Chapter 11:
Teaching history: Inquiry principles

Weblink 6: Hilary Cooper’s guidelines for teaching history to younger students

This weblink provides further details of the recommendations of British academic Hilary Cooper for teaching history to students in the early years of schooling.

Cooper’s work provides guidelines for working historically with younger students. Here, in summary, are some taken from sections of Cooper’s book dealing with the pre-school years and Years 1-3.

Cooper emphasises that young people come to school with some existing ideas about the past. They provide a foundation for initial exploration of historical concepts and skills. For instance, Cooper describes how ‘children are immersed in concepts of time. Days have patterns, passing years are marked by birthdays, seasons remembered in relation to festivals, holidays and weather’. The challenge, says Cooper, is to develop these inchoate notions of time into a more conventional notion of ‘measured time’ (p.10).

With the youngest students, children’s stories are very useful for exploring and developing the idea of chronological sequence. In such stories, ‘things happen’ in an often logically developed fashion which students can trace. Stories also open up the central ideas of change. Particularly valuable are those books that, through a series of illustrations, depict a changing natural and/or built environment over time. In Australia, Jeannie Baker’s *Window* and Nadia Wheatley’s *My Place* are excellent examples.

The use of children’s stories about times past can produce increasingly accurate understanding of those times, with the use of increasingly precise terms to describe objects and practices. Cooper describes how initial, unstable ‘pseudo-concepts’ eventually develop into valid abstract ideas. For example, the ideas that ‘a castle is a fort; a castle is a lord’s big home; a castle has a moat’ are developed into the idea that ‘a castle is the fortified home of a feudal lord’, an idea that incorporates an understanding of both the castle’s function and the social structure of the time (pp.16-17).

Stories can be further exploited. Citing *Peter Rabbit* as an example, Cooper points out that children as young as 2 and 3 ‘learn about cause and effect, motives and rules through stories with consistent and dependable characters which move steadily towards a predictable outcome’ (p.14). With students in Years 1-3, stories (eg: *Snow White, Cinderella*) can be used to develop young students’ abilities to sequence events, identify changes, explore questions of causation and motive, and think about effects.
‘Let’s pretend’ role playing involves elementary experiences with interpretation and recognition of differing perspectives. Such role plays also foster the questioning of present-minded assumptions and their replacement by more historically accurate understandings. For example, through the trial and error involved in role playing the daily activities in a small shop from earlier times, youngsters come to realise that refrigeration and pre-packaging did not exist and that goods were stored and sold in quite different ways. However, Cooper emphasises that ‘children’s imaginative play ... has very little in common with the processes by which historians construct accounts of the past’ but that such play is ‘the beginning of a continuum in which, with maturity, fantasy will gradually diminish and a search for what is known will become increasingly important’ (p.26).

Tangible evidence of the past – whether objects brought into the classroom, pictorial representations or objects encountered during site visits – are valuable in prompting speculation by young students about past practices. Initial understanding of chronology can be developed through sequencing activities – using diverse objects (toasting fork, old toaster, modern toaster, sandwich maker) or images (family photographs from several generations).

In learning that interpretations of the past can differ, students can begin by comparing descriptions of everyday events in their own lives. When introducing children to differing interpretations of historical situations and events, reconstructions of various types can be valuable – for example films such as *Oliver*, visits by dramatic troupes, re-enactments of tournaments and feasts, sites such as the Jorvik Viking Museum in York (UK) or Sovereign Hill in Ballarat (Australia). As Cooper says, ‘Young children who have learned to ask “Why?” and “How do we know?” can begin to discuss why reconstructions have been made, whether it might really have been like that, why, why not, and why they think it might have been different’ (p.66).

Cooper recommends that, in Years 1-3, students work increasingly with historical sources. ‘Making inferences about sources, then, involves asking questions about how they were made and used, and how they may have affected the lives, the feelings and thoughts of the people who made and used them. It means accepting that there may be a number of equally valid inferences’ (p.97). In an extensive section on ‘Teaching children to make deductions and inferences about sources’, she provides detailed guidelines for using a range of sources – oral, visual, local environment, artefacts, written sources and music. Such is the detail of Cooper’s book that it deserves a place in the professional reference collection in every primary school.