

History - a portrait of current practice in Scottish secondary schools

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Introduction

History – a portrait of current practice is one in a series of portraits by HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), depicting current practice in key aspects of the Scottish curriculum. The portrait series is a recent initiative by HMIE, flowing from the *Improving Scottish Education* (ISE) report¹. It is intended to promote improvements in Scottish education by drawing on the findings of inspections to stimulate reflection and debate. From time to time, portraits will be enhanced to include case studies of effective practice, usually to coincide with a good practice event in that subject. This portrait will be updated and enhanced with case studies and statistical evidence in due course.

An important purpose of the portrait series is to relate existing pedagogy and curricular provision to the aspirations of *Curriculum for Excellence*². By stimulating debate about teaching for effective learning, the portraits will challenge those involved in history teaching in Scotland to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in all young learners.

This portrait is based on evidence obtained from HMIE visits to 24 secondary schools during the period April 2004 to June 2007. These visits included both general inspections and other visits to examine effective practice. Inspectors evaluated the quality of learning, teaching, meeting pupils' needs and achievement.

Improving Scottish Education

ISE was published by HMIE in March 2006. This report highlighted the need to build on the strengths in Scottish education to meet the needs of learners for the challenges of a rapidly changing global society and broaden the range of their achievements.

Evidence from ISE indicated that pupils in secondary schools were often motivated and willing to learn, but were sometimes passive learners. There were many strengths in the secondary sector, but more sustained encouragement was needed for pupils to be independent learners and creative thinkers, actively involved in and responsible for their learning. Schools were increasingly effective in promoting the personal and social development of pupils. Not all consistently capitalised on opportunities to understand different beliefs and cultures, develop views on ethical issues and enhance understanding of pupils' potential role in future society. A more consistent approach could develop pupils' independence, self-confidence, ambition and personal values and beliefs further.

These aspects are explored in greater depth in this portrait on history in the secondary sector. In particular, the need to encourage young people to think critically and independently and to express their views with confidence is emphasised.

¹ Improving Scottish Education. HM Inspectors of Education 2006.

² Curriculum for Excellence - The four capacities: Successful Learners; Confident Individuals; Responsible Citizens; and Effective Contributors.

The potential of history in relation to Curriculum for Excellence

When well taught, history in Scottish secondary schools does have very significant potential to contribute to each of the four capacities set out in *Curriculum for Excellence*. The nature of knowledge which deals with human activities in the past should encourage the development of young people as responsible citizens, through its emphasis on human motivation and social values and examples of the impact of decisions and actions on individuals and societies. The provision of a coherent experience in history in Scottish schools has been affected by the Scottish tradition of devolving to individual schools the choice of themes and content, within primary school programmes and S1/S2 courses. Similarly schools can choose from a wide range of potential options available within Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) history courses, for those pupils who continue the study of history after S2. A clear advantage has been the flexibility afforded to schools to relate history to opportunities offered by the local environment and the community for making the subject meaningful and accessible. However, the quality of communication between primary and secondary schools has been variable. Hence the development of a balanced and coherent experience for pupils as they progress through the school system is far from guaranteed. In particular, there is currently no certainty that pupils' engagement with history will allow them to build up a sense of how Scotland's past has developed; and hence understand significant issues of national identity and Scotland's place in the wider world. Equally, some secondary schools are re-considering the extent to which the repetition of content at recurrent intervals, for example in the history of Nazi Germany, is really necessary to deepen pupils' knowledge and hence reinforce their confidence in examinations. In the most effective departments, there is a broader and more imaginative approach to the curriculum which allows pupils to consider historical concepts and content in a more varied range of British, European and world contexts. This serves them well in developing the knowledge and understanding inherent in responsible citizenship and in allowing them the chance to apply the skills they have learned in new contexts.

The skills base of the subject is often targeted towards the specific demands of enquiry skills at Standard Grade, Intermediate and Higher and, to a degree, the extended writing which culminates in Higher essays. At its best this can contribute to the development of very effective learners. The study of history in most Scottish secondary schools develops particular critical thinking skills in specific contexts. The most effective departments view these skills in a broader way, and emphasise their transferability. They achieve a balance between sustained emphasis on the skills required to perform well in examinations and more general skills for life, including those of participation in debate and discussion.

The development of young people as confident individuals and effective contributors can be enhanced through the study of past cultures, high quality of pedagogy and the range of learning experiences offered to pupils. An understanding of one's own past helps learners to build a sense of identity, giving them greater confidence to find a place in the culturally diverse society in which they live. There is considerable variation across Scottish schools in the extent to which history offers opportunities for independent thinking and collaborative learning, through debate and discussion. Systematic engagement with tasks which genuinely invite pupils to establish and present their own views is equally variable.

A portrait of current practice in teaching for effective learning

History teachers are aware of their potential contribution in developing the four capacities of *Curriculum for Excellence* and are increasingly considering the many opportunities offered by the subject to extend learners' achievements. Issues for teachers arise from a number of inter-related factors, however. There are perceived and actual constraints in achieving an excellent learning experience in history. Lack of knowledge of pupils' prior learning in primary schools, and of their individual learning capacity in relation to history, has often affected progress. The desire for a fresh specialist start at S1/S2, and over-emphasis on the specific skills required at Standard Grade, has limited the scope of the subject in some schools. Further issues have arisen from the lack of clear articulation between the expectations of 5-14, Standard Grade and Higher courses. In essence, the pressure of examinations has been perceived to constrain the development of the four capacities in many departments, particularly at the upper secondary stages. The "two term dash" at Higher, and the understandable need to train pupils in specific examinable skills, has affected the extent to which learning and teaching is genuinely interactive and personally fulfilling for pupils and staff.

Whilst recognising that history contributes holistically to the development of individuals, the next section of the portrait explores how successfully history, as taught in Scottish secondary schools, is developing the particular capacities identified in *Curriculum for Excellence*.

How can history help to develop responsible citizens, successful learners, confident individuals, and effective contributors?

Responsible Citizens

What do we do well presently in history to develop responsible citizens?

Signpost to responsible citizens.

Responsible citizens often display the following characteristics.

- *They have an awareness of Scotland's past and its place in the United Kingdom and the world and have an appreciation of issues related to community and national identity.*
- *They are aware of the values and standpoints held by others and are prepared to take these into account in establishing their own values and views.*
- *They have an understanding of political and social issues in a range of historical contexts.*
- *They have an appreciation of issues related to cultural diversity in the modern world and in historical contexts.*

History plays a major part in allowing young people to develop knowledge, understanding and skills which helps them to make sense of contemporary society and understand their place within it. In particular, the study of social values and human motivation in historical contexts, and the analysis of situations from the perspectives of individual and collective responsibility, help pupils to develop their own values and gain a broader awareness of the views of others. The time available for the study of history in schools is finite. The role of history at school is therefore to offer pupils, through judicious selection, a framework in which to set the huge amount of historical information that will come to them from other sources throughout their lives. By broadening their minds and exposing them to new information, pupils' perspectives and values will change and develop, as part of the process of becoming informed and responsible citizens.

Some of the key characteristics which are presently developing responsible citizens include the following.

- In some S1/S2 courses, and in many aspects of certificate history courses thereafter, pupils directly consider issues related to human rights, cultural diversity, political processes and social pressures, in a wide range of historical contexts. By application to modern parallels and circumstances, they learn to interpret their world. In the best practice the relevance of such learning is continuously emphasised by teachers.
- Where curriculum planning is at its most effective, pupils revisit key concepts and content at a number of stages, to allow them to develop a sense of contrast and comparison and to apply lessons they have learned in different contexts. They build an understanding of heritage and how international issues can impact on local communities.

- In some schools, pupils have well structured opportunities to consider moral and ethical issues in historical contexts and the chance to discuss the values and motivation of the historical characters concerned.
- In many schools pupils have the opportunity to develop political literacy and increase their social awareness, through studying the processes by which countries are governed and the impact that decisions have on individuals and societies.
- In the majority of courses, pupils are exposed to issues related to cultural diversity and become more aware of the values, beliefs, achievements and struggles of other societies and civilisations in the past.
- Where learning and teaching is at its most effective, pupils have a wide series of opportunities to debate and discuss political, social, moral and ethical issues in historical contexts.
- Through sustained experience in the analysis and evaluation of historical source materials, pupils in Scottish schools have ample opportunity to consider issues of reliability of evidence. They can apply these dimensions of critical thinking to information they are exposed to in their contemporary lives.

Planning for excellence: how might history contribute more to developing responsible citizens?

Effective curriculum planning is required to provide a balanced range of local, national and wider contexts for study. This includes consideration of how key historical concepts can be revisited as pupils mature, through increasingly varied contexts and increasing depth of study. In addition, pupils must be given the opportunity to discuss political, social, moral and ethical issues in an historical context. As teachers of history continue to improve their approaches, they could usefully consider the following questions.

- Do our courses at S1-S6 offer a broad and balanced experience of history, with the opportunity for pupils to revisit key ideas and concepts in a suitable range of new and more familiar contexts?
- Do learning activities ensure that all pupils gain an overall understanding of their community and the people of Scotland? Is this balanced with broader aspects of history which enhance pupils' capacity to interpret the other dimensions of history they will encounter from other sources?
- Do our courses have a rationale which relates to the four capacities *Curriculum for Excellence* and the broader concept of education for citizenship? Do they offer, in aggregate, the opportunity for pupils to explore human and social values and achievements, clashes of culture and the consideration of issues related to national identity?

- Do our S1/2 courses build on pupils' prior learning, develop an understanding of important concepts and offer a broad experience of history, both for those who will continue to study the subject and those for whom this will be their last experience of history at school? Is available time used effectively to develop historical skills in relevant contexts?
- Is there a coherent approach to developing an understanding of Scotland's past and cultural identity, building on pupils' prior learning and experience?
- Does the range of teaching approaches we offer provide pupils with progressively demanding opportunities to debate and discuss historical issues and develop the confidence to express their own views? Do our pupils understand the relevance to their lives as citizens of what has been chosen for them to study?

(For further information about citizenship, you may wish to refer to HMIE's recently published portrait on Education for Citizenship.)

Successful Learners

What do we do well presently in history to develop successful learners?

Signpost to successful learners.

Successful learners often display the following characteristics.

- *They evaluate the usefulness and validity of evidence from a range of sources.*
- *They communicate their view concisely and convincingly for a range of purposes.*
- *They access, evaluate and synthesise evidence of different types from a range of sources, using ICT where appropriate.*
- *They present evidence and express their views effectively and clearly.*

Effective departments offer a variety of activities throughout history courses which enable pupils to develop a range of skills useful in learning for life and a continuing interest in the past. Some of the key characteristics which are presently developing pupils as successful learners include the following.

- In most courses, pupils are exposed to a good range of sources of historical evidence, including some excellent visual sources. They are encouraged systematically to evaluate the usefulness of historical evidence, through comparison and contrast between sources, including reference to what they already know. In the best practice, evidence is used to challenge pupils' preconceptions, stimulate debate and to encourage them to modify their views.

- Most history departments encourage progressively such higher order skills in source evaluation, particularly from S3 onwards. They encourage pupils to synthesise information from a range of sources, to prioritise and to select what is most relevant for a particular purpose.
- Increasingly departments are capitalising on improved access to ICT resources and are using these effectively to access and present information. Visual presentation of source material, including graphs, maps, videos and other types of data is having a significant impact on pupils' learning where departments are confident and enthusiastic about the use of ICT.
- The emphasis in Higher courses on essay writing involves by its very nature high levels of written communication skills, particularly the capacity to present a balanced case convincingly in a relatively short space of time. The most effective departments recognise the need for such skills to be developed progressively from S1 onwards, in tasks and contexts suitable for pupils' level of maturity. Such learning encourages their confidence and capacity to think quickly under pressure.

Planning for excellence: how might history contribute more to successful learning?

The development of skills and competences is at its best when these are approached systematically and when there are clear efforts to build on prior learning and experience. As

teachers of history continue to improve their approaches, they could usefully consider the following questions.

- Is teaching and learning intended to do more than convey information to pupils? Does it require them to interpret and use the information provided to establish their views on historical issues?
- Do courses, individually and in aggregate, provide pupils with a framework which allows them to set specific development or events in context? Are they developing a sense of sequence and chronology in the contexts studied?
- Are the skills developed in history useful for learning for life and a continuing interest in the past, in addition to preparation for effective examination performance? Do pupils understand the relevance beyond history of the skills they are developing?
- Do extended writing tasks take into account pupils' maturity and contextual knowledge? Do lower attaining pupils have enough support in structuring their extended writing, in contexts which capture their imagination and make them want to communicate?
- Is ICT used effectively to access and present information? Are the strengths and limitations of the internet made clear to pupils, to allow them to compare and synthesise information from a range of sources?
- Are tasks for high attainers open-ended enough to provide challenge? Do they require pupils to think critically and independently?
- Are learners encouraged to develop higher order skills of communication such as expressing opinions, offering explanations or reaching conclusions based on their evidence?

Confident Individuals

What do we do well presently in history to develop confident individuals?

Signpost to confident individuals.

Confident individuals often display the following characteristics.

- *They are prepared to express their views on historical questions, including political, social and cultural issues.*
- *They show confidence and competence in expressing these views and can justify these with well founded evidence.*
- *They are aware of the nature of historical debate and discussion and respect the views held by others.*
- *They develop a sense of identity and feel connected to the society in which they live.*

Many teachers are aware of the potential role of history in developing pupils' personal confidence. Some of the key characteristics which are presently developing confident individuals include the following.

- The majority of departments provide some opportunities for debate and discussion in a range of contexts. Pupils' experiences become progressively more challenging as they mature and build on a wider range of contextual information and deeper understanding.
 - In the most effective departments, good curriculum planning ensures that time is used to maximum effect and that contexts for debate and discussion are carefully chosen to extend pupils' knowledge and understanding.
 - In most history departments, positive relationships, appropriate use of praise and good interaction between teachers and pupils enhances the process of learning and personal development.
- Classroom cultures are most positive when pupils feel they want to participate and that their views and achievements are valued.
 - Pupils' involvement in, and sense of responsibility for, the learning process is often enhanced by experience in independent investigation and through collaborative learning.
 - Pupils' confidence is built up by the provision of carefully planned opportunities for choice in learning, to extend pupils' depth of historical understanding. With effective support and appropriate praise, pupils often react well to the opportunities to exert choice in contexts which allow them to find out for themselves and establish their own views on historical issues.
 - Teachers are becoming more aware of the positive impact on pupils' confidence, by providing clear feedback on how to improve learning.

Planning for excellence: how might history contribute more to developing confident individuals?

The extent to which learning and teaching in history in Scottish schools currently encourages pupils to establish their personal standpoints on historical issues varies significantly. As history teachers continue to improve their approaches, they could usefully consider the following questions.

- Does the atmosphere of the classroom encourage pupils to feel enthusiastic and motivated about history? Is there an ethos which encourages pupils to feel confident about expressing their views in discussion, both with teachers and each other? Do they feel that their views and contributions are valued?
- Are courses planned well to provide a good range of opportunities for pupils to participate actively in independent investigation and collaborative learning in suitable contexts? Are their achievements in these regards fully recognised?
- Is pupils' capacity to present and justify their views developed in a progressive way and through a wide enough range of contexts? Do pupils have enough feedback on how to improve their skills?
- Do pupils have opportunities to listen to the views of others and share ideas? Are they encouraged to listen to, respect and respond constructively to the views of others? Are they open and resilient when faced with challenges which require them to re-think?
- Does history contribute overall to the development of pupils' personal values and standpoints by broadening their experience of human activity, through the study of past events, societies and individuals? Are there opportunities to discuss circumstances where groups with differing social, political, cultural and religious values meet and consider the impact of these processes?

Effective Contributors

What do we do well presently in history to develop effective contributors?

Signpost to effective contributors.

Effective contributors often display the following characteristics.

- *They think creatively and independently.*
- *They apply their knowledge to new situations.*
- *They communicate effectively in a wide range of circumstances.*
- *They develop organisational skills and perseverance in managing their own work and the work of others.*
- *They work well with others towards a defined goal.*

The majority of departments provide pupils with opportunities for collaborative learning, through class debate or group discussion of historical issues. Most pupils have the chance to improve their skills of written communication. Some of the key characteristics which are presently developing effective contributors include the following.

- In some S1/S2 courses, there are good opportunities for pupils to exercise choice and undertake an independent enquiry into some dimension of the course. A few schools also enhance such opportunities to deepen pupils' understanding and give them responsibility for their learning throughout the Standard Grade course.
- Where there is an emphasis on collaborative learning, pupils' personal development is extended by providing opportunities to report to groups or the class as a whole on their findings. When well managed, this has resulted in lively and productive debate in which pupils are keen to participate, particularly on moral and ethical issues in historical contexts.
- In some S1/S2 courses, the majority of Standard Grade courses and virtually all Intermediate and Higher courses, there are some opportunities for pupils to engage in extended writing for clear historical purposes.
- For pupils who continue to pursue study at Advanced Higher, the dissertation provides an important opportunity for pupils to plan their learning, think creatively and analytically and express personal viewpoints in relation to challenging historical questions.

Planning for excellence: how might history contribute more to developing effective contributors?

These positive features vary across schools and across stages. Partnership, teamwork and participation relate directly to the range of teaching and learning approaches offered. As teachers continue to improve approaches, they could usefully consider the following questions.

- Are courses planned and paced to allow enough opportunities for debate and discussion in a range of appropriate contexts?
- Is there a balance between opportunities for pupils to develop their own views and follow their own lines of enquiry, with chances to share views and learn from others? Do issue-based tasks encourage creative and critical thinking? Do pupils have enough choices?
- Does the experience for pupils encourage them to develop organisational skills, for their own work and the work of others; and a degree of perseverance and resilience in completing challenging tasks?
- Does the classroom culture encourage pupils to participate in their own learning and that of the class?
- Is pupils' personal and social development encouraged, in contexts that reflect their growing maturity and capacity to respond to challenges? Are their achievements recognised and encouraged?
- Does investigative work involve significant degrees of personal responsibility for the identification of sources of information, organisation of tasks and materials and the formation of personal and group presentations? Is ICT used effectively?
- Are pupils encouraged to apply their skills outwith the classroom?

Conclusion

Learning through history has immense potential for developing in children and young people the four capacities of *Curriculum for Excellence*. When planned and taught with imagination and verve, the study of history at school provides opportunities for them to broaden their experience of the world, gain an overview of how Scotland and the United Kingdom developed and increase their own sense of personal identity.

History can help them to:

- become aware of a wide range of political and social issues and of the values and perspectives of others;
- consider issues related to cultural diversity and national identity;
- evaluate the quality and relevance of information they acquire;
- learn and think independently;
- present their own views convincingly and with confidence; and
- appreciate the views and perspectives of others.

The best practice in Scottish schools allows them to do so. To build on these strengths and ensure that such good practice is extended, those involved in the teaching of history should give consideration to the following broad questions.

- Does the planning of the curriculum offer pupils a coherent, balanced and progressively challenging experience that allows pupils to recognise concepts and apply skills in a wide range of contexts?
- Does the experience offered in history provide pupils with a framework to which they can relate their learning in the future?
- Are pupils challenged to think critically for themselves and share their ideas with others?
- Are pupils encouraged enough to express their views convincingly on historical issues and justify these with evidence?
- Do history lessons enhance pupils' enjoyment about learning and increase their confidence in personal expression?