

Telling and suggesting in the Conwy Valley

Thelma Wiltshire applies a 'telling' and 'suggesting' strategy to an enquiry involving an historical site. Getting beyond more simplistic approaches to 'fact' and 'opinion', she describes how a pack of curriculum materials was designed to give pupils a precise language to talk about layers of certainty and uncertainty in their work of comprehension, selection, inference and deduction. The content that she and her colleagues chose was ambitious, in that it ranged across historical periods and involved complex source material. The strategy, however, helped all pupils to achieve new understanding. In this approach, Thelma uses a lot of 'modelling' of language use, followed by a structured opportunity for pupils to produce the language themselves.

Thelma Wiltshire

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Background

Whilst working as an Advisory Teacher for Humanities with the Wirral Education Authority, some colleagues and I were asked to produce a curriculum pack, with particular emphasis on history and geography linked to Llanrwst in the Conwy Valley. The old market town of Llanrwst is conveniently close to the Outdoor Education and Curriculum Centre of 'Oaklands'. This short article demonstrates some of the materials produced for investigating St Grwst Church in Llanrwst. It explains the strategies that were used for ensuring that all pupils achieved and expressed new historical understanding.

Overcoming literacy difficulties through history

The opportunity to investigate a historical site does not often occur but, when it does, it is

essential to use it to the full. A mere information-gathering visit is of limited value; an isolated set of activities without preparation or follow-up is pointless. Pupils need to gain new tools for specific aspects of historical thinking and to know that they have gained them. Also, as Chris Culpin has argued, they need a genuine historical puzzle within which to root their activity.¹ Otherwise, all we have is a pretty postcard project, a copying fest, some unfocused drawing activities and only the vaguest of learning objectives.

Right at the heart of any successful history work there must be quality literacy practices that come from the subject and that serve its ends. We wanted Year 6 pupils to think about the degrees of certainty with which they could draw conclusions. We therefore gave them a literacy strategy that was rooted in the idea of historical

Figure 1: Pupils matched the 'tells' and 'suggests' boxes to the written source. They then made boxes of their own, carefully deciding on 'tells' and 'suggests' for each one.

Using the site and source material to investigate the history of the church

This source tells us some things about St Grwst Church In Llanrwst. It suggests many other things too. It was written in 1844. Underline the parts that link to each box.

This suggests that the Wynnes were a wealthy family.

This tells us when the chapel was built.

This tells us when the tower was built.

The church dedicated to St Grwst was built in the early 1400; next to the church is the Gwydyr chapel, built in 1633 as a burial place for the Wynne family of Gwydyr castle).

In the centre of the chapel lies the stone coffin of Llywelyn (the Welsh prince) who died in 1240. Llywelyn the Great was originally buried at Aberconwy Abbey and then removed to Meanan Abbey until the time of the dissolution of the Monasteries when the coffin was brought to the old parish church of Llanrwst.

The tower was built around 1800.

Topographical Dictionary of Wales 1844

This tells us when the main part of the church was built

This suggests that the wealthy people of the valley took care of the coffin of the Welsh prince.

This suggests that when Henry VIII had the monasteries dissolved in England, the same thing happened in Wales.

You now have the opportunity to investigate the source and site, to create boxes of your own, showing what they 'tell you ' and what they might 'suggest to you'.

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inference. We wanted Year 6 to think about the difference between:

- factual statements that they could extract more or less at face-value (though, eventually, we would hope, they would question even these);
- and
- statements that were more tentative and based on inference or speculation.

Pupils were therefore given two types of ‘clever starter’: ‘This source tells us...’ and ‘This suggests...’. The point is not to reach the ‘right’ conclusion (such a choice is rarely clearcut) but rather to force pupils to think, perhaps for the first time, about the status of the conclusion they want to reach. ‘Tells’ and ‘suggests’ gave them a way of naming that status, and gave pupils and teacher, as a group, a way of talking about the problem together. Once all pupils are secure in the use of these words, then other layers of sophistication can be overlaid in the rest of Year 6 and in Years 7 and 8.²

Pupils were provided with a deceptively simple source (but potentially a problematic one if you wanted to take its setting and audience in 1844 even further) from *The Topographical Dictionary of Wales* (see Figure 1). At the simplest level, the ‘tells us’ statements aided pupils in their comprehension of the source and the ‘suggests that’ helped them to draw out their own tentative conclusions and interpretations. The vocabulary distinction of ‘tells’ and ‘suggests’ helped all abilities to stay focused on that issue and to discuss it openly and with precision. So this was not a literacy strategy shoved in for the sake of it – it was explicitly designed to serve an aspect of historical thinking, speaking and writing. It would serve, in subsequent learning (both immediate and long-term) pupils’ development of evidential understanding and their ability to ask better questions of historical sources.

Positioning the activity in medium and long-term planning

The sequence of activities was therefore quite important. In the next activity sheet (Figure 2) the pupils used the site, their prior knowledge and their new literacy skill to generate their

own investigating questions. The necessary prompts were supplied for the children with the instructions – ‘tells you’ and ‘suggests to you’.

This was one stage in a process towards independent, extended writing. At the end of the lesson sequence, pupils were ready to recall, select and organise historical information into extended prose because they had been trained to think about choice and positioning of wording.

Knowledge gains were also central to our aims. Looking at the development of the church the pupils could, with guidance, make connections with their earlier work on the dissolution of the monasteries. We wanted pupils to consolidate previous knowledge by comparing the dissolution of the monasteries in their local priory at Birkenhead with that of the monastery of Maenan in the Conwy Valley. Through the activity sequence they could also see the influence of the Elizabethan court and patronage even as far as that corner of North Wales. The effect of wealthy patronage was also shown in the modifications and improvements to the church in the nineteenth century.

Detailed attention to literacy improvement and imaginative, motivating strategies using historical sites can, together, help Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 pupils to deal with wide overviews and complex change through time. In particular, less able pupils can be taught how to make historical claims and statements. This precision and confidence of expression starts to give them some of the freedom, control and flexibility in historical enquiry normally enjoyed only by their more able peers.

REFERENCES

¹ Culpin, C. (1999) ‘No puzzle, no learning: how to make your site visits rigorous, fascinating and indispensable’ *Teaching History 97* (Visual History edition)

² Whilst the aim of the strategy is the same as that explained by Claire Riley the strategy itself contrasts with it in that we wanted to make sure that children produced this language by practising writing and saying sentences that began with these stems. See Riley, C. (1999) ‘Evidential understanding, period knowledge and the development of literacy: a practical approach to ‘layers of inference’ for Key Stage 3. *Teaching History 97* (Visual History edition). The original principle, as a teaching idea in history, owes much (as Claire Riley acknowledges) to the work of Hilary Cooper. The ‘telling and suggesting’ version of it has been developed, refined and disseminated by many practitioners in history education, most notably Kate Thomson of Cheltenham and Gloucester College of HE.

Figure 2: Armed with the idea of layers of certainty and language strategies for showing it, pupils were able to choose 'tells' or 'suggests' for each of the site features they selected.

Investigating the site and photograph

Using the photograph and looking around the church, write inside the boxes

1. What they 'tell you'
2. What they 'suggest to you'.

