

Meeting the ideals of Junior Certificate History 1992

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The new Junior Certificate was launched in 1989 amid high ideals, general enthusiasm and the belief that a new and exciting educational system was about to begin - the 65 year old Inter Cert and the 45 year old Group Cert had had their day. The key words in the new Junior Certificate Programme were to be "breadth and balance", "relevance" and "quality" with the aim of developing all aspects of the individual.' These principles were to permeate the study of all subjects at the junior level. In *the Guidelines to Teachers*, issued by the Department of Education and the NCCA, special attention was paid to, areas of knowledge, understanding, skills, concepts and attitudes which the new syllabus highlights more than heretofore." The economic, social and cultural implications of Ireland's membership of the European Community was to be highlighted. So also were issues relating to the environment and there was a plea that they be dealt with in a balanced way.

These are the general principles and ideals governing all subjects at junior level. Specifically, however, how is our teaching of the history programme meeting these ideals? Are "breadth, balance, relevance and quality" being offered? Is the sense of enthusiasm and heightened motivation which ushered in the new programme waning? Are we even enthusiastic about it and if we are not, is it too late? As we end Year 3 of teaching the new programme, which is due for examination for the first time this summer, some observation and examination of how we are progressing with the new course may be haunting us.

Section one of the Syllabus, which corresponds to *Year 1* teaching is perhaps by now the most familiar part of the new course. It carries the interesting and maybe too easily overlooked title "How we find out about the past". Especially easily overlooked is the first and key word "HOW". The title is not "Finding out about the past" as we may be inclined to assume. The whole year's work is centred on HOW the historian finds out. This marks one of the major changes in the new history programme: the study of HOW rather than the study of WHAT. With the latter so dominant in our teaching and study of history up to now, it may call for particular vigilance as we

progress through the Year 1 programme to keep the syllabus directive to the forefront of our minds.

"How we find out about the past" is not for application merely to the first topic of Section 1, i.e. "the Job of the Historian". It really fits in there and there may be an inclination to confine it to that. It is also, however, to be the over-riding orientation in "Our roots in ancient civilisation" in "Castle, Church and City" and in the "Renaissance" It is maybe through this new emphasis that the students' interest in the subject and awareness will be highlighted.

One of the most significant aims and objectives outlined by the Department in relation to history is that the new syllabus "aims to ensure that students are encouraged to develop an interest and enthusiasm for history and a value of their heritage from the past". That is the major challenge: are we developing an "interest and enthusiasm for history"? Certainly the emphasis on the "HOW" aspect of the Year 1 programme is a help towards meeting that desired objective. This explains why the first year students seem to find Topic 1, - "The job of the historian" - particularly appealing. (In the first month of second level schooling, students are generally more responsive anyway.)

In realising the need to develop an interest and enthusiasm for the subject, the general sense of willingness, excitement, novelty and motivation which characterise many 12-13 year olds (though not all) as they begin their first year in second level schooling, ought to be exploited. The "Job of the Historian" is the ideal beginning. It is worth exploiting to the full by using whatever methods help the student to further understand and to become enthused by the first few weeks of second level history. A careful and thought out introduction to topics, class discussion, elaboration of aspects of the topic to be examined and the use of teacher and text-book inspired exercises are helpful, but what I have found particularly useful is for students to work on some project which will bring home to them poignantly what the "job of the historian" is, and at the same time further their interest and liking for the subject.

Several suggested approaches are outlined in the Department of Education/NCCA *Guidelines*. One, which I have found useful, is to have each student draw up a "Family History". This project is given as a means of introducing them to historical

enquiry and the methods and skills used by the historian. These skills include: the student learning to "locate historical information from a variety of sources," to "select relevant information to answer historical questions", to "record this information", to "examine it critically" to "synthesise" and "present and communicate it in a variety of ways". 1

Emphasise and draw attention to the importance of this "Family History" project for each student. It can be used to form the central part of the first month's work. As such, the introduction and enthusiasm which the teacher brings to the project is important. The student needs to know clearly what is involved, so that he/she is in a position to work on the entire outlined historical skills. The student must be aware of where to *locate* the information being sought. Very often here, it will involve interviewing family members, visits to relatives, particularly grandparents, or correspondence by letter or phone if relatives are living outside the students' own home area. A variety of sources can be used to draw on the information required - oral sources, photographs, newspapers, letters, etc. The student has then to *select the* relevant information and to *record* it by taking notes, categorising or summarising. While conscious of the age level of the students and of their stage of development, attention is drawn to the need to examine information *critically* and to *synthesise* in a way suited to the level of the student.

The aspect of the project which has greatest appeal is *to present and communicate* information in a variety of ways. This may include family trees, photographs, descriptions, maps, memorabilia, etc. In the past, students have taken into class as part of the Family History presentation: trophies and medals that family members have won, photographs and accounts of a father's exploits in the boxing ring, old rosary beads which grandparents used, firsthand accounts of the German bombing of North Strand during World War 1, grandparents' accounts of hardship in Dublin in the 1920s and 1930s, visits to pawnshops, etc. This provides an ideal opportunity to work on *evidence and sources* in the class. Through work on the family history project, students are introduced to a whole variety of sources, some primary and some secondary. They will meet examples of each type and through working with the

various examples they will understand much better the differences between the two types.

Progress with work on the project is examined on a regular basis to ensure, firstly, that the work is being done; secondly to iron out any difficulties that may arise and finally to enthuse the students to work with care and attention, ensuring that the deadline for completion of the project is met. To increase interest and pride, much is made of the finished product. The projects are assessed by a teacher of history who does not teach the class. This strengthens the objectivity and sense of excitement that, another teacher" is involved in examining their work. Prizes may be awarded to the best three, although this has its negative side as students may assume that only the projects that win prizes are praise-worthy. When projects are being returned after they have been assessed, the teacher who assessed them speaks to the class, congratulating and encouraging them for the good work that has been done and highlighting a limited number for particular commendation. Also present is the year head for the First Years who also speaks and so formalises and builds up the project and history in the minds of the students.

Such project work has been found to act as a stimulant and motivator to students in their study of History. Naturally a project on "My Family History" is not the only type of project possible. In dealing with this aspect of the course, a colleague in a neighbouring school chooses "*The last hundred years for my family and friends*, a book by published in 199-" as a project title. Another approach to this first topic of Year 1 is to ask students to take from the home or the home area items that are more than 20 years old. Determine their use and age and why they may no longer be in use. In this way one can build up a school history museum.

Ideally, have built into each of the topics to be done in first year some agent which will act as an encouragement "to develop the interest and enthusiasm for history". From there, it seems, will flow the attainment of the aims and objectives: the knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, etc. It does not have to be project work. In Topic 2, the study of "Pre-Christian and Christian Ireland" a different agent can be used. The Stone, Bronze and Iron ages are examined as well as monastic life in early Christian Ireland, including in particular, the work of gold and silver smiths, the art

and the manuscripts produced at the time. Examples of this very fine work are well produced in many of the text- books that are available. This topic can very well be taken out of the text-book and out of the classroom - particularly if one lives in the general Dublin area - by a visit to the National Museum. A trip outside the school is always a source of interest to students. If the visit takes place towards the end of the first term or at the start of the second term, it may well be the first time that students have gone on a school related trip.

While students will always relish being elsewhere when their fellow students are in class, the visit must be well planned and directed, especially with first years.

Otherwise they will welcome the afternoon off but will gain little from the actual visit. From personal experience, it is necessary to have work for students to do while there. One needs to visit the Museum prior to the class visit and draw up suitable exercises for the students. Realistically one needs to do this annually as the layout of the exhibits changes from time to time, particularly if an exhibition has been mounted which necessitated other adjustments to the Museum. Their education officer will help and advise with school groups. The bookshop provides a useful selection of books, booklets, guides, postcards, maps, etc. which can be purchased and used for classroom work before or after the visit.

There is the danger of the students' time in the Museum being taken up completely with doing work- sheets, however useful and well directed. The 12 or 13 year old needs to be given the opportunity of browsing at ease to get some awareness of the sense of awe and power and glory attached to so many of the treasures - and to experience an appreciation of the inspiring work done in Ireland many centuries ago. Such a trip to the Museum can heighten students' understanding of material presented in the classroom; it can excite and enthuse them and bring history alive and so meet one of the main aims of the new Junior Certificate programme.

In teaching "ancient Greece" for instance, a trip of a similar nature could be organised - not to the National Museum but to the Museum of the Classics Department in University College, Dublin. It has many artefacts recovered during archaeological work in Greece which would greatly enhance students' (and teachers') understanding of the life in Ancient Greece. Invitations have been extended to teachers to visit the Museum to examine what it has to offer to the new history programme, to draw up

some suitable worksheets for students and to take relatively small groups of students there to see it for themselves. Such a visit would greatly help the "how we find out about the past" as the emphasis is on how one learns about life in Ancient Greece from the artefacts that have been found.

It has been the experience to date that the final topic in Section 1, Year 1, the "Renaissance", is fighting for the time it deserves as the year comes to an end and as the other topics eat into the time that the Renaissance requires. Greater time management is required throughout first year. By the nature of this topic, visual sources and their interpretation will have a central place. Again, as in most of the first year work, the text-books have an extensive array of relevant visual sources. whether painting, sculpture or architecture. The use of slides can add the elaboration required. However an appreciation of such artistic developments is largely for the developed and mature mind and it is difficult and expecting too much, to await signs of great appreciation and wonder arising in the energetic minds of first years. *The Guidelines* have recommended that in this topic the study is intended to be an "an overview of the developments that have taken place". 1

The study of the Renaissance can also be taken out of the classroom. It may this will help students to remember and to appreciate Renaissance developments. The personnel in the National Gallery in Merrion Square are of particular help here. They will organise a guided tour for class groups, covering the Renaissance period paintings and they will also provide worksheets featuring the main Renaissance personalities and exercise work which could be done either in the classroom or in the Gallery. My experience is of making general preparations for such a visit but time caught up - the visit must await its first realisation. It is intended to explore fully the opportunities provided there as it may be such a visit which will bring to life what for many students may be a nebulous topic.

The highlight of the history programme in Year 1 is the day-long history tour for all first year students - which takes place around Easter. The focal point of the tour is the visit to the National Heritage park in Ferrycarrig, Co Wexford. which has models of life in ancient Ireland from the Stone Age to the Normans. It has a well presented student guide and work book which has been prepared by history teachers and which

the students can work on while there. The park particularly welcomes school groups, provides guides to direct the students to the park and has inside and outside eating facilities. Realistically, two hours at most is spent in the park. Consideration was given to the desirability of using the trip to see other historic sites. It was felt however, that one could easily clutter the day and give it too heavy a historical weight.

Day-long tours can equally be organised to the Boyne valley to view the passage graves and aspects of early Christian and medieval Ireland.' Most schools have particular examples in their own localities which can form part of the first year programme. With advance planning, a selected range of places could be visited in a day. It is best to allow some time for the social and entertainment elements along with the educational. In this way the tour would have an attractive flavour for the students, would be seen as part of the school history programme and would enhance "the interest and enthusiasm for history"

FOOTNOTES

1. Department of Education, The Junior Certificate History Syllabus, 1989.
2. Foreword to the Department of Education/NCCA, A Junior Certificate History Syllabus
3. Department of Education, Junior History Syllabus, p.3, 2. 16. 4. *Ibid*, p. 5.
5. Junior Certificate History Guidelines for Teachers p. 10.
6. L. McNiffe, "Me New Junior Syllabus" in Stair 1990, p. 12.