

Examining the examiners: Reflections on the first Junior Certificate papers 1992

By Elma Collins

The Junior Certificate papers which students took on 12 June 1992 put them and their teachers to the test after three years of work on the new Junior syllabus. But in this article it is proposed to turn tables and examine the examiners. How did the papers measure up to the aims set out in the syllabus, and in particular, how did they examine "the skills essential to the research and writing of history", since this was the area in which (chronological detail apart) the new syllabus differed most from the old?

The emphasis given to the skills aspect of history teaching both in the syllabus itself and the *Guidelines for Teachers* sent out by the Department, makes it clear that skills are central to the new approach which underlay the Junior syllabus. Students were to learn to *locate, select, record, examine critically, synthesise and present and communicate* history. By implication, while the Intermediate was mainly concerned with teaching information and with the students' ability to recall it, the Junior syllabus would teach these skills and the Junior papers would test them. Have they done so? To answer this, it is proposed to deal in detail with the questions on the Higher and Ordinary level papers and assess their purpose in relation to the aims and objectives of the syllabus.

Questions 1 to 4

Though there are some differences in detail between these questions in the Higher and Ordinary papers, they are mostly common to both and will be dealt with together.

Question 1 relates to visual sources which accompany the paper.

1.(i) shows the book shrine of the Cathac. (a) asks students to describe what they see, that tests the skill of recording information; (b) asked why such shrines were made; that tests recall (or intelligent guesswork!); (c) asks why the O'Donnells carried the Cathac into battle, like (b) it tests recall, if the information was in the text-book or guesswork if it was not.

1.(ii) shows two pictures of the Three Graces, one medieval (though confusingly identified as 14th century Italian; there is such a thing as giving too much

information!) the other a renaissance work by Botticelli. Students were asked to identify the Botticelli and give reasons for their choice. This is a good question since it tests students' ability to select, record and synthesise information and to justify a conclusion.

1.(iii) shows Hitler and Mussolini side by side and students are asked to name them and identify the countries they ruled. This merely tests recall. (c) asks for the two pieces of evidence in the picture showing the two men were fascist. This tests the skill of selecting and recording relevant information, though at a very low level.

Question 2

This question labelled Documents, may be considered the main place where the skills of history are tested. It is, regrettably, a mess. Part of the problem is structural. The quotes from sources are presented on a separate sheet, though there is no reason why they should be, since they are just printed passages. They are also too long and too complex in their language and sentence structure to be easily understandable by the ordinary level student. But the main problem is the way they are presented. They are completely detached from any historical context. The result is to turn this question into an exercise in English comprehension rather than in historical skills.

2.(i) asks the student to match the quote with possible authors. Anyone who had never studied history but who had done some IQ tests could do this. (ii), (iii) and (iv) can all be answered by reference merely to the content of the document and not to any historical understanding. This is testing comprehension, not history. (vi) asks which quote would be least reliable as a source, and is essentially unanswerable since the students have not been given enough information to assess any of the sources critically, the skill which it was presumably intended to test. To achieve its purpose, this question needs to be completely recast. A more sensible approach would be to take each document separately. This is how I would suggest recasting the question around document G:

G

The following is part of a speech made in the House of Commons by the British Prime Minister on 3 September 1939. Read it carefully and answer the questions that follow.

...everything I have worked for, everything I have

hoped for, everything I have believed in during my public life, has crashed in ruins. There is only one thing left for me to do: that is to devote what powers and strengths I have to forwarding the victory of the cause for which we have sacrificed so much. I cannot tell what part I may be allowed to play myself: I trust I may live to see the day when a liberated Europe has been re-established.

(i) The person who spoke these words was (tick the right name)

Margaret Thatcher ___ Neville Chamberlain___

Clement Atlee ___ David Lloyd George ___

[This tests recall and/or deduction based on the information given]

(ii) What does the speaker say is the “one thing left for me to do”? ___

[Tests skill of selecting and recording information]

(iii) In this speech, does the speaker sound (a) happy or (b) depressed? Pick out the words or phrases that led you to your conclusion

_____ [testing skill of examining critically and synthesising]

(iv) From your knowledge of what happened at this time, explain what the speaker means by saying “everything I have believed in during my public life has crashed in ruins” _____

[testing skill in synthesising information from source and student’s own historical knowledge.]

This approach allows for a build up from simple skills of recall and transcription to more complex skills of synthesis and assessment. No such ascending difficulty of skills exists in the present questions, and given their present format it is difficult to see how it could be built in.

Other sources could produce better questions and other skills could be tested over three or four sources, especially the vital and high level skill of detecting bias which can only be exercised if the student, like the professional historian, has enough information about the author, provenance and context of the source to make an informed judgement. Anything else will be guesswork and luck. Both of these play a

part in all examinations, but the aim of a good examination paper should be to minimise their role, not to maximise it.

Question 3.

The various parts of this question are all tests of recall, apart from xv (Higher)/ xvi (Ordinary), which is an imaginative way of testing a student's grasp of chronology in a particular period.

Question 4.

This is clearly an attempt to encourage the development of historical empathy. On the face of it this is a valid question, though its ultimate value depends more on the marking scheme adopted than on the content of the question per se.

HIGHER LEVEL

Question 5

As a source question, this is also clearly concerned with the testing of skills. It has the advantage over Question in that some information on the sources is fed to the students so that their answers can be based more on information and less on guesswork. This is to be welcomed.

The sources come from the revolutionary movements of the late 18th century. (a) deals exclusively with the source and so tests only the lower level skills of location, selection and recording. (b) and (c) do move beyond that to test the students' ability to assess the bias of the sources, though only in a limited way. More imaginative questions could have been asked; for example what was the purpose of the authors of (b) and (c)?

Question 6

A. The job of the historian:

(a) is a valid test of the terminology of historical study, though it does not go beyond the dictionary definition to test the conceptual grasp of these terms. Some of the terms used are difficult, though not presumably for a top level student. (b) and (c) seem more likely to produce waffle than enlightenment. The space might have been better used with some more concrete questions on historical procedure: e.g. defining

the difference between primary and secondary sources or asking for an example of the use of propaganda.

B. These questions on twentieth century Ireland test only recall and the ability to get information quickly on to paper, the old Intermediate skills, reappearing on the new paper. There is a case for developing these skills, especially for students who intend to continue to Leaving

Certificate history. A more serious problem here is the detail on this topic which students were expected to know, since the syllabus defines the study of Ireland from 1900 to 1980 as being "in broad outline". More than that is needed to write on the 1918 election or the Orange Order. Many more such questions and teachers will abandon the high aspirations of the new approach to history teaching and be back to the grindstone of hammering in the facts.

C. It is difficult to see exactly what is meant here by "a contrasting society" since both the USSR and the USA underwent much the same social changes as Ireland in **the** twentieth century. For example we all moved from horse and train to car, tractor and plane. But the fault there lies with the syllabus, not the examination paper.

D. Tests recall and communication skills but does it quite well in a very traditional format.

Some general points

Taken overall, then, the verdict on the new examination has to be "must try harder". There were attempts to test skills, but not enough of them and those that there were, are limited in scope and ambition and have not been thought out fully.

There is another, more worrying area of weakness. A significant difference between Junior and Intermediate history is having two papers with two levels of difficulty. Teachers welcomed this because it gave the opportunity to differentiate between students. "The most able, it was hoped would have to try harder to gain an A on the Higher level, while the least able would have an opportunity of getting some grade on the Ordinary.

As structured at present, the papers do not seem likely to fulfil this hope. The problem seems to be more in the Ordinary than in the Higher paper. Because four questions are more or less common to both, the level difficulty of many questions is too high for many of the students for whom this paper should have been designed. In practice it is nearer to the Intermediate than to the old Group Certificate papers on which it should be modelled. After all, this is the segment of the school population it is intended to cater for, as well as those who did Inter for social rather than educational reasons, even though it was above their capacity.

The solution would seem to be to forget about common core to the two papers and to produce two quite different papers, better suited to the differing capacities of the candidates. This will allow greater flexibility in designing questions specifically for the more able and less able, without the need to marry the two. The motives behind the decision to have common questions may have been good but in practice it is less than satisfactory and needs to be reconsidered for next year.