

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY PROJECT

Editorial note: This article is an expansion of the outline article on the Cambridge History Project which appeared in the last issue of *Mitteilungen*.

During the last twenty years, the history taught in English and Welsh schools has gone through some fundamental changes. The Schools History Project, which began life in the early 1970s, showed how the teaching of history to the 13-16 age range could be enriched by introducing students to the use of evidence, by developing their understanding of the concepts of causation, empathy, change and development, and by assessing their performance on the basis of recognized criteria. Other initiatives extended the methodology of the Schools History Project to the teaching of younger children. The introduction in 1991 of the National Curriculum for History gave formal recognition to the importance of methodology in the teaching and learning of history and ensured that in future these skills and concepts, applied to the knowledge and understanding of relevant content, will be included in the curriculum for all children between the ages of 5 and 16. It also established a system for the assessment of children's progress against specific Attainment Targets divided into a hierarchy of levels of attainment.

Another innovation pioneered by the Schools History Project, and now extended to all syllabuses for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations that students sit at the age of 16, was the introduction of coursework in history to supplement examinations in the scheme of assessment. This enabled pupils to demonstrate what they could do under the more favourable conditions of working in class and at home without the pressures and time constraints of the examination room. It also had the effect of improving their motivation.

But what of post-16 education? What changes have taken place in the history that is taught to 16-18 year olds? Until recently, very few. The traditional syllabus for the Advanced (A) Level examination varied little from one examination board to another. Candidates were required to study the history of Britain and Europe between two specified dates concentrating on knowledge and understanding of content. There was no coursework, no explicit methodology and the criteria on

which assessment took place were veiled in secrecy. In the last few years, most syllabuses have been revised to include exercises involving the comprehension and evaluation of documentary sources, but in most other respects the traditional A Level syllabus remains unchanged. The introduction of the Advanced Supplementary (AS) Level examination in the late 1980s provided an opportunity for a radical rethink regarding post-16 history education, and ought to have led to the production of imaginative new syllabuses, but the opportunity was largely ignored. The AS Level syllabus is equivalent to half an A Level: unfortunately, in most cases, the new syllabuses are half a traditional, content-orientated A Level.

In such a climate of change in the curriculum for 5-16 year olds and stasis in post-16 education, many teachers and students have become increasingly frustrated and bewildered. They argue that the transition from imaginative and stimulating GCSE courses, with their emphasis on the interdependence of content knowledge and methodological understanding, to A and AS Level courses that make little attempt to utilize or develop the skills and concepts students have acquired leads to disenchantment and lack of motivation. A need was therefore perceived for a stimulating post-16 history syllabus that would take as its starting point the position students could be expected to have reached by the end of their GCSE courses, that would provide a progressive programme of study combining content and methodology, and that would be assessed by means of coursework and examinations and on the basis of recognized criteria. It was to meet this need that the Cambridge History Project was founded in 1985 with funding provided by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.

The Cambridge History Project (CHP) was the brain-child of its Directors, Denis Shemilt, from Trinity and All Saints College, Leeds, and Peter Lee, from the Institute of Education at London University. Mr. Shemilt and Mr. Lee had both been in the forefront of the moves during the late 1970s and early 1980s to increase the use of methodology in the teaching of history and to assess students' work on the basis of valid criteria, and it was they who were largely responsible for devising the initial structure of the CHP syllabuses for the A and AS Level examinations and for designing the system of assessment. An Executive Director, Alan Kelly, was appointed to co-ordinate the work of committees of teachers that were established in various parts of the country to produce a detailed syllabus accompanied by appropriate teaching materials. There is a widespread, although not entirely justified, feeling among teachers in English schools that the examination boards are isolated from and unresponsive

to the needs of teachers and students. The involvement of teachers in the production of the syllabus and the creation of mechanisms for consultation over future developments were part of a conscious policy to involve teachers as directly as possible in all aspects of the development and examination of CHP.

It was teacher preference, expressed through responses to a questionnaire, which determined that the subject matter of the first CHP syllabus would cover political history and focus primarily, although not exclusively, on the history of Britain. This syllabus, which is entitled *People, Power and Politics*, has two main components, a Development Study and a Depth Study. The Development Study examines the changes and developments that have taken place in the nature and exercise of political power in Britain from the end of the Roman Empire to the present day and incorporates a comparative study tracing the development of Russian political history from the ninth century to the present day. The Depth Study focuses in greater detail on one short but important period in British political history, the years 1637-64 in which civil war erupted throughout the British Isles, the king was put on trial and executed, and the country became a republic for eleven years. The Development and Depth Studies were not conceived as separate entities, but as an interrelated whole, with the latter nesting within and being understood in the context of the former.

The CHP syllabus is progressive in that it takes as its starting point the position that average students of history can reasonably be expected to have reached by the age of 16 and develops their understanding gradually towards A Level standard, rather than assuming from the outset, as many syllabuses do, that 16 year old students can understand sophisticated concepts or operate at the standard expected of 18 year olds. Each half of the syllabus comprises four modules incorporating exercises of increasing difficulty. A Level students cover all eight modules, whilst those following the AS Level course study the first two modules of the Development Study and the first two of the Depth Study.

The syllabus and the accompanying student textbooks have been designed to encourage active learning strategies, such as investigation, problem solving, formulating and testing hypotheses, discussion and group work. Information technology is employed in the construction of time lines and through the use of a data processing programme that enables students to consider the value of

quantitative analysis in history.

The *raison d'être* behind the Development and Depth Studies owes a great deal to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's division of historians into parachutists and truffle-hunters, of whom the former survey the historical scene from a great height, allowing them to recognize the overall pattern of the landscape, while the latter keep their noses to the ground of their chosen patches, which they know intimately, rooting around for delicacies of fresh insight. Thus, the Development Study ranges lightly over long periods of time and encourages students to identify patterns of change and development in what Fernand Braudel called the 'tides and currents' of history, while the Depth Study develops more detailed understanding of the two decades of upheaval in mid-seventeenth century Britain.

In terms of the teaching of history in England and Wales, the Development Study represents a greater departure from traditional practice than the Depth Study. The teaching materials for the pilot phase of CHP were constructed on the assumption that students would begin by acquiring an understanding of the 'long view' of history and developing the ability to construct developmental accounts. They would then deepen their understanding by examining such issues as how differing significances can be attached to events within a line of development, how the pace and direction of change can vary within different facets of an account, and how the 'tides and currents' of history contain eddies, whirlpools and cross-currents.

This approach underestimated the difficulties most 16 and 17 year old students have in grasping concepts of change and development. It also took insufficient account of the patchy nature of their content knowledge. All too often students who were asked to produce developmental accounts adopted one of three undesirable strategies. The first was to produce a narrative account making only occasional reference to developmental processes. From interviewing students, we established that this was largely a result of asking them to identify developmental patterns at the same time as assimilating content knowledge. Because much of the content was new to them, they concentrated on understanding and explaining it rather than on making developmental connections. The second approach was to eschew the long view altogether. If asked to consider whether the Norman Conquest was a turning point in English history, they would focus

exclusively on the Conquest and its immediate aftermath, failing to recognize that the historical significance of an event can only be judged by considering it in the context of changes and developments over a long period of time. The third strategy we have christened 'event hopping'. In this case, a student asked to consider, let us say, the importance of the English Reformation in the political history of Britain between 1500 and 1700 might produce brief accounts of changes that took place during the 1530s, the 1640s and immediately after 1688. No attempt is made to trace the changes and developments that took place between these dates and therefore the student's conclusion tends to be expressed in terms of the amount of change that has occurred rather than in terms of its causes, pace, direction and significance.

While many of the better students were able to produce perceptive analyses of historical change and development, a rethink was needed in order to overcome the problems identified during the pilot phase. Instead of beginning by asking students to construct developmental accounts, in the revised syllabus and teaching materials we provide them with a developmental account and ask them to identify processes of change and development within it. At the same time, students acquire content knowledge that provides a context within which subsequent work can be understood more easily. We then ask them to consider the significance of certain key events in British history, interpreting each in relation to changes and developments in a period of not less than three hundred years. The emphasis here is on interpreting the events in the context of long term historical developments, and this appears to have largely overcome the problems of 'event hopping' and of producing chronological rather than developmental accounts. Only when students have assimilated an adequate breadth of content knowledge in the early part of the course, and have acquired an understanding of how to attribute developmental significance to events, do we ask them to begin producing their own long term developmental accounts and to consider more complex forms of development, including cross-currents and variations in significance.

The Depth Study presented fewer problems during the pilot phase than the Development Study, probably because teachers and students are on more familiar ground with the detailed history of a short period of time. Nevertheless, many students found it difficult at first to grasp the idea that events require a causal explanation, actions require an explanation of intentions and ideas or beliefs require an empathetic explanation; while others were uncertain initially

about the use of comparisons with other situations or possibilities in order to evaluate their explanations of past events. Rewriting some of the material to make the methodology clearer has, however, overcome most of these problems and led to the production of very high quality work by some students.

Difficulties also arose over a unit linking the explanation of the trial and execution of Charles I to the analysis of data relating to the voting behaviour of members of parliament during debates on the king's future in December 1648. This unit, which is based on a data analysis computer programme devised by members of the Project team, revealed widespread uncertainty among teachers and students regarding the use of quantitative analysis in history. Revision of the materials to explain the techniques more clearly and to show what statistical data can and cannot be used to explain has led to increased confidence in the use of this material, but one suspects that the real problem lies in the novelty of the approach. Only when, and if, the use of quantitative analysis in history becomes more widespread in English and Welsh schools will teachers and students begin to gain confidence and familiarity with the techniques involved.

So far, this article has concentrated on the difficulties and problems that have arisen and that are inevitable with the introduction of a Project that involves such a radical departure from current practice in the teaching of history to post-16 students. However, it was clear at an early stage that, despite the teething problems, CHP students were displaying higher levels of motivation and enthusiasm and achieving higher standards than their colleagues following more traditional syllabuses. A number of university lecturers from outside the Project have commented on the quality of work produced and the depth of historical understanding displayed by CHP students, many of whom were on a par with their better undergraduate students.

The first CHP A Level examination was in 1990, when students from just over fifty schools and colleges were entered. Following an expansion in the number of pilot schools, about eighty centres entered candidates for the 1991 and 1992 examinations. Although the first AS Level examination was in 1991, entries for this examination have been rather low so far, reflecting the lack of enthusiasm for AS Level in the country as a whole. In all of the CHP examinations to date, both A Level and AS Level, results have been significantly higher than the national average for other syllabuses. The higher grades achieved by CHP

candidates may be due in part to the coursework element, which accounted for 33% of the marks during the pilot phase and has been reduced to 25% in the revised syllabus that came into operation in September 1992. It is a well documented phenomenon that coursework generally leads to high levels of motivation and high standards of work. However, this can provide no more than a partial explanation. If it fully explained the higher grades, one would see corresponding improvements in performance in other A Level syllabuses that now include coursework or special studies, but this has not occurred to any appreciable extent. We believe that the improvement in the performance of CHP candidates is due primarily to providing them with a syllabus in which the methodology is explicit and the criteria for assessment are freely available to teachers and students, taking much of the mystery and uncertainty out of the examining process.

At the start of the pilot phase, we devised an assessment system comprising six Assessment Domains. A Domain is defined as an area of competence related to the understanding of a concept and the performance of associated skills. The Domains were in pairs, with one focusing more on the understanding of a concept and the other placing greater emphasis on the performance of related skills. Thus, *Domain 1: Historical Enquiry* was paired with *Domain 2: Using Sources as Evidence*; *Domain 3: Cause and Motive* was linked with *Domain 4: Offering Explanations*; and *Domain 5: Change and Development* was associated with *Domain 6: Constructing Accounts*. Each Domain was divided into three Levels of Attainment, for each of which there was a Level Descriptor defining the mastery criteria for that Level. For instance, the Descriptor for Level 1 of Domain 2 was *Can evaluate a given hypothesis by reference to reliable and relevant evidence taken and inferred from a range of sources*. Teachers and students have access to these Level Descriptors, which are couched in methodological terms so that they are equally applicable to any content. However, candidates cannot be rewarded for producing theoretical or methodological answers. As the Descriptor quoted above indicates, the theory must be applied to appropriate historical content for a response to be rewardable.

Broadly speaking, this assessment system worked well and was felt to be more reliable and more justifiable than the rather subjective assessment based on the use of marks employed by most other syllabuses. Nevertheless, there were flaws with the system. The differentiation of 'concept' Domains from 'skill' Domains was found to be artificial; three Levels was felt to provide too crude an

instrument of assessment; there was a tendency for weaker students to write somewhat unhistorical answers in an attempt to meet the requirements of the Domain Descriptors, which were printed on the examination papers; and the identification of certain Domains with the Development Study and others with the Depth Study restricted the type of questions that could be set.

On the basis of these findings, it was decided to abandon the distinction between 'concept' and 'skill' Domains by combining the six Domains into three. In the revised syllabus, Domain 1 focuses on the use of evidence and methods of historical enquiry to test historians' hypotheses; Domain 2 is concerned with proposing and evaluating explanations of historical situations, occurrences and developments; and Domain 3 addresses the construction and analysis of developmental accounts. The number of Levels in each Domain have been increased from three to five to allow for greater differentiation. The printing of the Domain Levels on the examination papers has been abandoned so that candidates concentrate on writing good history in answer to the question they have been asked rather than on writing a methodological answer which they may believe, wrongly, will meet the demands of the Domain. Lastly, the restriction of Domains related to causation and historical explanation to the Depth Study, and of Domains dealing with change and development and with the construction of accounts to the Development Study has been abandoned, so that now all Domains access all parts of the course. This has led to increased flexibility in the designing of coursework assignments and in the setting of examination papers.

During the pilot phase, it was decided to include a compulsory oral assessment among the coursework assignments. This provided an opportunity for candidates whose weak literary ability hampered their expression to demonstrate their understanding through a different medium. In most cases, the oral was conducted by means of a one-to-one interview, although some experiments with group orals were undertaken. The difficulty of ensuring that all candidates have equal opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding has prevented most schools from using the group oral format. Furthermore, centres with a large number of candidates found it difficult to find sufficient time to conduct individual interviews. Recognizing the problems faced by these centres, the oral assessment has now been made optional.



At the time of writing, the pilot phase has just come to an end and the *People, Power and Politics* syllabus is now available to any school wishing to adopt it. A substantial number of new centres will begin to teach CHP in 1992 and 1993 and the present rate of enquiries suggest that numbers will continue to grow. A second CHP syllabus, entitled *Technology and Society*, has been devised and is currently being piloted in ten schools.

A detailed evaluation of the pilot stage has yet to be undertaken, but certain conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the reactions of teachers and students. Despite the initial difficulties already mentioned, and others associated with the reading level of material that have been solved by rewriting the student textbooks, the Project has been judged a success. Teachers reported greater motivation amongst their students, increasing numbers opting to study history at A Level, and larger numbers applying to read the subject at university. Although CHP undoubtedly makes greater intellectual demands on students than more traditional syllabuses, they have not only shown themselves to be capable of coping with those demands but have actually relished them. So, it seems, have their teachers.

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