

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of History
REPORT**

**Loreto College
Saint Stephen's Green, Dublin 2
Roll number: 60820E**

Date of inspection: 15 April 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HISTORY**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Loreto College, St. Stephen's Green. 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 two days 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 teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and some teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

History is a compulsory subject in junior cycle at Loreto College, in line with Department of Education and Skills regulations. It is commendable that the subject is also a core element of the school's Transition Year (TY), with an additional option, the History, Politics and Culture of Northern Ireland, available to supplement this provision as students may require. History enters an options system after TY and is available in two different slots on the timetable for both fifth-year and sixth-year classes, ensuring that all students wishing to select History for Leaving Certificate can do so. This is commended and uptake levels in senior History are very healthy.

Timetable provision for History is generally very good. Three single periods per week are allocated to each junior-class group, mostly evenly spread across the days of the week. The core TY history provision sees the subject have two periods per week for a half year module in each class. This is not high provision but the chance to study Modern Irish Politics for a double period each week across the full year, for those students who opt for it, is a further important support to historical studies in TY. Fifth-year and sixth-year history classes all have five periods per week, configured as one double lesson and three single lessons in all cases. This is good provision.

The school is well resourced in terms of its history-teaching personnel, with a compliment of five qualified teachers and one student teacher currently involved. Good procedures are in place for supporting and mentoring student teachers and involve a post-of-responsibility holder, the deputy principal and, in History, a member of the subject-teaching team. Management is supportive of teachers' attendance at relevant history in-service training, including that provided by the History In-service Support Team (HIST) for the revised Leaving Certificate syllabus. Management also funds membership of the History Teachers Association of Ireland (HTAI) and reports good links between the school's history department and that association.

Whole-school resourcing of History is very impressive. The fact that most classrooms in which the subject is taught are teacher-based rooms means that a number have very high levels of visual displays and students' project work. Some classrooms have built-in data projectors while portable ones are available for use in others, with the result that almost all lessons observed were able to use information and communication technology (ICT) most productively. The school is currently moving towards the installation of interactive whiteboard technology in all classrooms for next September and is engaged in staff consultation and training, and in seeking advice from other schools which have installed similar technology.

Students have good access to a full computer room and a separate suite of computers in the school's library, which greatly supports their research and project work in History. The library itself is a wonderful facility and is under the supervision of two part-time librarians. The stock of history materials available in the library is excellent, including a range of Irish and international books and ones suitable for younger students and for those undertaking research studies for the Leaving Certificate. These books are superbly organised and catalogued and have been added to incrementally through consultation with the history team. This is very good practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The history teaching team have formed a subject department in recent years. The department has a number of meetings each year and minutes of these are maintained. A subject co-ordinator is appointed on a rotational basis, which is good practice. A subject plan has been developed using the template provided by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and this gives an important framework to department activity. Year plans have been developed and agreed for all year groups and are in line with syllabus requirements while at the same time allowing some flexibility in terms of teacher preferences in senior cycle. The TY history plan is focused on modern American history but deals with content which is significantly different from that contained in the Leaving Certificate American history topic. It would be worthwhile including more detailed reference to methodology, resources, student presentations and other facets of the TY history programme in the relevant plan, to bring further clarity to the approach taken.

Minutes of department meetings show a fine commitment by history teachers to discussing issues of practical concern. The department is currently working on the electronic pooling and storage of teaching resources on a staff server, which should be a significant asset to teachers when the roll out of interactive whiteboard technology takes place in September. It would be sensible for a future departmental meeting to discuss methodology and strategies for the use of electronic and digital resources, and for developing the interactive side of whiteboard technology with a view to enhancing student learning opportunities. Focussed discussions have also taken place on marking schemes in certificate examinations, how much time needs to be spent on different aspects of the course, what resources are needed for History and on ensuring the continuity of teachers with classes from year to year. The department has created an excellent history notice board which is regularly updated and it has liaised effectively with management and the library staff in ensuring the updating of subject-specific resources as required.

The school's history department has been particularly active in co-curricular work and deserves great commendation for this invaluable support to the delivery of History in the school. Very good use has been made of the school's location in order to access nearby sites of historical interest with student groups. These include the National Museum (Kildare Street) for first-year classes and a planned walking tour of 1916 Dublin for fifth-year students. A visit to the army archives by senior students is currently at an advanced stage of preparation. The school has a

longstanding tradition in debating, with history teachers significantly involved, and has the major accomplishment of winning the Oxford Union schools debate in 2008, the only Irish school to do so thus far. The history notice board also contains a fine visual record of a senior trip to Auschwitz, and the school participates with enthusiasm and success in the annual HTAI (Dublin Branch) Quiz. A Mini United Nations group meets twice weekly at the school and has the significant merit of linking historical study to citizenship and social awareness in a fine cross-curricular manner. Overall, as these examples testify, the commitment of the members of the history department to the enhancement of students' varied experiences of History outside the classroom is to be highly commended.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the vast majority of lessons observed, the standard of teaching and learning was very high. Very good levels of teacher preparation were in evidence in all classrooms, helped by the fact that most lessons observed were taught in teachers' base rooms. Individual teachers had prepared a wide variety of teaching resources for use within each lesson, many of them ICT-based. Live internet link-ups to history websites, video excerpts, photographic and documentary sources integrated into PowerPoint displays were among the materials prepared. Among the PowerPoint presentations alone, the variety ranged from cartoon characters acting as historical guides to some excellent primary documents, wall murals and historical posters. In most classes, supplementary handouts were also deployed, while some teachers had additional posters, charts or an overhead projector transparency to help stimulate students' interest. These were all very well used, with the only recommendation being that where ICT is not being used, the placing of documents or more pictures on overhead transparencies can add a further visual dimension to the lesson and so enhance students' engagement, especially in the mixed-ability contexts of the lessons observed.

In most lessons, a good focus by teachers on identifying the learning intentions at the outset was evident. Generally, this took the form of an electronic presentation of anticipated learning outcomes. Where they were placed in writing on the margins of the white board so that the aims remained in focus for the duration of a lesson even as different slides were screened, this was optimal practice. In most instances where teachers identified learning intentions in this manner, time was left towards the end of lessons to revisit them, identifying to what extent such aims had, in fact, been achieved. This is commendable and very much in keeping with the principles of assessment for learning and good lesson structuring.

In the lessons observed, a good regime of oral questioning was in place. This was used to monitor and correct homework or, throughout most lessons, to elicit students' knowledge and views on the topics being explored. Some excellent oral questioning was observed, linked to visuals, documentary sources and video recordings presented to students using ICT. On isolated occasions, questioning was a little too focused on lower-order, factual recall and needed to delve deeper in search of students' understanding or seek more answers from students who were not putting their hands up. Overall, however, the quality of oral questioning observed was very good, as was the openness of teachers to taking questions or views from students at any stage during lessons. Some particularly challenging questioning was used to elicit students' ability to see linkage between historical events and cultural, religious or even sporting developments, or to identify possible cross-curricular links.

Within most lessons, teachers made obvious efforts to vary pace and activities, integrating initial questioning with group or pair tasks and ICT presentations. Students were assigned short tasks to undertake, sometimes in groups. Again, it is recommended that these focus at least as much on

interpretative and cognitive skill development as they do on recall or on answering relatively simple questions. Using documents, rather than factual summaries, to stimulate such tasks, would provide more opportunity to hone students' analytical and interpretive skills. Where group feedback is being sought through questioning on a particular piece of evidence, displaying the evidence base itself for all students to see would be good practice, even if on an overhead projector screen where ICT is not available.

The quality of teacher-student engagement in all lessons was very high. Where group or pair work was engaged in, students worked productively and with good support from teachers as it was required. In whole-class teaching contexts, it was commendable that practically every student in senior lessons was involved in discussion or question-answering at some point. Most teachers were very comfortable in introducing touches of light humour during lessons, and some had lively dramatic and engaging styles of delivery which helped bring material to life for students. In every lesson, students' concentration levels remained exceptionally high throughout.

Student learning was enhanced by the emphasis placed by teachers on making the material relevant to them. Where local churches, statues or streets could be used to bring Irish revolutionary history to life, this was done. Street names in Belfast and Dublin were very cleverly drawn upon to highlight differing political viewpoints at the time of World War I. Human-interest details were very much to the fore with younger classes as a biographical approach through the Renaissance and revolutionary times was taken. Students' interest in drama, art and sport was indulged as a means of helping them to embrace historical events and developments, while the different sides of feminist history were very cleverly developed and discussed with senior students in particular. In some cases, teachers placed very good emphasis on highlighting key words or short summaries of key information. In most cases, this form of reinforcement of learning was not a feature of the approach to learning, nor was student note-taking deployed. It must be stated, however, that students' understanding of and engagement with the material covered, as elicited through questioning by the inspector at the end of lessons, was of a very high standard. A more uniform policy for the retention of handouts needs some consideration but overall the quality of student learning in evidence was very satisfactory.

ASSESSMENT

Apart from oral questioning being used as an informal means of assessment throughout lessons, in all classes visited, clear homework assignment procedures were in place. Senior homework is generally framed in the style of Leaving Certificate questions, appropriately using interrogative rather than discursive questions, in keeping with the revised syllabus. Some very good examples of documents-based homework were also noted, linking a reading task on GAA conventions to focused questions requiring written answers. Junior cycle homework tasks included good use of visuals, occasional drawing tasks and short or long-answer questions in the style of those found in the Junior Certificate examination. The use of PowerPoint presentations by students in one junior lesson, as a means of assessing their work on individual projects and building their confidence, is particularly commendable. It was notable that it is general department policy for students to maintain separate copybooks for notes and homework, which is good practice, or in the case of senior students that they maintain folders of their work.

Teachers used a variety of methods of assessing students' homework, from formative, comment-based marking to giving students marks or grades. In some junior classes, the explanation and use of the principles of significant relevant statements (SRSs) as tools for improvement of students' work is worth exploring. It is recommended that specifying the number of significant points

required in a homework task is preferable to asking for a number of lines or pages to be completed, as handwriting styles and scales will vary a lot.

One of the features of department planning activity at the school has been the development of common assessment instruments for summer examinations in first, second and fifth year, as well as in TY. One example of a common test for second years was noted in the subject file and it would be sensible to use the augmented ICT facilities to develop a full folder of such instruments over time. The school's overall policy on assessment is weighted in favour of continuous assessment at intervals prior to the end of each academic year, with progress reports sent home and parent teacher meetings held annually. Student journals are also used to keep the lines of communication between school and home open as required. Classes due to sit certificate examinations sit pre-examinations in spring, with the possibility of students who don't perform satisfactorily in these being asked to re-sit pre-examinations after that. It is commendable that while TY uses a terminal examination for part of the assessment mark in History, individual student presentations are also included in portfolio assessment, in keeping with the spirit of TY generally.

The school has developed formal policies on assessment and homework and the history department's file contains subject-specific issues relating to these two areas. It is commendable that management plans to organise a staff training session on assessment for learning (AfL) in the autumn. Some of the principles of AfL have already been observed to be working well in many history classes and this training should help make the application of AfL more uniform and further enhance learning opportunities for all students. The overall approach to assessment taken at the school is very impressive.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- History is well timetabled across all year groups.
- History is very well resourced in terms of teaching personnel, ICT and library facilities, and the planned roll out of interactive whiteboard technology provides further opportunities in this regard.
- Very good departmental and individual planning is in evidence in History.
- The history department is applauded for its commitment to co-curricular and other non-classroom activities.
- A very good standard of teaching and learning was characterised by productive ICT usage, teacher-student rapport, variation and making History relevant for students.
- Good informal and formal assessment practices are in evidence in History and will be further enhanced by formal engagement with assessment for learning, as planned.

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

- A more clearly documented outline of the methodology and resources used in TY history would be worthwhile.
- In some lessons, more usage of higher-order questioning, spread among all students, and a sharper focus on identifying learning intentions, have been recommended.
- The use of the planned teacher server to store common assessment instruments, as well as teachers' resources, can further augment collaborative practice in History.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal near the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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