Creativity in History Teaching

When I did my PGCE I never thought of myself as creative or of teaching as a creative job. Over the years, however, I discovered that creativity can be an important part of teaching, stimulating for me as a teacher but, more importantly, enabling me to respond more effectively to the problems that students have. That's been the really satisfying thing – using my creativity to help students learn more.

I was a quiet child. My first stage appearance at the age of 5 was a non-speaking part as an elf but I went one step further. Not only was I silent but I also made myself invisible by hiding behind the scenery. I was roundly told off at home because my aunt, a dressmaker, had spent ages making the costume and no-one had seen it. Secondary school was no different. I was no good at music or art and too shy to be dramatic. My creativity was limited to a nudge off my pads behind square. The only time I was noisy was when batting and calling yes, no or wait very loudly. This wasn't appreciated by one Latin teacher who suggested that I get out sooner or he'd ask for Wednesday afternoon matches to be held elsewhere to prevent me drowning out 'amo, amas, amat'.

I was still firmly inside my shell when I was interviewed for a PGCE place (something I bore in mind in later years when I was interviewing PGCE candidates myself). The first signs of a change came during my VSO training when I wrote a short script and played the lead in the end of course show. I think the credit for this breakthrough goes to a very hedonistic fortnight in which learning to teach English as a Foreign language played a very small part.

However further creativity didn't blossom immediately. Like many teachers I built up my confidence in the classroom gradually, becoming comfortable with being on view, the focus of attention, using my voice in different ways, projecting an image of being in control. I organised a public enquiry into the Peterloo Massacre to get my A level students researching for themselves and discovered I rather liked dressing up on a fund-raising march round Yorkshire in Civil War costume. But what I hadn't yet identified was how to use creativity to help students learn more effectively.

Several things then happened together in the mid-80s to set me off on a wholly new and creative direction. By then I was working for SHP and sitting in on lots of conversations about how students learn and the importance of identifying the problems they had in learning, the preconceptions or misunderstandings that might be blocking their progress. That made me think much more carefully

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about my teaching on the History degree course and how I could help the students – many of whom lacked confidence as their A level grades had been disappointing.

Then, around 1987, I went down to the Tower of London to run a half-day course on using the Tower as a site for SHP's History Around Us unit but the really important part was the other half of the day – a session on applying Theatre in Education techniques in the classroom. Rosemary Linnell of the Curtain and Globe Theatres demonstrated how to involve students in role-plays which didn't require them to acquire lots of information in advance but did require them to think, to ask questions about the thoughts and ideas of the people being studied and to make decisions in role as those people. I began to see links to my Wars of the Roses where students were struggling to make sense of who's who and the motives behind decisions. I also suspect, though my memory is hazy, that it was Rosemary who introduced me to the idea of tabards, leading to many hours creating sugar paper tabards and writing names on them in very large letters.

Not long afterwards I went to the theatre for real, to see Michael Bogdanov's modern dress version of Shakespeare's History plays for the English Shakespeare Company, the most exciting Shakespeare I've ever seen. *Richard III* opened with a scene at Edward IV's court, a jazz band playing and all the characters on stage chatting in small groups. Then a maitre d' stepped forward and introduced the groups – the royal family here, the politicians over there, the king's brothers on that side and at the back three ladies, all in mourning, Cecily Neville, Anne Neville and Margaret of Anjou. YES, I thought, that's how to doit – how to help my students make sense of who's who, using the room as a plan or a map and have them move around wearing tabards with their names visible. I was beside myself with excitement at the possibilities.

What happened over the following years was a carefully-controlled explosion of ideas, carefully-controlled in two ways. Firstly, as teacher I remained central to what was happening in the classroom, asking questions, talking and explaining just as much as ever (which was a lot), directing the learning – it was just that the kinds of activities students engaged in were sometimes different from before. Secondly, the new activities were occasional not frequent, dictated by what I diagnosed as the particular learning problems and needs that students had with a course.

One example was using structured role-plays with final year students studying the Wars of the Roses. They needed to read demanding academic articles but often stumbled at the first hurdles, struggling to distinguish Salisbury from Northumberland from Somerset, follow the complex sequence of events or distinguish the motives behind actions. The role-plays I used –lasting an hour

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or more at the beginning of a sequence of classes – were designed to introduce all those issues in a way that enhanced students' memory and understanding – and they were very successful. Central to the activities was talking the students, each in role as a historical person, through the events and asking them to select their course of action at relevant moments – 'learning from inside the past' as I used to refer to it. I particularly remember Matthew, in role as Warwick in 1470, struggling with choosing one of the three options he faced and realising that none of them was a good one, that he had to choose the least worst option. Teasing that out really made an impact on everyone's understandings.

I applied that approach – constructing activities around the problems students had in learning – to many other topics and at all levels from KS2 to degree level – helping KS2 make sense of the chronology of periods of history, Y7 to appreciate that the events of 1066 could have ended differently or that the take-over of English land after 1066 was a slow process even if England was an occupied country, ruled by people who spoke a different language. Contrary to some rumours, however, I very rarely climbed into historical costume when teaching. If I did, it was only once in a course and again only to help students learn more effectively – I was King John answering questions to help students see why historians might interpret John and his reign in a variety of ways and I was the Duke of Somerset in the early 1450s, justifying my policies, because the surviving narrative sources are almost all the work of Somerset's political enemies and it was hard for students to develop an understanding of Somerset's views and choices.

I really enjoyed the sessions in role, not just the dressing up but the stimulus to take on the role, responding in character to whatever questions students threw at me. BUT – and it's a huge BUT – none of these sessions, whether in role or structured role-plays or others, were created to make classes enjoyable. Enjoyment was a by-product, not the purpose. What I was aiming to do was push students to think more and to think more clearly and to understand and remember more – and in that I was delighted to find I was almost always successful. This was in part because these methods made a huge demand on students' concentration – they were more tired at the end because they were concentrating and thinking continually, one gauge of this being that they asked more questions and better questions because of the extent to which they were focussed on the details of the topic.

So what was creative about such teaching? Firstly there was the thinking about past experience and identifying what students struggled with, then came the puzzling out – how could I do more to overcome that problem? What did I have in my armoury of techniques that would work with this

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topic and this learning problem? Then there was the mapping out of an activity, writing out the choreography of moving people round the room if that was needed, identifying all the questions I'd ask and what options I'd present students with. And by the time I'd done all that planning I was at a high peak of excitement the first time I taught the session – with classes or at a CPD session.

The satisfaction of success was enormous – both at the end of that lesson and over time as it became apparent that students had remembered what we'd done. That was perhaps the thing that surprised me most – the considerable improvement in students' memory of what we'd done. Why was this? I put it down to something quite imprecise (and I'll admit I have never read anything about the psychology of learning) – I think the stronger memory is the result of students' emotional engagement with lessons. By emotion I don't mean they're sobbing into their hankies at the end – I mean their interest has been engaged to a deeper level, they have concentrated more, thought more deeply, been absorbed in what they're learning. The great medievalist Sir Richard Southern was absolutely right when he said 'we learn by being puzzled and excited.'

One other point I'd like to make about these kinds of activities is that they have two things in common with all good histories – they're focussed on the experiences of individuals, on people, and they tell and deconstruct stories, helping students understand complex narratives. Here are three other examples of creative activities which fit that description:

a) building up a tableau of people one or two at a time to create a scene and asking at each stage of its creation – what do you think is happening? Who might they be? In this case it's part of the story of Becket, not his murder but the whipping of Henry II. What questions do you want to ask? Why was the king being whipped? What a great question to explore because the students came up with the question – just as I'd planned!

b) building a community of people, for example the fictional villagers of Allton before the Black Death, a role for every student, and then revisiting them in the 1350s. What happened to everybody, what questions do you want to ask about their experiences and how would you tell their stories?

c) helping students understand the narratives of events by taking part in decision-making activities, whether 1381 with Y7 or the reign of Henry VII at A level. So many good debates and arguments, so much learned in terms of events, issues and the complexity of decisions.

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There was however one type of activity that I did doubt for a time, the use of scripted drama in the classroom. Then I met the remarkable Kate Brennan, head of department and playwright, whose experience of using scripted dramas from KS3 to A level completely changed my view. I've since had enormous fun with the joyful and deeply creative task of writing dramas, realising how much depth of detailed and nuanced arguments you can build in, how you can challenge misconceptions, how you can explore the changes and continuities that exist side by side.

Of course, creativity isn't solely achieved through developing classroom activities. Another route to creativity, something that might sound quite mundane, is planning courses. I loved the creativity of planning – what did I want students to learn, how much time did I have, what might they struggle with and how could I juggle all these to create a coherent course? KS3 courses are a major challenge – how do you link threads and themes together across all three years and make sure there's space for underlining the key points to take away, that students don't just get to the end chronologically but have time to look back over everything and see the big stories in terms of content and the process of history? If that's not a creative task I don't know what is.

Creativity has therefore helped me help my students and hopefully help other teachers too but has it done anything for me? Well I've had huge enjoyment in creating and using activities and the satisfaction of helping others but, more than that, it's helped me see myself differently, as having a kind of creative intelligence and that in turn has been confidence-boosting. This, I think, is one of the unanticipated benefits of teaching, that we discover new aspects of ourselves, that we have skills and capacities we didn't know we had and which might not have emerged in other jobs. Sadly it makes retirement all the harder – I do miss the dressing up!

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