

Story telling: how can we imagine the past?

— Grant Bage

Editorial note: Story and its bedfellow narrative with their chronological spines are central to children 'Doing History' and developing a sense of personal identity within a national context. Grant Bage raises the role of storytelling, using dramatic moments to develop understanding.

Introduction

Simon Schama's plea to "Reinvent the art and science of storytelling in the classroom" made the media headlines and echoed centuries of educational history. (Bage 1999) "It is, after all, the glory of our historical tradition – a legacy from antiquity – that storytelling is not the alternative to debate but its necessary condition." (Schama *The Guardian* 9 November 2010).

The practical challenge persists of **'Doing History' through story**, with real children and renewed confidence. It is enormously tempting to view 'storytelling' as a heroic pedagogy to sustain us – particularly if we can restore teacher professional autonomy in a new era.

Storytelling and History Education

'Simple storytelling' is insufficient. Historical stories only become *educational* historical stories, when actively questioned. As another expatriate British history professor (James Vernon) argues, history "Requires a point of view and organising narrative, but the coherence of the explanation is more important than the excitement of the story. We want students who aren't just entertained, but who can think critically and effectively about the world they live in...I disagree that story-telling will get you there." (Guardian 16 November 2010)

Quite rightly, professors pose challenges for teachers. Schama and Vernon suggest 'stories' of historical significance as rival curricula. For Schama examples include Thomas a Becket, the peasants' revolt, the British conquest of India; for Vernon the Renaissance, the rise of industrial capitalism, the advent of a democratic UK.

Their key point is the overriding importance of story linked to a sense of identity at the core of citizenship. How can History turn this idea into a teaching and learning reality?

The Historical Association has strongly supported the idea of teachers as active story tellers, providing the pedagogic expertise they need, see Storytelling.

Teachers as story tellers: story, dramatic moments and pupil questioning

What follows are some classroom strategies to teach any period of history. They stimulate, enthuse and encourage the *questioning* of stories that deepens knowledge and understanding. Our teaching aim is children's engagement, leading to absorption of genuine knowledge of significant historical stories, grounded in historical evidence:

Mantle of the Expert

Many 'storied' methods use educational drama to lend children 'expertise'. www.mantleoftheexpert.com

Through adopting expert historical 'roles' such as archaeologist, curator, film maker or journalist, children can find meaningful reasons to acquire and use historical knowledge. They can imagine leading projects: 'How could a bundle of Victorian shopping lists become an interesting museum display?' or 'Describe a major archaeological find for the local newspaper, without revealing the actual site'.

Commentaries

Children devise and perform voice-overs for an archive film, or set of authentic visual images. Variants include audio guides about historical sites (e.g. buildings, town trails) or radio programmes presented as commentaries and eye witness accounts, of actual historical events.

Any Questions?

Using varied evidence (e.g. pictures, books, documents) about an historical person or event, children prepare to interview characters in familiar formats: news, chat show or celebrity magazine. A child, teacher or classroom assistant may 'hot seat' as that individual and 'answer' these questions.

Freeze Frames

Prompted by viewing a TV programme, reading an account, or hearing the same story out loud, small groups construct three static and silent 'tableaux'. These try to summarise the essence of this historical event. If photographs are taken, different groups' interpretations can be compared and discussed. Individual 'actors' can explain their pose, expression, attitude etc.

Photo Tracking

Similarly an actual historical photograph or illustration is 'copied' by children, using static mime. The audience's job is to ask questions of each participant: the actors' task is to prepare for the mime and for the answers to the questions.

Waiting Room

Using research to imagine themselves into the instant before an historical event, children are asked to react authentically. For example: preparing the town hall for Queen Victoria's visit, writing your diary before a battle, sending a telegram home just before emigrating by ship.

Expert Teaching, Drama and History

The *Primary History Journal* and *Historical Association* website brim with classic pedagogy as developed and explained by brilliant teachers. Their deployment transforms historical stories into vibrant experiences where children can both be entranced, intrigued and involved with both the story and its hard evidential base, ask analytical questions, develop historical imagination and creativity and so learn history as a vibrant, living subject. Teachers, by mixing storytelling, questions and enquiry empower children to learn the principles of history and enjoy the delight that story brings.

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