

The new Junior Certificate programme: A Teacher's Experience

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The two most important lessons I learned this year were firstly, the increased importance of planning and sticking to the plan, and secondly, the need for a high degree, of selectivity in using any text-book. In September, I thought I had planned the year's work sufficiently but must confess to being well behind schedule within a matter of weeks. I now realise that I spent too long on the introductory section and the work of the historian, I got carried away with additional material on the Hallstadt and La Tene Celts, and put a lot of time into Greek architecture. By the time we reached the Middle Ages, sometime in late April, a degree of panic was setting in and was beginning to transmit itself to the students as the summer examinations loomed and comparisons were being made with what other classes were doing. With time slipping by, I had to cut my losses and decide to omit Medieval Dublin. And so for another year, I left untouched the material I had accumulated during the millennium, and plans to do a walking tour of the city and visit the Viking exhibition were shelved.

The book chosen for the year (*Uncovering the Past*) was good with plenty of colourful visual material and easily understood by a mixed-ability class; I would however be more selective in future use. As time went on I realised the importance of adhering to the Department guidelines and this was confused when talking to other teachers. It was difficult to break away from the content approach of the old syllabus and I constancy found myself asking "am I leaving anything out?" Old habits die hard!

At the beginning of the year I was concerned about the availability of resources within the school, but as the year progressed, numerous bits and pieces were uncovered. The school is fortunate in having a well stocked library and an accommodating library and both the students and myself made good use of it for project work. While I had plenty of slides available within the school, borrowed from friends and relations and my own collection, I regret to say that I did not use a single one as a slide projector was not available. Never the less to say the history department will be requesting a slide projector from the limited funds available in the coming year. I used two or three videos which the school had acquired over the years but viewing had to be highly selective and involved a

fair degree of preparation on my part. I finally got the opportunity to use the various posters, postcards, calendars, brochures and souvenirs which I had bought over the years and to ensure their survival, I had them laminated at the Teachers' Centre, Drumcondra. The students themselves were also a valuable source of material in the form of letters, newspapers, photographs and oral histories from grandparents.

The new syllabus does refer in several places to field trips and use of local resources and indeed, I had great plans at the start of the year, but again, not all materialised. It was not until April that the visit to the museum could be organised. In the midst of its preparations for the "Work of Angels" exhibition, I made several planning visits and drew up a worksheet for the students, only to discover on the day that five of the exhibits had been cordoned off. The visit was made worthwhile, however, as I had to drag the students out to pleas of "can we not stay longer?" In May a tour was organised to Carlingford, Mellifont and Ballymacscanlon, again with positive feedback from the students.

I had for long convinced myself that there were few historical sources in the immediate vicinity of the school, only to be corrected by the students. While looking at church architecture of the Middle Ages, I was making a feeble attempt to draw a tracery window on the blackboard, when the students suggested that I look out the window to the church next to the school. Though built in the early part of this century, it did indeed have numerous tracery windows and stained glass as an added bonus.

The most positive aspect of the year was the students enthusiasm for the course. While I believe I spent too long on the introductory section, it did yield rewards in the long term. In the first few weeks there was little input from me and certainly no masses of new facts and figures inflicted upon the students. Instead guided responses could be elicited from them as to what history is and what evidence could be used in building up a picture of the past. In this manner the students could clearly identify with history and make it their own. A class time capsule, to be opened in May 1995, was particularly useful in this regard. The overall approach encouraged by the new course in certainly "pupil friendly" and while as a teacher I experienced numerous teething problems, the students responded well.