Subject Inspection of History

REPORT

Jesus and Mary College,
Goatstown Road, Dublin 14
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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Jesus and Mary College, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in History and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had informal discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

History is a compulsory subject for all junior cycle students in Jesus and Mary College, in keeping with the school’s voluntary secondary status. It is commendable that all Transition Year (TY) students also study History as a core subject in the programme. From fifth year onwards, students may opt for History following an initial open choice and the creation of flexible option bands to best accommodate students’ preferences. This is fair to History. At the time of the evaluation, a teaching team of three teachers, and a post graduate diploma in education (PGDE) student teacher, were responsible for the delivery of History across the school. This is quite satisfactory, although the need to balance the number of periods of History each teacher has should be borne in mind in future planning.

Timetabling of History in junior cycle is very good. The provision of four single periods for first-year history classes is excellent, while the allocation of three single periods in second and third year is good. A timetabling change just prior to the commencement of the current academic year has led to one junior class being shared between two history teachers. This occurred as a result of exceptional circumstances in change of personnel at the beginning of the school year 2009. A student-teacher has been allocated an appropriate number of History lessons on the timetable and is teamed with a senior history teacher as mentor for most of these. This is good practice, although assigning all TY history to a student teacher can have the effect of breaking teacher-student continuity between junior and senior cycle and needs to be kept under review in future years. It is unfortunate that TY History is only allocated a single period per week in each class group. This is very little time to get meaningful work done, despite the interesting and innovative focus on Japanese history within the course, and the extension of time for History in TY merits serious consideration. This could also help to ensure more consistent numbers of students taking History for Leaving Certificate, as numbers have fluctuated quite considerably from year to year. The provision of a double period and three single periods per week for both the fifth-year and sixth-year History classes is good and these are well placed across the timeslots and days on the timetable.
Some excellent progress has been made in terms of whole-school provision for the teaching of History, through the purchase and installation of interactive whiteboards in classrooms, including all those where History is taught. The fact that these rooms are also base classrooms for the teachers concerned is an additional support and has resulted in the generation of a fine visually rich environment in all cases, thus offsetting the lack of a school library facility or of a designated history room. The high usage of information and communication technology (ICT) observed in History prompts the recommendation that a school intranet system, allowing history teachers to pool resources electronically and access them as they require in the different classrooms, would be a valuable and cost-neutral support worth investigating. The school’s plans to significantly develop its website and home-school ICT links also present opportunities for the enhancement of communication, subject information, and ultimately of teaching and learning. It is good to note a display case holding, among other engraved plates, the annual award presented to the top history student in Leaving Certificate annually. This aspect of subject profiling is an area which might be broadened out in time, perhaps to include a history notice board on the corridors, detailing school history, local history or matters pertaining to history competitions and trips, as desired.

**Planning and Preparation**

A very solid commitment to subject planning is evident in History in Jesus and Mary College. A very thorough departmental folder has been developed by the history team. This includes an outline of the role of the voluntary subject co-ordinator, whose duties involve the organisation of meetings, dissemination of subject information, maintaining class lists and updating the subject folder. The history department meets roughly twice a year on a formal basis, with minutes retained of each meeting. Those minutes examined show a wide range of issues being discussed, including the organisation of trips and projects, examinations and collating and storing resources. It is commendable that the department has discussed the development of historical banners for display in classrooms and on open nights. The examples of these which have been seen are highly visual and dramatic, and are an excellent means of promoting historical interest. The department is also commended on the involvement of teachers with the History Teachers’ Association of Ireland (HTAI), attendance at a significant range of conferences and in-service courses offered by the History In-service Support Team (HIST).

The relatively recent roll-out of interactive whiteboard technology has impacted significantly on History teachers at the school. In future departmental planning, the electronic pooling of resources, as previously suggested, and the discussion of how such technology can assist teaching and learning merit ongoing consideration at meetings. If practicable, some emphasis could also be given to subject promotion, including the development of local history, student awareness of the value of History as an option for Leaving Certificate and the close monitoring of uptake levels annually, with a view to ensuring continuing viable numbers opting for senior cycle History. The anticipated increase in time provision for TY History will also require further departmental reflection on TY subject planning, so that a re-writing of the TY history programme will need to be effected.

At individual level, all teachers are operating within the yearly schemes of work agreed within the history department. The previously mentioned sharing of a first-year class between two teachers has been managed by good collaborative discussion between the teachers concerned. The four periods allocated to History in first year have allowed for time not only to ensure that the course is covered but also to factor project work into planning. All teachers made very good use of ICT in their planning, including the preparation of electronic material for use within classes. Teachers
also deserved commendation on the clarity with which prepared handout material was presented, both in verbal and textual formats, and individual examples of questionnaires, maps for pasting into copybooks and letter-coded analysis tasks on documents were features of lessons observed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all lessons, the manner in which students were prepared for work from the outset was very noticeable. All had their books ready, took seats upon entering the classrooms and settled to work immediately. In all classes, a pleasant atmosphere, conducive to work, was evident from the outset, aided by good seating arrangements with clear sightlines to the teaching area. In all rooms, teaching and learning opportunities were significantly enhanced by the presence of interactive whiteboards, complemented by ordinary whiteboard space for writing on as teachers required or, in one instance, for the use of an overhead projector in tandem with the ICT equipment.

Once roll taking and any other initial tasks were completed, lesson development began immediately in all classes. Some very clear emphasis was placed on identifying for students what the learning outcomes of the lesson would be, and these were placed on the board as a reminder, which is good practice. Invariably too, teachers outlined for students how the lessons would be structured, including where short self-directed tasks would be included on ancient Rome or Stalin’s use of propaganda. Introductory questioning by teachers dealt with the oral correction of homework or was designed to get students to brainstorm, for example, to identify the key terms associated with the American Revolution. Some very supportive oral comments on the efforts made by students in researching their homework on the American Revolution were noted. A short reading task was also given to nominated students as a stimulus for discussion. Such strategies all worked very well, and it was particularly noticeable in most lessons that teachers kept very closely to the outline time schedule they had proposed for the different stages of lessons.

The level of ICT equipment available to teachers was an obvious support to delivery as lessons proceeded. However, it was as much the overall emphasis on visual learning as the use of equipment which ensured excellent opportunities for student learning in most lessons. Very meaningful use was made of data projectors to show maps of US colonies and images relating to the Stamp Acts, visuals associated with the Roman army, roads and trade, and political cartoons and photographs from the Soviet era and the Third French Republic. These were complemented by an excellent red and white banner on Stalin’s USSR in one classroom, and by the use of handwritten notes by teachers on adjacent whiteboards to provide verbal reinforcement of the visual messages. Getting students to make short notes of such key terms, perhaps in a dictionary section of their copybooks or in summary-chart formats, would be a worthwhile reinforcement of such board work. The use of an overhead projector to show diagrammatic maps aimed at clarifying the changes brought about by collectivisation, and of before-and-after screen images on the same topic, were excellent. Some of the handouts used in lessons also had a good visual focus, and were most valuable when they complemented a focus on the visuals in students’ textbooks.

The promotion of student engagement and learning was very well done in lessons, chiefly through good questioning. At times, it was recommended that more use of pinpointed questioning, rather than seeking hands up or asking ‘Is there anyone who doesn’t follow’, should be considered. However, the overall focus of questioning was sharp and lively, with most students drawn into the lessons through it. The emphasis, in interrogating political cartoons, on questioning students on matters like colour, background details and facial expressions, was particularly effective and deserving of deployment in all senior classes where source work can be factored in. Some very
positive teacher support was offered when students got answers wrong, while in all lessons there was a fine openness to students who wished to ask questions of their teacher at any time. Other simple tactics employed by teachers to promote student engagement included teacher movement around the room, variation in tone of voice to include some dramatic resonances, asking students for their opinions rather than merely for information, and the inclusion of interesting anecdotes or comparisons, with the parallels drawn between the Roman Forum and the nearby Dundrum Town Centre being particularly apt in one lesson.

In most lessons, very good provision was made for promoting student activity as a means of ensuring learning. Where pair work or small group work was used to interrogate sources or consider questions, this worked very well and deserves to be used for short periods in more lessons, if possible. Where a relatively long period of note dictation was employed in another lesson, shortening the bullet points and breaking this up with a short pair activity would have been appropriate. An excellent group task on a document handout sought out the aims and outcomes of collectivisation and required considerable analytical work by students. A little more clarity on who was to do what tasks was needed in other group work observed, while the placing of the feedback from such groups on the classroom whiteboard, and perhaps by students in their copybooks, was also worthy of consideration from the perspective of reinforcing learning.

The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was very good, characterised by pleasant classroom atmosphere, highly visual presentations, good teacher-student interaction and fine opportunities for student engagement.

**ASSESSMENT**

Homework was an important element in all lessons observed. Apart from the oral correction of assigned homework at the beginning of lessons, it was particularly useful that some teachers made a point of referring to an anticipated homework task as lessons proceeded. This had the effect of helping students to link the material being studied to the task to be done later, and was done to heighten students’ interest as a lesson proceeded through the American Revolution. At other times, a document-based handout on Stalin was part completed in class as a precursor to assigning the remainder as homework, while a very imaginative homework task following a lesson on an ancient civilisation saw students asked to design a poster for Roman army recruitment.

Copybooks examined showed a good commitment by teachers to monitoring and commenting on students’ work, while the use of Leaving Certificate marking templates in one senior class was also a good training tactic observed. The use of Junior Certificate significant relevant statements (SRSs) as a marking strategy, especially if it is explained to students how such marks are awarded and why, would also be worthwhile on occasion, especially on longer answers. Some junior homework examined involved drawing tasks and definition-style explanations of key terms, and senior exercises seeking both information and interpretation of visual and documentary sources, were all appropriate to the year groups and syllabuses concerned.

Whole-school assessment and homework policies have been developed within school planning. Annual parent-teacher meetings, written reports at Christmas and summer time, or after mock examinations for third-year and sixth-year classes, are good supports to formal assessment. It has been noted that the use of portfolio assessment in TY History has been introduced in recent times. This is highly commended, as it offers opportunities to promote students’ project work, and perhaps the sort of debating and analytical skills so valuable to senior history students.
particularly. If the time allocation to TY History can be increased, such assessment considerations ought to be central to the expanded module too.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• Timetable provision for History to Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate is very good.
• The ICT facilities provided in all base classrooms visited are an excellent support to teaching and learning and were very well deployed in all lessons visited.
• Very good work has been done in both departmental and individual planning and preparation.
• Strong departmental links with the HTAI and HIST are commended.
• Subject promotion measures, such as the annual senior award and the creation of historical banners for open nights, are commended.
• The quality of teaching and learning observed was very good, typified by a pleasant learning environment, an excellent visual focus, activity-based strategies and very good levels of student engagement.
• Good assessment practices have been noted, both in terms of homework and at whole-school level.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• An increase on the current one period per week for History in TY is very desirable
• The potential for the electronic pooling and storing of resources via an intranet merits exploration in History and other subjects as it proves practicable.
• The maintenance of a sizeable history class in each Leaving Certificate year requires ongoing departmental consideration.
• Somewhat more emphasis on student activity, and on focused strategies to ensure retention, has been recommended in some lessons.
• The use of portfolio assessment in TY, and of SRS-marking with a formative focus in junior lessons, deserves to be discussed by the history team.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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