



This paper is taken from

*Teaching Citizenship  
Proceedings of the seventh Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2005

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 389 1

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***Harnett, P., Newman, E. (2005) Teaching citizenship through learning about people's lives in the past, in Ross, A. (ed) Teaching Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 155-160.***

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit at the time of the conference, and for the initial stages of editing this book
- Lindsay Melling and Gitesh Gohel of IPSE, London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

# Teaching citizenship through learning about people's lives in the past

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## Introduction

There have always been close links between the study of history and citizenship. This paper raises questions concerning the nature of this relationship and investigates history's potential for enabling children to understand contemporary issues. Case study material arising from initial primary teacher trainees' work with primary school children at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol is analysed. This is used to explore the extent to which studying history might provide opportunities for children to investigate controversial and sensitive issues, and the challenges which this presents to initial teacher training trainees. Parallels between the notion of the Empire as an 'imagined community' and the development of current European consciousness are raised.

## History and citizenship

There are many opportunities for fruitful dialogue between history and citizenship. History may contribute to citizenship education in two important ways; in developing a sense of community and shared identity and also in encouraging an active engagement in the construction and interpretation of the past. Most cultures have recognized the power of a good story in moulding future citizens. The Ancient Greeks used their epics to present models of heroic citizens to their listeners; the virtues and values which were deemed important in their society were played out amongst the key protagonists as the stories unfolded. Stories root people in their past and provide common heritages which can be shared. As such they are central in creating the notion of 'imagined communities', those feelings of kinship and common interests which bind communities together and help to define a common sense of purpose and cultural identity (Anderson: 1991). It is an ongoing process – national myths still continue to embody national virtues and characteristics today and members of different European countries would be able to identify their own heroes/heroines which exemplify their national consciousness.

This view of history has fuelled the debates in England on the nature of the history curriculum to be taught in state schools. Following on from Margaret Thatcher's statement in the House of Commons 1990, that children should learn the 'great landmarks of British history', the British Right have led a constant campaign to include significant events in the history curriculum. This is taken up by the media who from time to time survey English children's knowledge of historical facts and complain that it is woefully inadequate. Similar trends are also in evidence in other European countries. These campaigns all suggest that there is a canon of historical knowledge to be recognised and to be shared by everyone. This view of the past rejects the notion that the canon may be contested and that there may be many different views on what counts as important historical knowledge.

It would be wrong however, to engage solely with debates relating to selection of historical content. Studying history requires more than some knowledge about the past; it also requires some understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed. This

includes acknowledging that studying history is a process; the development of a 'way of knowing', and of interrogating a variety of sources of information. It involves analysing different interpretations and the recognition of different viewpoints.

One of the strengths of the history National Curriculum in England (DfES: 1999) is the focus on historical interpretation. This focus was hotly debated as the history National Curriculum was planned in the late 1980s (Phillips: 1998). Support for a single, dominant interpretation of the past was strong, but the curriculum planners finally adopted a model which would enable children to interrogate how the story of the past is constructed with a range of different interpretations. The history National Curriculum provides opportunities to develop the skills of critical analysis using a range of sources of information. In practice, this may result in young children questioning the differences in accounts about the past; considering ways in which museums construct the past through their displays and collections or perhaps in analysing ways in which people have been represented through paintings and their portraits.

The emphasis on interpretations provides opportunities to consider the points of view of different people living in the past. Whereas, traditionally school history might have included the study of famous and important people, the current curriculum provides opportunities to look at the experiences of a range of people from the past. Children are encouraged to investigate how ordinary people lived and the decisions which they made in their lives; they are encouraged to evaluate these people's experiences and look at the reliability of different accounts. In this respect, history contributes to children's awareness of social diversity and people's different beliefs and values.

The emphasis on historical knowledge and content linking with the process of understanding is also reflected in the Programme of Study for citizenship within the English National Curriculum (DfES: 1999). The Programme of Study emphasises the processes of learning about citizenship through activities which encourage children to play an active role as citizens, such as researching and debating issues; investigating legal frameworks and different kinds of rights and responsibilities; using imagination to understand other people's experiences and resolving conflict situations through exploring alternative solutions; understanding democracy and appreciating the range of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom. Many of these key skills and understandings are also important within the history National Curriculum.

The challenge for educators is to consider ways in which studying history and citizenship may support each other; the extent to which historical knowledge and developing historical understanding may provide opportunities for contributing to children's sense of citizenship and abilities to work as active citizens. At the University of the West of England, we use opportunities created through visits by trainees and children working together at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol to explore ways in which this might be developed.

### **The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum at Bristol**

The museum was opened in 2002 in Bristol and has received many accolades including being a finalist in the European Museum of the Year Award in 2004. The notion of the Empire is itself controversial. At its height the British Empire was an important signifier for people living in countries covering over a quarter of the world's land mass and a museum dedicated to its memory might be seen as celebrating stories of imperial

conquest and exploitation. Traditionally imperial histories focused on political or economic domination, but more recently cultural and social histories have been researched. Historians have become increasingly interested in cultural domination and its effects on both ruled and their rulers.

This changing focus within imperial histories is reflected within the way the museum is organized and the ways in which visitors are involved in developing their own interpretations of the displays. The museum provides a narrative and chronological account of the different phases of Empire building; the building of an empire, Trading Fortunes 1480-1800; Encircling the Globe – the empire at its height 1800-1900 and the Move from Colonialism to Commonwealth (1900 to the present). Themes within these phases encompass a broad range of perspectives. They include monopolies, trading companies, enslaved labour, humanitarian ideas and post colonial immigration to Britain. The legacy of Empire is also addressed in terms of cultural exchange – food, music, dance and festivals which impact on contemporary life. Within the museum there are thus lots of opportunities for citizenship education within the museum. Land rights; social justice; stereotypes; roles of the subjugated; law and order are all key issues for citizenship education.

The museum employs a number of strategies to include visitors within the imperial narrative. As you enter the museum, a large screen displays people from different backgrounds talking about the Empire and Commonwealth and what it means to them. Their accounts emphasise ways in which the Empire and Commonwealth are part of everyone's history permeating through different aspects of ways of life. Stories are ongoing; as you leave the museum you may record your own history in the museum's radio room. Consequently there is no sense of closure to the notion of Empire and Commonwealth, but re-interpretations and re-configurations of the past and their continuing influences within changing contemporary contexts. We have within the museum, multiple stories within an 'imagined community', which offer powerful and exciting resources for educators.

### **Working with initial primary teacher trainees at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum**

The Faculty of Education uses the museum as a resource for developing trainees' knowledge and understanding of history and citizenship in the primary school. A week at the end of the autumn term is devoted to trainees preparing and working with children at the museum. Prior to the week the Museum Education Officer visits the University and talks to the trainees about the Museum. Trainees are also encouraged to visit the Museum and to prepare activities which use the collections to extend children's learning and develop their awareness of issues relating to citizenship education.

The following case studies provide examples of some of the children's work and demonstrate different ways in which trainees engaged with the notion of Empire as an imagined community. They suggest ways in which history might raise questions linked with citizenship and in particular, to develop investigations and to promote questioning. The different approaches outlined provide some insights into the possibilities of using history to encourage children's engagement with active citizenship.

### **Belonging to a community**

One group of trainees used the opportunities provided by the museum to explore the lives of different people who lived in the Empire. They chose to focus on the lives of an Inuit woman from Canada; an Australian aborigine and a British soldier stationed in East Africa since they wanted to children to look at subjugated groups as well as the dominant white culture. Children were asked to find out about these people's lives; their food, clothing, shelter and ways of life. They contrasted different people's experiences and compared them with their own lives today.

Children were able to investigate the life styles of different social groups within a wider community; they made comparisons and developed their awareness of key features of human societies – the need for food, shelter and safety and how different communities organized themselves. These are all important in extending children's awareness of societies other than their own. However, the investigations may also have been developed to question different peoples' positions and power relationships within the Empire; who were the powerful and to what extent did this influence the sort of lives which people lived?

### **Distribution of power**

Power relationships were explored more fully by another group of trainees who created a storyboard describing the arrival and subsequent colonization of Australia by the British. Good use was made of the different artefacts within the museum to compare and contrast different life styles and the children used role-play to record re-constructions of the encounters between British soldiers and Australian aborigines. The role-play was effective in that it enabled children to consider different viewpoints towards colonization. For example, children role-playing the aborigines on their first encounter with the British commented, 'Who are these people?' 'What silly clothes! What are you wearing?' As the dialogue developed they pointed out the unfairness of the encounter with particular reference to the British guns.

The trainees developed this work to address wider issues in particular how different populations may co-exist with each other. They explained that it was only in 1967 that Aborigines were first allowed to vote and in 1992 they won their first legal battle to reclaim land. We have an example here of how history may be used to explain the present and also to raise children's awareness of issues linked with social justice.

### **Respect for each other**

The children watched a video about a Roy Hackett, a Bristol inhabitant who came to Britain from the West Indies following the Second World War at the museum. In the video he spoke about his initial feelings on coming to Bristol and some of his experiences in trying to find housing and employment where he had encountered much racism. Trainees were working with children whose families had originated from Jamaica, Somalia and Pakistan and they thought children would be interested in discussing and role playing the different journeys which their families had made to Bristol. This activity gripped the children's imagination and they enjoyed recounting and sharing the family stories which they had heard about their journeys to Bristol.

The trainees also felt that Roy's biography raised several sensitive issues. They used Roy's experiences to begin a discussion about racism in Bristol and questioned the children whether they thought that people would encounter similar difficulties today. The children were not surprised by Roy's experiences and they rejected the idea that racism was less evident today, citing examples such as the racist graffiti in the playground and the park bench with. 'Pakis go home engraved on it.' The trainees encouraged the children to consider the importance of respect for and acknowledgement of difference between people.

However, the children's responses also led trainees to reflect on their own reactions to racism; they began to question their own positions as teachers who were unfamiliar with the racist incidents which their children might meet on perhaps a daily basis and whether their responses might appear patronizing and unrealistic.

### **Learning about people in the past and citizenship**

The above examples indicate some ways in which studying history may be used to develop a sense of shared community and also to promote understanding of alternative viewpoints. The case studies suggest that history may also provide insights for our understanding contemporary societies. However, the extent to which history and citizenship can be linked requires careful analysis. An emphasis on the selection of historical content based on its possible contribution to citizenship education may distort the balance of historical narrative.

Identifying different interpretations and appreciating how historical knowledge is constructed is important if we want to engage children actively in history and not as passive consumers. Yet, on the other hand it does provide challenges for history educators; how do we help children identify with different viewpoints and try to make sense of the past? Undue concentration on different interpretations may lead to the fragmentation of the past and the neglect of a narrative structure to provide coherence. As we noted earlier, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum provides a strong narrative background in which different peoples' stories may be contextualized. This narrative of the wider community is important to understand the experiences of the individuals within it.

Examples from history may serve as a stimulus to debate current concerns and perhaps to explain the present. However, we need to be wary of removing events from their historical context and of imposing twenty first century views on the past. The past might seem unjust in terms of current understandings of human rights, but studying history requires that we develop our understandings of past people's beliefs and values to understand more fully their lives and the events and issues which pre-occupied them. We cannot view and understand the past through twenty first century lenses. It could be argued that citizenship education may provide opportunities to 'judge' the past, whilst history focuses more strongly on exploring what was important for past societies.

Historians however, are involved in some value judgements in the selection of evidence to support their interpretations of the past. Carried to extremes, such selections may distort the historical narrative. For example, the use of history to promote national consciousness and a sense of shared heritage may neglect or give undue emphasis to particular events. Indeed, in terms of European consciousness, research suggests that recent interpretations may underplay the fierce conflicts and struggles which marked Europe of the past. In this respect, Soysal (2003) argues that fresh interpretations of the

Vikings as peaceful traders and farmers in the ninth and tenth centuries have emerged from concerns to teach about a common European past.

Similarly, there might be concerns in the selection of history stories. Stories which focus solely on political and national achievements may divide and fragment. If we wish to promote European consciousness, we need to see how personal and national stories fit into this wider whole. We may consider emphasizing social and cultural histories which provide opportunities for exploring common experiences and those aspects of the past which bind us together within a shared heritage.

Stories about people in the past therefore may raise awareness of issues related to citizenship such as the development of a sense of identity and community and acknowledgement of different viewpoints and understanding of different ways of life. But citizenship is also about the present and the future; contemporary issues need to be debated and children prepared for their future roles. History may contribute some understanding, but not at the expense of a direct engagement with the present.

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