be given a greater priority** in the development of literacy across the curriculum.

What lessons can be learned from the responses of students?

Analysis of the students' written work and interviews revealed that enquiry on the causes of the Civil War was successful in a number of respects which have implications for the teaching and learning of history and history lesson planning.

When tested in two extended writing assessments and a written exam that included questions on the Civil War, students who had studied the Civil War using the enquiry method were more successful than students in a control group. They were also far more likely to have chosen the Civil War as their favourite topic of the year than those in the control group.

Students responded positively to being asked to read a story with a local setting, a central character with whom they could identify and a clear purpose for their reading. Those students whose reading was supported in this way with a model for gaining meaning from text were more successful in the final written tasks. These tasks were analysed for quality of communication, historical content and understanding.

Some students who rarely wrote more than a few lines were able to write at some length when supported with a writing frame.

Some more able students wanted to dispense with a writing frame. Their work was linguistically sophisticated but often missed the historical point. In these cases the frames were useful in making students answer the historical question accurately and guiding them into the register of historical language. The solution we adopted was to use the writing frame, with this group, as part of the feedback, to demonstrate how further progress could be made.

Students found eliciting subtleties of meaning from source extracts very difficult and rarely used this information in their final pieces of extended writing.

Implications for practice

Our classroom based study revealed that certain key elements were important in an historical enquiry aimed at developing literacy skills:

- in planning the enquiry, reading and writing should be seen as parts of the whole and given equally high status;
- students respond to narrative as a source of information about the past;
- reading tasks should be purposeful and engaging with clear relevance to written tasks;
- it is useful to use a model to help students engage with and find meaning in the text;
- students are not necessarily aware of what constitutes a good piece of writing in history. To improve students' writing they need models of what the teacher looks for in a good piece of historical writing. The practice of peer and self-evaluation, common at GCSE, was found to be valuable;
- exposure to and analysis of examples of extended written history provide models for students' own writing. In our study such models were the key to raising the literacy standard e.g. students could not write a diary of trench life in World War One if they had never seen a diary;
- preparation for written tasks is a useful way for students to sort, categorise and reach conclusions about the information they have read;
- written tasks need an audience and purpose; and
- where written tasks are supported with writing frames, flexibility is required to allow the students to break away from the frame and create their own style. Care is needed to ensure that clarity and accuracy are not casualties in this process.

About this study

The research project was centred on the practice of History Departments in eight South Yorkshire Comprehensive Schools. Improving literacy was a major concern for all these schools and all eight departments were engaged in some work aimed at developing literacy through the study of history.

Classroom based research was carried out in two of those schools, with six classes of Year 8 students. In two classes in each school an enquiry into the causes of the English Civil War was taught using a story based approach. Scaffolding exercises followed, leading to two pieces of extended writing, supported by writing frames. The same students responded to a questionnaire on attitudes to reading and a sample was interviewed following the Civil War enquiry.

A control group of one class in each school was taught by conventional text book methods with some video input.

Further reading

Beck, I., McKeown, M., Hamilton, R. and Kucan, L. (1997) *Questioning the author*. International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware

Counsell, C. (1997) *Analytical and discursive writing in history at key stage 3*. Historical Association pamphlet

DfE (1975) *A language for life*. The Bullock Report, London HMSO

Guerra Sakta, C. (1999) *SQRC: A strategy for guiding reading and higher level thinking*. Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy 42:4

Lunzer, E. and Gardner, K. (1979) *The effective use of reading*. Heinemann

Medwell, J., Wray, D., Poulson, L. and Fox, R. (1998) *Effective teachers of literacy*. Report commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency. University of Exeter

Wray, D. and Lewis, M. (1997) *Extending literacy*. Routledge

Contact

John Daborn, Dinnington Comprehensive School, Doe Quarry Lane, Dinnington, S25 2NZ
Tel: 01909 550066
e-mail: J.S.Daborn@sheffield.ac.uk

Mark Cottingham
Eckington School, Dronfield Road Eckington Sheffield S31 9BR
Tel: 0246 432849

www.teach-tta.gov.uk

Publication number 133/8-00

Further copies of this summary are available from TTA publications 0845 606 0323