

History Action Research Programme (H.A.R.P.) Intermediate Certificate. 1983-1986

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In this article I will concisely describe this history action research programme which field-tested two history courses in order to evolve a suitable and practical syllabus for junior cycle post-primary students in current circumstances. It is not within the scope of this article, therefore, to discuss major issues in the ongoing debate about and review of the nature, place and purpose of history in our post-primary schools. Suffice it to say that the debate, though not publicised, is alive and fruitful. Perhaps it should be conducted more publicly in order to sensitise people to the nature and perceived educational implications of the subject. Be that as it may, this article which describes an action-research programme emanating from that ongoing debate, will treat of the background to the programme, its implementation, the assessment procedures involved, the evaluation process and some conclusions reached.

1. Background

The Intermediate Certificate History Committee met five times in 1979 to consider history at junior cycle level. As a result of its deliberations, the committee made some proposals to the Department of Education, inter alia, an action research programme to field test and develop, in selected schools, four different history programme models in order to evolve suitable practical syllabi for junior cycle post-primary history. The variations in approach were identified in the discussions of the Syllabus Committee and resulted from identified but tenable differences of opinion on

- (a) the philosophy, nature and aims of history at this level;
- (b) Areas of content that would appear relevant and of immediate interest to pupils in the 12 to 15 age-group.
- (c) Methodological strategies. The four programme models suggested were:
 - (i) A basic outline course with optional modules for deeper study;
 - (ii) A twentieth century course with line-of-development studies;
 - (iii) A syllabus designed by the teacher (mode 1 1 1);
 - (iv) A course spiralling from a local environmental focal point. In subsequent comprehensive discussions with the Department, two of the programme models were accepted for action-research.

These two were:

- (i) Model One: a basic outline course with optional modules for deeper study;
- (ii) Model Two: a twentieth century history course with line-of- development studies.

It was suggested that Model One should aim at providing a body of useful, interesting information for the pupil to encourage further study; it should cover a broad band of time, foster a sense of chronology and temporal perspective and avoid encyclopaedism and superficiality. It was suggested that Model Two should aim at providing students with a body of information to enable them to understand the recent evolution of the world in which they live.

With regard to the optional modules for deeper study in Model One and the line-of-development studies' in Model Two, while their fundamental differences were accepted, it was suggested that both should range over a wide variety of topics, that they should facilitate the training of students in the skills used in the study of history and in the presentation of the results of that study and that they should form a significant part of their respective programmes.

The following general criteria were drawn up for the two programme models being action-researched.

- (i) They should be suitable to the stage of development of the pupil and should be attractive from the learning and teaching point of view;
- (ii) They should cater adequately for the transition from primary to post-primary education.
- (iii) Should be acceptable to all teachers of history as being valid in their own right and useful as a basis for further study.
- (iv) They should facilitate the use of a wide variety of methodological approaches;
- (v) They should achieve a balance between Irish and world history;
- (vi) They should utilise, as far as possible, extant resources;
- (vii) They should take cognisance of major social concerns;
- (viii) They should be capable of being examined by externally written terminal examinations or modifications thereof.

Other matters discussed involved the administration of the programme, the programme personnel, school selection procedures, costings, evaluation, assessment and certification. Finally the programme began in the schools in 1983, lasted for three school years (from Sept. 1983 till June 1986) and was directed by the post-primary history inspectorate. The programme was grant-aided by the Research Committee of the Department of Education but

other 'hidden' cost factors were borne by other sections of the Department also. Participating students were promised certification of Intermediate equivalence in history at the end of the programme.

2. Implementation

2.1 Selection of Participants:

The history inspectors visited a variety of post-primary schools, selected on a random basis, explained the programme and its implications to the history teachers and school principals and requested them to consider the matter and then, if they wished, to apply for participation in the programme.

Eventually 19 post-primary schools, involving 40 teachers and a pupil cohort starting at 1,454 but dropping to 1,385, joined the programme and completed it. Model One was completed by 14 schools involving 28 teachers and 1059 pupils. The remainder did Model Two (see Appendix 1). The number of classes varied depending on various factors and, by and large, the team of teachers remained constant.

2.2 Inservice/Planning:

The inspectors/directors met regularly to review progress and draft strategies. The participating teachers met four times each year to review progress, discuss and resolve problems, receive relevant inservice training and plan the action-research programme. The courses were usually preceded by a questionnaire designed to evaluate progress, elicit relevant information and give expression to the opinions and problems of the participants. An analysis of these questionnaires provided evaluative data and revealed areas where inservice inputs were needed. The draft plans, drawn up by the inspector/directors on the basis of

(i) The data in the questionnaires,

(ii) Information obtained from visits to the schools and

(iii) Reports from teachers, and dealing with content, projects, methodologies, resources, aims and objectives, assessment criteria and routine administrative procedures, were submitted for discussion and decision to the participating teachers at the inservice courses. The teachers, divided into work-groups, considered all suggestions without the intrusion into their deliberations of the inspector/directors. All decisions were arrived at by consensus at a plenary session of all participating teachers at the end of each inservice/planning meeting.

Consequently, over the period of the action- research, the participating teachers formulated a statement of agreed content for each of the two models being action-researched. For Model One the content was from Irish and European history from 'Plato to NATO'. For Model Two the content was from Irish and world history in the twentieth century. 'Optional modules for deeper study and line-of-development studies took the form of projects for which the teachers drew up guidelines and assessment criteria. It was agreed that each student must do two projects, meriting 20 per cent of the marks and the topics could be chosen after consultation between teacher and pupil. For the less able student, it was agreed that instead of a written project, five pieces of course-work, done by the pupil on his/her own, arising from normal learning situations and dealing with agreed content of the model being studied, would suffice. Also models with explanatory notes or recordings and explanatory notes might also replace formal written projects. Appropriate guidelines and assessment criteria were drawn up for them.

Various methodological strategies were suggested, discussed, tried out and reviewed. Ultimately each participating teacher adopted the methodology best suited to his/her respective circumstances.

2.3 Resources: Given the criteria on that action-research should use extant resources as much as possible, participating teachers raised the issue of cost in providing resources from extant sources. This problem was tackled in many ways. Initially, the inspectors made model packs to stimulate the production of resources. The production of such resource packs by individual teachers or groups was funded by the Department and that fostered some good resource production. Other resources were purchased by the inspectors to stimulate experimentation both in resource production and utilisation and also in the reorganisation of traditional content in new forms. Finally for the last two years of the programme all the teachers were grant-aided each year £3.50 per student to facilitate resource production and purchase. This worked fairly satisfactorily because details of resources obtained had to be submitted before the grants were paid.

2.4 Aims and Objectives: The participants over a prolonged period formulated a statement of Aims and Objectives appropriate to the models being action-researched. Some participants wished to begin the discussion and formulation of Aims and Objectives at the very beginning of the programme. It was agreed, however, to let the first year go by without any formal discussion on the matter would take place. This was agreed in order to facilitate such practical

tasks as the selection of content, obtaining appropriate resources, experimenting with various methodological strategies, studying various assessment procedures, developing project strategies and criteria and considering the nature and educate value of history. All this work was the experimental background against which Aims and Objectives were eventually discussed and these discussions produced an agreed set of Aims and Objectives appropriate to the models being action-researched and designed to influence assessment procedures. (see Appendix 2)

3. Assessment

3.1 Written Examinations:

The evolution of appropriate assessment procedures were determined by the fact that each of the two models being action-researched development three elements:

- (i) an agreed content (see Appendix 3);
- (ii) two projects or their equivalent;
- (iii) an agreed statement of Aims and Objectives.

The assessment procedures that eventually evolved, were school-based but externally moderated.

It was eventually agreed to examine content by two written examinations, one at the end of second year and the other at the end of third year. Each individual class teacher or a group within a school made the relevant examination paper within agreed guidelines and in the context of the stated Aims and Objectives. Inservice training of the teachers in all aspects of written examinations was done by the inspectors and availed of by all the teachers. The teachers conducted the examinations, drafted the marking schemes, marked the scripts, and then submitted scripts, examination papers and marking schemes for external moderation. These two written examinations merited 60 per cent of the marks. It is worth noting that this move to a school- based examination came, not from the inspectors and the evaluator who all urged the contrary case thoroughly, but from the teachers themselves. The inspectors were conscious of the criterion of an external terminal written examination but the participating teachers went for a school-based procedure.

The moderation of the written scripts was undertaken by a panel of moderators selected from the participating teachers who

applied for the job. They met under the chairmanship of an inspector and over three days moderated the scripts of the candidates, taking into account not just the answers to the

questions on the examination paper but also the wording of the examination papers and the appropriateness of the marking scheme. Where problems arose, consultation frequently involve the whole panel and an equitable resolution ensued. The moderators issued reports to teachers whose scripts they moderated.

3.2 Projects or Equivalent:

The two projects or equivalents (meriting 20 per cent of the marks each), one completed by Easter of second year and the other by Easter of third year, were marked, when completed, by teachers according to agreed criteria.

The inspectors, on an agreed date before the end of the school year when the respective projects were done, visited the school and moderated the projects. Any changes in the marks awarded by the teacher involved consulting the teacher and at times interviewing particular students. The agreed final mark was then recorded when the teacher was convinced it was equitable.

The grade thus awarded to the student at certification was based on' the cumulative marks gained from the two written examinations and the two projects, all duly moderated.

4. Evaluation:

Internal and External

Various procedures were used to collect data for evaluative purposes.

(i) Inspection Regular visits to schools by the inspectors and the evaluator provided data for evaluative purposes.

(ii) Questionnaires were drafted for circulation and return before eleven inservice courses.

Much of the data in them was very valuable for evaluation purposes. The evaluator also used questionnaires.

(iii) Reports by participating teachers The teachers were requested to submit reports on the programme not once but as often as they felt so moved. These reports were very valuable.

(iv) Analysis of examination performance The analysis of the performance of students in both the written examinations and the projects together with the comments of the teachers provided useful evaluative data.

(v) External evaluation An external evaluator was employed to submit two reports. An interim report with a supplement was received, based on the first two years of the programme. A final summative evaluation came at the end of the programme.

On the foot of all the above data, the inspector/directors made recommendations, some of which were in agreement with those of the external evaluator

5. Conclusions

The inspector/directors and the evaluator, in their composite report to the Department, considered Model One the more successful of the two programmes field-tested and they recommended its dissemination with various modifications. The inspectors suggested that it be offered as an alternative to the present (1987) approved syllabi to which they suggested some modifications, the principal one being that there be only one syllabus as an alternative to Model One.

The need for inservice training for teachers in order to facilitate the smooth dissemination of the suggested syllabi was accepted. However, it was felt that the degree to which resources were provided and funded arising from the dynamic of the action-research would not be demanded in the dissemination process involving Model One.

Some interesting features of the action-research programme were

- (i) the moderation of the written scripts which involved consideration of both the examination paper and the marking scheme;
- (ii) the evolution of a totally school-based assessment procedure;
- (iii) the balance accorded to practical skills-based work in the teaching and examination of the history courses;
- (iv) the importance attached to teaching national history as part of a balanced programme;
- (v) the personal conflict experienced by some participating teachers accommodating themselves to being personally responsible for examinations in all their forms and outcomes;
- (vi) the conflict experienced by some teachers between the single resource, externally manufactured and resources made by themselves, principally from the points view of comprehensiveness and reliability.

On a final note, I wish to thank all those who helped participated in action-research programme which, in many way, changed us all