

Substantial sculptures or sad little plaques? Making 'interpretations' matter to Year 9

Andrew Wrenn builds upon current, popular and practical work on 'interpretations of history' analysed in recent editions. Using the public's responses to the temporary exhibition on the slave trade housed at Bristol City Museum, he offers a range of fascinating practical activities for Year 9 pupils. Many of these could be carried out without visiting the slave trade exhibition in Bristol and some could be adapted to suit visits to other museum exhibitions of controversial events. Like Tony McAleavy in his seminal article on interpretations in 1993 (*Teaching History* 72), he emphasises the need for professional clarity about the purpose of 'interpretations' work as well as the way in which it merges with other aspects of pupils' growing historical knowledge and understanding.

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The Kinloch question: a problem that will not go away.

The murder of Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent public scandal surrounding the police inquiry, raised issues of race and ethnicity that are not comfortable for modern British society. Dealing with racial and multicultural issues in the history classroom presents special difficulties. Many history classrooms embrace a kaleidoscope of cultures. The 'racism' of the past in the present causes acute difficulty. Do the demands of rigorous historical scholarship mean that we simply ignore it? Should we try, as history teachers, to be neutral and objective with emotive material?

This is a particular problem when teaching the Holocaust, as the recent exchange of letters between Nicolas Kinloch and his critics in this journal shows. At what point does past oppression on grounds of ethnicity become so severe that the history lesson becomes, *automatically*, a moral lesson? Nicolas Kinloch has argued powerfully that we should be alert to the dangers inherent in this trend. But how do we deal with 'revisionist' views that border on the racist? Do we simply apply scholarly rules to everything, regardless of its origin? Or do we show pupils our automatic

moral contempt for interpretations that are not even worth deconstructing and debunking? Is a neutral stance appropriate and helpful for teaching pupils good history in the 1990s? These questions will not go away.

Bristol, Colston and the slave trade

In preparing material for use in Chesterton Community College, an 11-16 multi-ethnic comprehensive in Cambridge, I was drawn to consider these issues in relation to Bristol and the slave trade. Bristol was one of the two major cities that profited most from the slave trade (the other being Liverpool). Several street names still celebrate this prosperity. In Bristol city centre stands a statue commemorating Edward Colston, an eighteenth century benefactor. The statue suggests civic virtue. Colston endowed two schools that bear his name to this day. A concert hall is named after him. A member of Chesterton Community College history department, an ex-Bristolian, remembers going to the girls' school bearing Colston's name and laying a wreath on founder's day. As a child she was given no notion of Colston's heavy involvement in slaving.

For much of 1999, Bristol City Museum has held a temporary exhibition on the city's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. The presentation was, by turns,

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fascinating and moving. It was also controversial! For me, the most interesting part of the exhibition was the public responses recorded at the exit. There were an astonishing variety of reactions, many emotionally charged. Here was the past leaping out of the conventional, two-dimensional picture of the slave ship with its helpless black victims stacked below decks like sardines, to grab the present by the throat. Some responses called for radical re-naming of streets and the demolition of Colston's statue. These responses tell us more about the significance of the past in the present than about slavery itself.

The solution lurking in the National Curriculum

I wanted the Year 9 classes at Chesterton, finishing their enquiry-in-depth on the British slave trade, to move on to consider what emotions the exhibition stirred in the visiting public and what these can tell us about how modern Bristol reacts to its slaving past. In other words, these responses allowed me to shift into the National Curriculum demand that pupils study real 'interpretations of history' (NC Key Element 3) and to move away from an enquiry into the slave trade itself (NC Key Element 4). To address the demands of Key Element 3 it is necessary to present pupils with real interpretations and to analyse the values, views, context, audience and preoccupations of the interpreter. Key Element 3 places the focus of analysis on the present, rather than the past. It should not be confused with merely asking pupils to debate a view or to come up with an interpretation themselves. These are valid exercises but more the province of Key Element 4. The National Curriculum requirement to study interpretations requires us to supply pupils with a range of real, modern interpretations and to explain why particular individuals and groups 'construct' the past differently.¹

The sequence of activities in Figures 1 to 6 shows the path followed by pupils at Chesterton Community College. In the activity shown in Figure 3, they placed the visitor responses into an analytical framework. This was to help pupils realise that issues raised by the exhibition are vitally relevant to the interpretation that a multi-cultural city like Bristol places on its past.

And for multi-cultural Bristol read multi-cultural Britain. The Labour MP Bernie Grant calls himself British because 'it includes other oppressed peoples like the Welsh or the Scots. It would stick in my throat to call myself English'.² By implication, this places the sins of imperialism and racism firmly on the shoulders of the white English, while redefining the term 'British' as a vehicle for multi-cultural citizenship. Can our pupils understand, value and contribute to debates about the use of such words? To do so, they will need both

historical knowledge and something more. They will need to consider how such interpretations of the past evolve and how they affect modern representation of the past. Liverpool Maritime Museum possesses a fine gallery on the slave trade with a placard at the exit, calling for reparations from former slaving powers (like Britain) on behalf of the black 'diaspora'. What are pupils to make of this? School history and its teachers have a role to play in helping pupils to make sense of changing controversies of British identity and citizenship. This role should be debated. The most successful current work on 'interpretations' needs to be scrutinised and debated much more thoroughly both in history teaching circles and beyond.

Interpretations: a 'conscious reflection on the past'

Thus the aim of my activity sequence was definitely not to drill the pupils into politically correct horror at the brutalities of the slave trade! Instead, the activity sequence is designed to access controversial issues through the rigour and discipline of National Curriculum Key Element 3. An interpretation of history, in its curricular sense defined by McAleavy, embraces any representation that is 'a conscious reflection upon the past'.³ The temporary exhibition was an interpretation of Bristol's slaving past devised by Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. But there is more than one 'interpretation' here. The responses of the public recorded in the public register at the exit of the exhibition are also individual reflections on the past. These, too, are 'interpretations'. These, too, are amenable to analysis. They are also fascinating. They are real reflections that matter to real Year 9 pupils. With rigorous, structured activities, supported by carefully managed discussion, Year 9 pupils can carry out a learning sequence that will help them to reflect in a critical, informed way upon these interlocking interpretations. They can consider, tentatively, what overall conclusions might be reached about current interpretations in Bristol—how these are formed and spread and changed.

The public's responses shown in Figure 1 fall into a number of different and overlapping categories. Some are reactions to the exhibition itself, some to the slave trade and some to impressions of the slave trade prompted or informed by the exhibition. The activity in Figure 2 teaches pupils to be precise about these differing objects of the visitors' comments. By further scrutinising these public interpretations the pupils are able to gauge the continuing significance of the past in the present and to make links across periods to the present. 'Significance' and 'links' across periods are also explicit requirements of the National Curriculum. Too often, teachers only pay lip service to them. Here was an opportunity to link this fully with work on 'interpretations'.⁴

Figure 1

These statements are all examples of real public responses recorded at the exit of the exhibition during 1999. Cut them up so that pupils can manipulate them for use in the activities.

<p>I don't believe we ever did anything like that.</p>	<p>Bristolians and others need to take it on board as part of their heritage.</p>
<p>It's about time Bristol acknowledged the fact that it was built on the blood of its black sisters and brothers.</p>	<p><u>I hate racist people</u> - from a white kid.</p>
<p>Former colonies renamed themselves. The name of Colston needs replacing with slave names on our streets and buildings.</p>	<p>I'm proud to be black.</p>
<p>Acknowledge all of this in a substantial piece of sculpture in a prominent position NOT THE SAD LITTLE PLAQUE on the industrial museum!!</p>	<p>I explained as much as I could to my 3 and 5 year-old children. They cried for the black children taken away from their parents and forced to work.</p>

Figure 1 (Continued)

<p>Devastating as a new resident of Bristol. I am shocked by my own ignorance, humbled by how much suffering and barbarity built this city's fortunes.</p>	<p>A very biased exhibition. There were other Bristolians (than slave traders). What about the non-conformists and Quakers?</p>
<p>The exhibition should be permanent. Every pupil should see it.</p>	<p>A formal public apology needs to be made plus some kind of reparation.</p>
<p>Good to see no mention of the myths about Jews being involved in this horrific trade. It was purely a 'Christian' activity.</p>	<p>Bristol should acknowledge its history. However, today's residents are not responsible for their predecessors' cruelty.</p>
<p>As a black person who had the advantage of visiting the Transatlantic museum in Liverpool, I felt this exhibition did not have enough information. The fact is it was too polished, tailored to the middle class.</p>	<p>Perhaps people will feel about animals in 100 years' time as we feel about slavery today.</p>
<p>Sorry - (white man).</p>	<p>It makes me MAD that people are still comparing us with animals.</p>

Figure 2 What are the comments about? Pupils can either place sample statements in the right hand column, or they can put numbers to show the number of statements they think fall into each category. Use this to help pupils realise the complexity of the responses. They need to realise that people are reacting to different things. Follow up with a short piece of writing using the sentence starters below, in order to help pupils see and discuss the nature of the judgements.

What are the comments about?	
What the visitors were writing about	Examples of comments
About slavery in history	
About people today	It makes me MAD that people are still comparing us with animals.
About Bristol today	
About Bristol in the past	
About the exhibition	
About none of these	
<p>Now use these sentence starters to help you write a paragraph about what the visitors were commenting upon.</p> <p>Most people who visited the exhibition commented on...</p> <p>Some people thought...</p> <p>Other people thought...</p> <p>The exhibition might have made some people change their views about...</p>	

Figure 3. Pupils position the statements down the left hand side, ticking those columns that describe the emotions in the statement. Either use the real statements or represent them with numbers or letters.

Statements	Pride	Anger	Shock	Sadness	Guilt	Shame	Denial
I don't believe we ever did anything like that.							✓

Note to the teacher: There will be productive disagreement here and it is important to discuss this with individuals, small groups or the whole class, as appropriate. Pupils will realise, of course, that it is not always possible to tell, just from the statement, what emotion it reveals. To help some pupils to think about this, teachers could devise an oral activity in which pupils experiment with different tones of voice for each statement, discussing how this alters meaning.

Figure 4. Other activities for strengthening understanding or following up issues. Use these to consolidate difficult points or to provide extra access for lower attainers.

<p>Choosing activity Choose any pair of statements that disagree with each other.</p> <p>Follow-up writing Not everyone who visited the exhibition thought the same. For example...</p>
<p>Choosing activity What kinds of things in the exhibition might have made someone write Statement A? List types of exhibits.</p> <p>Follow-up writing Exhibits like... might make people think for the first time about... Exhibits like... might make people angry because... The choice of exhibits might encourage people to ask questions about...</p>

Figure 5.

Ask pupils to complete these sentence-starters. Then share and discuss their ideas.

The reason some visitors showed pride was...
The reason some visitors showed shock was...
The reason some visitors showed sadness was...
The reason some visitors showed guilt was...
The reason some visitors showed shame was...
The reason some visitors showed anger was...
The reason some visitors showed denial was...

**there is no
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Conclusion

The main point of the activity is not to dictate to the pupils how to react to the slave trade. Rather it illustrates how popular interpretations can arise from individual members of the public reacting to other interpretations of the past presented to them. Pupils may be discerning several trends in the responses of Bristolians and other visitors to the exhibition. This, in turn, indicates how this particular slice of Bristol's past is remembered. Pupils will also realise that there is no single, stereotypical Bristolian interpretation and that such popular interpretations may not be representative of views in the city's population as a whole.

By considering the public responses to the exhibition, pupils may or may not alter their own, personal interpretations of the trade and its significance. This is peripheral to the central objectives. The key learning objective, in a history lesson, is for pupils to learn more about how popular views of history are constructed.

REFERENCES

See Kinloch, N. (1998) 'Learning about the Holocaust: moral or historical question?' in *Teaching History*, 93. For subsequent correspondence see Letters, *Teaching History*, 94 and Letters, *Teaching History*, 96.

¹ 'Interpretations' as a new curricular component became part of history teaching discourse in 1991 with the first National Curriculum (Attainment Target 2). This was followed by a spate of influential research and development funded by the National Curriculum Council and designed to examine the distinctive additional purpose of this new area. Work with evidence and historical method was already an established part of school history. Clearly such activity was closely related to 'interpretations' but what was this new component *adding*? In answering these questions the practical and theoretical work of Tony McAleavy was hugely influential. History teachers still attend his in-service training in large numbers. See McAleavy, A. (1993) 'Using the Attainment Targets in Key Stage 3, AT 2 Interpretations of History' in *Teaching History*, 72. In their project for the NCC, McAleavy and his team demonstrated that 'Interpretations' (in its new curricular sense) could be practical, fun and rigorous. He also explored and clarified the theoretical distinction between traditional source work and empirical approaches of the 1970s/1980s (originating in the Schools History Project) and the new emphasis upon 'substantially subsequent' interpretations. A huge range of practical teaching activities were developed and trialled. See, for example, chapter 8 of NCC (1993) *Teaching History at Key Stage 3*. For more recent work by teachers on Interpretations see Murray, M. (1999) 'Three lessons about a funeral: Second World War cemeteries and twenty years of curriculum change' in *Teaching History*, 94.

² cited in Paxman, J. (1998) *The English*, Michael Joseph.

³ McAleavy, A. (1997) Key note address at Historical Association Education Conference, Manchester, September 1997.

⁴ Key Element 2 of the National Curriculum Key Elements contains the requirement for teachers to ensure that pupils make links and explore the concept of significance. This kind of learning focus can become a central part of work on 'interpretations' (Key Element 3). It is rarely helpful to attempt to teach the Key Elements in isolation. The Key Elements are just an audit tool. Together they describe history's processes and concepts as a set of different kinds of learning goals for pupils. The most effective history departments debate and analyse the interplay of these components in their planning, rather than merely 'covering' them.

Figure 6.

Variations on (or extensions of) the sentence-starter activity in Figure 5

Variation 1:

Make a whole class writing frame. Working with the whole class, ask pupils to think of variations on the wording of each sentence starter so that each one can become a paragraph opener for a lively piece of extended writing using an appropriate style with varied vocabulary and sentence construction.

Variation 2:

Ask pupils to adopt the roles of those who made the statements. Ask individuals to explain, orally, why they hold that emotion and view.

Variation 3:

Ask pupils to make a wall-display of the statements in Figure 1, adding to it the results of brief interviews with Bristol people on their views about (i) the exhibition, (ii) the slave trade; (iii) Bristol's role in the slave trade (iv) other modern interpretations and representations e.g. the current Channel 4 television series on the slave trade.