

PUPIL PRECONCEPTIONS IN HISTORY

An example of the ways in which beginning teachers can gain access to pupils' ideas and thus develop their own expertise in the process of learning to teach history

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INTRODUCTION

... because we (i.e. the English) won the war it was all right for us to have fought.

... the war (World War II) took place in 1750 ... John Major was involved.

... different wars were fought all over the world which made up World War II, but most of the fighting was in England.

... you really shouldn't judge conscientious objectors until you've read *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

What sorts of ideas about history do secondary school pupils bring with them to the classroom? The comments above were collected from Year 9 pupils in the course of a series of investigations designed to explore pupils' preconceptions in history. They suggest something of the potential complexity and sophistication in the thinking of some pupils, the values and beliefs that pupils may hold about the past, the sorts of misconceptions that some may bring to their lessons, the inconsistency in the thinking of many and the enormous diversity amongst pupils.

In contrast to some other school subjects, the research literature on history teaching and learning provides little evidence of what school pupils bring with them to their history lessons — their existing knowledge and beliefs about the past. The prevalence of constructivist approaches in science and mathematics teaching is in part a testimony to the influence of investigations into children's preconceptions in these subject areas, research which clearly indicates the value of gaining access to and taking seriously pupils' existing ideas¹.

This article reports on a number of small scale investigations into pupil preconceptions in history, carried out by PGCE students at Oxford University's Department of Educational Studies at the end of the first term of the PGCE year. The focus of each investigation was ideas deemed relevant to a unit of work not yet studied formally by the pupils: this covered in several instances the Era of World War II, but also the Indigenous Peoples of North America, Tudor England and the Cold War. We discuss not only some of our findings about the pupils' ideas, but also what we have discovered about gaining access to these ideas. We conclude with a consideration of what might be some of the teaching and learning implications of our investigations.

Perhaps because of the lack of other comparable work in this field we are left with as many questions as answers. One particularly significant question which emerged as we discussed the outcomes of the investigations is 'what do we mean by

preconceptions?' Are we referring here to existing knowledge? To beliefs? To attitudes? Does our use of the word 'knowledge' encompass statements about the past which are factually incorrect? Do we regard such preconceptions as 'wrong', or are those statements best understood as misconceptions? These questions seem to us to relate to how we conceptualise the term preconception. We do not attempt to resolve these questions — but we suggest that they are worthy of consideration by both beginning and experienced teachers.

GAINING ACCESS TO EXISTING IDEAS

The investigations used a wide range of different methodologies. Some required written responses by pupils, others oral responses. Some asked the pupils to respond to oral questions, others to written or pictorial stimulus material. Some were conducted with individual pupils, some with small groups, others with whole classes. Here we describe the methodology of three of the investigations, carried out in different schools, which were all, in our view, effective in gaining access to the pupils' ideas and which illustrate the diversity of approaches which can be used.

Example 1: Preconceptions about World War I:

The methodology here involved four different tasks, undertaken in sequence, by a mixed ability group of Year 9 pupils, in an hours' lesson. The first task was an individual brainstorming activity on what each pupil associated with the words 'World War I': they were asked to construct spider diagrams of whatever came to mind. This was followed by an activity concerned with words the pupils associated with the war. They were given a list of words, many of which did relate to World War I but which included others related to World War II, and even a couple of apparently 'rogue' words like 'bows' and 'arrows' and 'the Mary Rose'. Pupils were asked to circle those they associated with the war, write down their reasons for choice and discuss these with a partner. Next, they were asked, in small groups, to consider 20 pictures and decide which related to World War I and their reasons for their decisions. Unbeknownst to the pupils the pictures had been selected so that they were in fact all related to World War I. The final phase of the investigation was a series of small group discussions based on questions such as 'Who do you think was to blame for World War I?' and 'Do you think war is right?'

The effectiveness of this methodology was significantly enhanced by the fact that there were four teachers in the room! This obviously helped the groups to maintain the intended focus of discussion, and enabled the teachers to share what they had learnt from the pupils' discussion. But even if this were not possible (and perhaps A level students could be helpful here if teachers are not available) the tasks could still be effective. The variety of tasks encouraged pupils with varying abilities to

reveal their thinking, the product of the brainstorming was available for later inspection by the teacher, the open ended and non 'test-like' nature of the activities — with an emphasis on discussion and collaboration — enabled the pupils to become aware of what they already knew or thought about the topic.

Example 2: Preconceptions about the Second World War:

In contrast to our first example, which was characterised by a predominance of relatively open-ended, oral tasks — somewhat dependent on the teacher to maintain the intended nature of the task — our second example was based on a worksheet which involved a range of reading and writing tasks, to be completed in a 70-minute lesson. Here there were ten short tasks, including free writing of words the pupils would associate with the World War II, marking dates on a timeline, ticking boxes to signify the selection of weapons used in the war, circling or underlining relevant words from lists of countries, people and events related to the war, shading in a map and underlining true and false statements about the war. In addition there was an extension activity, asking for free writing or drawing about the war. Finally, after each of the ten sections of the worksheet, pupils were required to tick boxes asking them to reveal the source of their information, e.g. their parents, books, television — or if it was a guess.

The effectiveness of this method seemed to be that its diversity made it accessible to all the pupils; analysis of the pupils' responses was relatively straightforward and revealed a great deal about the variations in the sophistication of the knowledge base of different pupils. In addition, as it was possible to look in detail at each individual pupil's responses to all the tasks, it was possible to identify the inconsistencies in their ways of thinking. On a practical note, although the worksheet was quite expensive to produce (nine pages of photocopying for each pupil), it was easy to use in the classroom. For the pupils, it may be that they felt 'tested' by the approach used, and as each task was relatively closed it set in advance the parameters of the pupils' response. Finally, the analysis of the responses suggested that in the section about the source of pupils' preconceptions, the guess option seemed to have been used as an insurance policy by many of the pupils — a trend which emerged in other investigations which similarly sought to gain access to the source of pupils' ideas.

Example 3: Preconceptions about the North American Indians:

This investigation deliberately used both pictures and words to gain access to Year 8 pupils' existing ideas about the Indians. Unlike the previous investigations which — at least in their design — tended to focus on prior knowledge of history, this investigation was as much concerned with the pupils' images or ideas about the Indians as with what they actually knew. Thus the first task involved giving the pupils three sets of pictures which depicted a range of images of what the Indians looked like, how the Indians behaved and how the Indians lived. In each set, the images had been carefully selected to present a range of more or less stereotypical images, and the pupils were asked to rank them in the order which best fitted their existing ideas about these facets of the Indians. Ten pupils were then asked, in an oral interview, a series of questions about the Indians. Some of these explored the same issues as the pictures, but other questions asked about the source of the pupils' ideas and the reliability of these sources.

Although the oral interviews clearly present practical

problems in terms of their feasibility for a single teacher, the use of two different mediums to gain access to the pupils' ideas was instructive: different ideas were revealed in the different contexts, and a rather less stereotypical set of images about the Indians emerged from the pupils' responses to the pictures. Here, it seemed, some were not constrained by their vocabulary and were thus not dependent on words such as 'wigwam' to denote where Indians lived. The issue of written language was a recurring theme in the investigations — and it seemed that the tasks which were less dependent on the pupils' reading and writing skills were more successful in gaining access to a wide range of pupils' ideas. Another strength of this investigation about North American Indians related to the phrasing of the questions asked both of the visual images and in the interview: by stressing 'best fit' with existing ideas, and seeking pupils' views, they seemed to validate the pupils' existing ideas. Unlike questions asked in other investigations, they neither implicitly nor explicitly suggested that there was a 'correct' response or a 'right' answer.

THE PUPILS' PRECONCEPTIONS: OUR FINDINGS

Between them, the investigations taught us a lot. We found ourselves bewildered, depressed and excited by what we had discovered. Here we will try to give a flavour of what emerged, organised in terms of three themes: the pupils' existing knowledge and beliefs (particularly in terms of the Era of World War II), issues related to language, and the sources of pupil preconceptions. In synthesising the findings from over 15 investigations, we have concentrated on the ideas that appear to be common in that they were evident in the results of several of the investigations: it seems likely that many pupils may think in these ways. One dimension though that is lost by this approach is the idiosyncratic — the analysis of responses from many of the investigations revealed. For example, an individual pupil who thought that World War II was still going on and 'might come over here soon', or, in another instance, a pupil who thought that bows and arrows were used in the war.

Knowledge and beliefs

A very common phenomenon in the pupils' thinking about World Wars I and II was its Anglocentric focus. This seemed to manifest itself in a range of ways: their assumptions about where the war was fought (in England, for many), their ideas about who bombed who ('we' were bombed, not the enemy), their beliefs about the impact of war ('we' were devastated) and about events during the war (it could not be true that British forces had to retreat at any time during the war). This type of perspective seemed also evident in attitudes to war — combatants were inevitably 'bad' unless it was 'us', and as 'we' won the war it was right to have fought it. The diverse ways in which this perspective revealed itself suggests something of the complexity of the term preconception — pupils seemed to be referring to what they regarded as facts about the war, but in so doing revealed both their misconceptions about what actually happened, as well as a set of values and attitudes about the history of the wars.

Another characteristic of the pupils' knowledge about the wars was its diversity, with some revealing sophisticated and accurate existing knowledge about the causes, course and consequences of war, whilst others were unable to distinguish between the two world wars, were not able to locate them in the twentieth century and were confused about the people and countries involved.

Many pupils' responses seemed to suggest inconsistencies in their thinking, such as the United States not being involved and yet US pilots shooting down enemy planes or Pearl Harbour being a significant event and yet Japan not being involved in the war, or apparently unquestioning acceptance of the term 'world war' even though they believed that the only countries involved were Britain and Germany. It may be that these responses resulted from inappropriate questions which had been interpreted in a different way to that intended but they seemed to us to suggest something about the way in which historical knowledge for some pupils consists of a series of not necessarily related pieces of information — they are not linked in the pupil's mind in any particular frame of reference and thus inconsistencies may well not be evident to the children. Although it may be that some pupils are not concerned with what we might interpret as a lack of coherence in their thinking, other pupils seemed to be searching for a resolution to what they recognised as a gap in their understanding: a significant minority of pupils asked why the wars were regarded as *world wars* when — so far as the pupils knew — only European countries were involved.

In many cases, pupils' knowledge about the home front in World War II was extensive and relatively sophisticated — clear evidence of their learning in Key Stage 2, and perhaps a reminder to secondary school teachers that this accurate body of knowledge and understanding is there as one of the foundations of the pupils' work in Key Stage 3.

Language issues

It is not easy to disentangle issues of language from those of knowledge and understanding in history, but we believe there was evidence of the pupils' language skills either masking their historical understanding or, conversely, suggesting understanding where none existed. The most obvious examples of hidden understanding were evident in those responses where it seemed that pupils did not know a particular historical term and yet did know about the phenomenon concerned. One such was the word 'holocaust', not recognised by some pupils who nevertheless were able to talk about aspects of Nazi anti-Semitic policy, such as the existence and function of the concentration camps. At the other extreme, it was evident that some pupils had heard of people or events in the war, and were thus able to cite them as associated with it, and yet were not able to match these words with a more detailed account of their nature or contribution.

Our discussion of effective methods of gaining access to pupils' ideas indicated that we believe that the language demands of the tasks set for pupils were significant in determining what the tasks were able to reveal. It certainly seemed that pupils were most fluent in expressing their ideas if they could do this orally, or at least in response to pictorial stimulus material, rather than in writing or in response to a written stimulus.

Sources of preconceptions

A number of the investigations tried to establish where the pupils' existing ideas had come from, and although the data collected here was less illuminating, it was nonetheless instructive. A major influence that we were able to identify, although it was rarely mentioned by the pupils, was their primary school education — what they had studied in Key Stage 2. It was evident that their work on Britain since 1930, and particularly the impact of World War II on Britain, had resulted in knowledge and understanding of a range of issues

associated with the Home Front. Generally though the pupils attributed little influence to schooling: what they cited was the influence of the media. Most often mentioned of all possible sources was the television, and especially programmes such as *Black Adder*. Parents, grandparents and family outings seemed to have had some influence, but what appeared to be the most memorable source for the pupils was television entertainment.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IMPLICATIONS

We recognise that our investigations represent no more than a preliminary excursion into this field of history, that in many ways they were flawed and that any claims that we can make about their implications are necessarily tentative. Nevertheless, we do believe that our work has indicated something of the range and diversity of ideas that pupils bring with them to their history lessons, and that within any one class there is likely to be a wide variety of 'starting points' represented. It seems reasonable to assert that teachers should assume that pupils are not a blank sheet — whatever is being studied, it seems likely that they will have, if not knowledge, then ideas, beliefs, attitudes and images in their minds. It may well be that, especially in the case of beliefs and attitudes, these are held dear by the pupils and will not be easily changed or challenged by the teacher. It may be that they are the product of a powerful media image of the past, of an attitude prevalent in the pupils' home or the expression of a prejudice common in society.

If we are right that pupils come to their history lessons with this range of ideas, then it seems only logical to suggest that an important task for the teacher is to try and gain access to them, and at least some of the methods that we have discussed could be used in the context of an 'ordinary' classroom. Quite what is to be done with the ideas seems to us to be another question — the pupils' varying preconceptions add yet another dimension to the already demanding task of effective differentiation. However, if it is common for pupils to perceive at least the two world wars in Anglocentric terms, then that finding itself suggests a course of action for the teacher who wishes to ensure that the pupils develop a less restricted view of the wars.

Our findings seem to echo those reported in the science literature — that pupils do come with ideas, that these may be inconsistent, that they may be relatively stable and that pupils fit new knowledge into existing frameworks. What our investigations also suggest, at least to us, is the value of continuing work in this field in history. For beginning teachers, we would suggest that investigations of this sort are valuable in understanding more about learners, both in general terms and in relation to specific pupils: they can yield valuable information to draw on in subsequent teaching of a particular class. But more generally we believe that there is a case for more extensive and much more sophisticated research into what ideas pupils bring to their history lessons, to explore much more fully what must be a significant influence on and determinant of their learning in those classrooms.

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NOTE

See, for example, Wellington, J. *Secondary Science: Contemporary issues and Practical Approaches*. Routledge, London, 1994