

Identity, Nationality and the History of Britain: Thinking about objectives and teaching activities

Reproduced from: Euroclio Bulletin 27, 2008

In the twelfth century the History of Britain, as told by Geoffrey of Monmouth, meant the story of King Arthur and Merlin. Today the tangled history of the different countries within the British Isles is still part of the English National Curriculum for 11-14 year olds but, sadly, there are no wizards in it at all. What's worse is that nobody seems to be rushing to teach it.

From September 2008 a new version of the English National Curriculum is being taught. The main difference in terms of content from earlier versions, is that content is defined by thematic story rather than by period. These thematic stories can be summarised as Empires, Power and Democracy, Everyday Life, Conflict and Co-operation, Ideas, Beliefs and Attitudes, Movement and Settlement and, finally, the history of Britain which is defined as '*the different histories and changing relationships through time of the peoples of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.*' There is a brief further explanation of what is intended

'This includes studying the histories of the different parts of the British Isles and their impact on each other, and developing an understanding of the historical origin of the UK. Pupils could explore both the separate histories and identities of Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England and their interrelationships, for example through English colonisation and/or their economic and political interdependence. This can be linked with the study in citizenship of recent constitutional changes in the UK.'

However, apart from this general guidance, it is left to the teacher to decide exactly how to fulfil this requirement in terms of coverage of events and issues.

In many ways there's nothing new about this – when the National Curriculum was introduced in 1991 the history of Britain was included but, given the chronological division of the syllabus, it was most often covered (if at all) as a series of unrelated historical episodes. At best, coverage of 'Britain' involved lessons on how individual events have been interpreted differently by different national groups – why was William Wallace a Scottish hero but seen as a traitor in England? Why is Oliver Cromwell still hated in Ireland over 300 years after his death? Individually these topics may well have been worthwhile, enabling children to understand how events have and can be interpreted

differently by different peoples and at different times – but they did not create a coherent story of ‘Britain’.

That lack of coherence, leading to pupils struggling to link events and so create a sense of developing stories across time, is the problem that the new National Curriculum in England is trying to deal with. Many teachers see considerable opportunities for enhancing pupils’ understanding in the approach but one problematical area is this topic of the inter-related histories of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Put simply, hardly anyone in England is excited about teaching this. During 2007-8 I ran a series of courses on planning and teaching the new National Curriculum History course and only 1 out of about 600 teachers expressed real enthusiasm for this unit – and she was from Wales. Teachers in England have been at best grudging in their inclusion of this unit in their newly-planned schemes of work. Why is this? There seem to be four major reasons:

1. Pressure of time - History teachers are finding the time they have to teach 11-14 year-olds being cut, often severely so, and hence something new in the mandatory curriculum is an additional pressure.
2. Suspicion about why this topic has been given new prominence. There is concern that it has been included for political reasons at a time when Scottish devolution is becoming a much more serious political issue. Some teachers believe that this story is there to help create a sense of national unity at a time when the political unity of the United Kingdom is being questioned.
3. A lack of confidence amongst History teachers about what the story of British unity and disunity actually consists of. By and large the tradition of history teaching at British universities is based around studies in depth rather than wide-ranging overviews across time – British academic historians, in Braudel’s phrase, prefer to cultivate their ‘walled gardens’ rather than risk a peep at ‘la longue duree’. This means that young teachers have gained little or no experience in their university studies of taking courses requiring them to analyse topics such as the power of the crown or the story of British unity or disunity over a span of time covering several centuries at least. Without that experience and knowledge, the idea of putting together an outline course for 11 and 12 years olds is, to say the least, intimidating.

4. And, as a product of the reasons above, a lack of clarity about why the history of ‘Britain’ is being taught. This is the most important element of all and the one that the rest of this article is primarily concerned with. What does this story have to offer 11-14 year olds? Why is it worth teaching? Without answers to those questions, teachers are not likely to welcome this topic.

Developing objectives for teaching the history of the British Isles

I’d like to begin with a fairly standard approach to planning this thematic story to illustrate some of the problems facing teachers trying to work out what the history of ‘Britain’ has to offer their pupils. Below is a very abbreviated summary of a scheme of work prepared under the auspices of The Historical Association.

1. Is Britain today one country or lots of countries? (1 lesson)
2. Where did the English, Scots, Welsh and Irish come from (to c.1000AD)? (1 lesson)
3. Why did English kings in the Middle Ages conquer Wales but fail to conquer Scotland? (2 lessons)
4. Was the ‘English Civil War’ just about the English? (3 lessons)
5. Why does the Cromwell film not mention his actions in Ireland? (2 lessons)
6. Why did the Kingdom become united? (2 lessons)
7. Which great Briton did the most to make Britain great? (2 lessons)
8. Was the cost of Britain’s greatness too high? (5 lessons) – a study of living and working conditions across Britain.
9. How and why has national feeling developed in Ireland, Wales and Scotland since 1900? (4 lessons)

In addition, in relation to each of these enquiries, the scheme of work lists possible activities, differentiated outcomes and objectives in terms of concepts and processes. Much of this contains

interesting and worthwhile ideas, such as work on historical process (interpretations, significance, causation) but this scheme of work also poses two significant problems.

1. By spreading this chronological coverage over 22 lessons (and the notes also suggest splitting the lessons into two groups across 2 years) pupils never see a big picture of the history of Britain. The course is really 9 separate enquiries that do not come together to tell a whole story. This simply will not achieve one of the National Curriculum's primary aims – that of enabling children to understand and be able to tell that story across time. At some stage in the course the whole story has to be visible and told in a single lesson to be clear and comprehensible.

2. Despite the post-1900 coverage in the final group of lessons there is no compelling argument for the inclusion of this thematic story in relation to pupils' understandings of their world. The introduction to the scheme of work gives three reasons for the study of the British Isles

i) 'it is only fair. If the promotion of equal opportunities is an important part of our education system, then there must be recognition of the contribution made to British history by all its peoples - whether their origin is Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Scandinavian, African, Asian, Eastern European or something other.

ii) if young people educated in this country are to develop a sense of national identity, they will need to understand the blend of unity and diversity which gives the United Kingdom its unique political character. They need to learn what is distinctive about England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales and how these distinctive features have arisen.

iii) the content lends itself to the effective teaching of important historical concepts, namely interpretations and significance. As different nationalities within the British Isles may interpret certain events differently and assign a different degree of significance to them, there is plenty of material to help teachers develop their pupils' understanding of these key concepts.'

The first and third of these reasons are unexceptionable but it is the second that goes to the heart of the issue in discussing a sense of British national identity based upon an awareness of the 'unity and diversity' of the peoples of Britain. I think the problem lies in the implicit assumption that we each have a single sense of national identity when, in reality, we each have a series of identities. In certain circumstances I feel British, at other times English, at others northern English or even

Lancastrian or Liverpudlian. There are still other occasions when I can feel European and sometimes, when thinking of a year spent teaching in Aswan, Egypt where I was made to feel overwhelmingly welcome by people of a very different culture, my identity is simply that of 'human'. What seems far more important, therefore, is helping children to understand how and why we each have multiple national identities, an objective as relevant whether we are Anglo-Welsh or Anglo-Jamaican or Croatian-Scot. For children growing up in the 21st century it is not developing a single national identity that seems the issue but how to understand that we each have more than one identity and how and why these have been influenced by past events.

Therefore here is an alternative set of teaching and learning objectives which may well have a value in other areas of Europe grappling with the issue of nationalities and identities. Objectives a and b are a necessary prelude to c and d but should not take up the bulk of the teaching time.

Having studied the history of the developing unity of the British Isles pupils should know and understand:

- a) the pattern of unity and disunity over time, identifying key moments both when individual countries became united and when the countries within the British Isles became united.
- b) the reasons for this pattern of unity and disunity e.g. war, geography and landscape, the roles of individuals, trade and employment opportunities, chance, communications.
- c) how the individual national identities and overall British identity has been forged by both events themselves and by interpretations of events.
- d) why people in different parts of the British isles interpret events in different ways.

Set out simply like this that sounds enormously ambitious for children aged 11-14 but, by the age of 14 we are not trying to create a full understanding of these objectives but to introduce pupils to these ideas at a level they can cope with.

Developing activities for teaching the history of the British Isles

So how can these objectives be achieved in the classroom? It is critical that each individual objective should be the focus of an activity. If several objectives are mingled within a single activity pupils are likely to have huge difficulty distinguishing them and being clear what the lesson is about so their chances of achieving the objectives are much reduced.

What follows below is the beginnings of a different route through the history of the British Isles that separates out the objectives into individual activities that inform pupils' understanding of their world, today and in the future. Activities 1 and 2 are essentially introductory activities, creating an outline framework of understanding for the more important work in Activities 3 and 4.

Activity 1

This outline activity will help pupils understand:

a) the pattern of unity and disunity over time, identifying key moments both when individual countries became united and when the countries within the British Isles became united.

This activity is an overview history of the British Isles, starting perhaps after the departure of the Romans and coming right up to date. It therefore tells two stories – of the growing unity of individual countries (England, Scotland etc) and secondly of the growing unity of Britain. This can be done effectively in one of several ways, all of which have a central, strong visual component:

a) kinaesthetically – by turning the classroom in to a map of Britain and pupils into the people of the isles. Pupils start as individual kingdoms within the modern countries but as the teacher tells the story orally they move into more united groups or make physical links to show, for example, the uniting of the crowns of England and Scotland.

b) using ICT – by asking pupils to use information on cards to create a voiceover

for a series of maps charting the development of unity and disunity. Every pupil does not have to tell the whole story at first. Each group could be given part of the story to narrate and then their combined efforts narrated one after the other to create the whole story.

c) creating a living graph of unity and disunity with pupils using event cards to create their graph – the horizontal axis being time, the vertical axis unity-disunity.

Whichever route is chosen this should take two lessons at most. The first should tell the whole overview story very quickly, cutting detail to fit the time available so that pupils get a strong sense of the overall story. The second lesson should then focus on the pattern of change and on when the key turning points were.

Activity 2

This second outline activity will help pupils understand

b) the reasons for this pattern of unity and disunity e.g. war, geography and landscape, trade and employment opportunities, chance

Some of the reasons for the pattern will have been mentioned in the first activity but pupils will gain a clearer understanding of these factors if they are disentangled from the story. Firstly put out large labels around the room, each label denoting a factor – war, communications etc. Then distribute amongst pupils a pack of event cards, each card recording a key moment in this story and making clear which factor or factors was at work at that time. The task is for pupils to place their event cards by the correct factor label. This firstly consolidates the factors in pupils' minds and secondly shows which factors have had the greatest impact because they will have gathered the most cards. Finally put the events cards, factor by factor, out on a timeline – this will show whether a factor was of major significance throughout history or at particular times.

Activity 3

This activity builds on the previous two to help pupils understand

c) how the individual national identities and overall British identity has been forged by both events themselves and by interpretations of events.

Create on the floor a series of circles (using rope or cord), one for each of England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The area outside these circles represents Britain as a whole. Now split the class up into 5 groups, each group representing one of the constituent countries. The task is for pupils to distribute historical event cards into or between the circles according to whether the event helped people feel e.g. English, Welsh or British. Each group will have its own pack of cards although some of the events will appear in more than one country's pack, for example English and Welsh versions of the rebellion of Owain Glyndwr against English rule in the early 1400s.

This activity can be introduced using contemporary events, probably using sports events. The 2008 Olympics provided a host of useful examples – in which circle would you put the feats of Chris Hoy, triple gold-medal winning cyclist, a Scot who lives in Edinburgh but who was a member of the British team? The answer here is to overlap that card – part in the Scottish circle, part

overlapped into the British area. Such current examples help pupils understand what is required with other cards.

The value of this lies not just in the accumulating knowledge of the event cards but in the discussion of where individual events go and so how historical events have contributed to the development of national identities, of how the same event has affected several identities and the whole activity consolidates the idea that we each have multiple identities, such as both a British and an individual national identity. A development of this activity is to discuss how the choice of events studied can affect people's sense of identity and the dangers of such selectivity – “if you want to encourage a particular national viewpoint which events would you want children to study to achieve this?”

Activity 4

d) why people in different parts of the British isles interpret events in different ways.

This final activity is the opportunity for more depth, having undertaken a series of outline activities. Activity 3 has introduced the idea that a single event can be interpreted differently and those differences can help to create national differences. So now take some time to look in detail at a single event, unravelling what happened and how it has been seen and interpreted in a variety of ways and, perhaps, how those interpretations have changed over time. The advantage of having done the overview activities in fewer lessons is that it may free up more time to create a real depth study rather than something that masquerades as a depth study but is simply just a narrowly defined topic done quickly.

Conclusion

This discussion is the beginnings of a set of ideas about why we teach the history of the British Isles and how we might go about it. I hope that the discussion may be of relevance to those in other nations thinking about teaching which relates to the development of ideas of nationality and identity.

If you would like to follow up this discussion please contact me at ian@thinkinghistory.co.uk.