

# History, music and law:

## commemorative cross-curricularity

James Woodcock continues his theme from *Teaching History* 138 about the difference between superficial, thematic cross-curricularity and much more rigorous interdisciplinarity.

His concern is to retain rather than compromise the integrity of the subject disciplines. Woodcock argues that interdisciplinary working adds value to learning only when the knowledge and the distinctive truth quests of each discipline are understood adequately by all partners. This makes management of cross-curricularity much more than a practical or administrative management task. It requires a depth of disciplinary appreciation in the senior curricular leaders and an ability to lead others in disciplinary conversation. Here Woodcock illustrates this argument in a short summary of an interaction between history, music and law, where each explored the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and each built on the others' disciplinary concerns while retaining their own disciplinary goals and standards.

### James Woodcock

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## Meaningful interdisciplinary working: what is involved?

It is hard for teachers to provide genuinely meaningful cross-curricular learning opportunities for pupils. There is challenge and risk. The challenge is to help pupils to explore links between subjects that generate deeper, more complex understandings, ones that raise new questions which perhaps would not have otherwise been considered. The risk is that we do our subjects a disservice, focusing on simplistic common denominators, adding nothing but a 'feel-good' factor.<sup>1</sup> In a fuller account of my former school's approaches to inter-disciplinary working, I argued that simplistic links driven only by content and not by the discipline – a set of practices, processes and concepts inhering in knowledge – can detract from progression within a subject.<sup>2</sup> As Monaghan showed, in his detailed construction of a strong link between English and history using classic literature, genuinely inter-disciplinary links, ones which deepen disciplinary knowledge by embracing the discipline's fuller purpose – that is, its fuller, distinctive role in seeking particular kinds of truth – are more likely to strengthen practice in both subjects, as well as adding something new.<sup>3</sup>

In so far as this is a pedagogical challenge, it can only be overcome by curricular thinking. That means disciplinary thinking and, because two or more subjects must come together, inter-disciplinary working. It therefore requires careful planning and teaching, with colleagues working in partnership, collaboratively, working to understand one another's disciplinary standpoints, not latching on to a superficial 'theme' and trying to garner some superficial overlap or random content opportunities. There are also logistical challenges. Which pupils can be involved? When can these opportunities be provided? What resources do we have to allow them to take place? To overcome these latter challenges requires commitments from the school, stemming from a recognition of the genuine, distinctive value that such projects can offer. Staff need to be clear about how the project will lead to learning that goes beyond that which might otherwise be possible.

This article is a case study of one of our efforts at Sawston Village College to provide such meaningful, sustainable cross-curricular opportunities for our pupils. This article focuses on one particular project linking history, music and law but similar events have taken place over a number of years, informed by the same underlying principles.

## Starting with history: participating in and exploring commemoration

Over the last few years we have participated in the Cambridge Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration and its related symposium organised by the Keystage Arts and Heritage Company.<sup>4</sup> The commemoration service is a civic event, typically held at the Guildhall in Cambridge city centre, featuring prominent public figures, community groups and many local schools. Each year's commemoration follows the national Holocaust Memorial Day theme. At the Cambridge event, pupils present their response to that theme, typically through a form of performing art, including dance, music, poetry and creative writing.

The symposium precedes that event. It has become an opportunity for Sawston pupils to engage with legal and moral issues surrounding the genocides and large-scale killings of



recent history, such as in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. With a partner school in Rwanda, Sawston pupils have a unique means of beginning to examine the impact of genocide through personal contacts.

The opportunities for rich learning in this project are manifold, but there are clear risks. For example, would our chosen commemorative performance appear facile in the light of such grave events? Would pupils fall into simplistic moral, perhaps anachronistic, judgements? How do we carefully navigate the specificity of both the Holocaust and other genocides, when making comparisons between them? Do comparisons between the Holocaust and Rwanda deepen pupils' understanding of genocide or lead to oversimplistic equivalencies divorced from their own historical contexts? When we initially participated in the commemoration and symposium, one of our first decisions was for pupils not to attend these events without additional, dedicated prior teaching. Participating pupils ranged from Year 8 through to Year 11. Not all had yet studied the Holocaust and few knew much about the Rwandan genocide. Even those who had studied the Holocaust necessarily had a limited knowledge, based on one enquiry in Year 9. One or two pupils had, through personal interest, some vague knowledge of international law, which would be the focus of the symposium, but most pupils had a very limited understanding of how the law works.

We took the decision to be open with pupils and explicitly to explore with them the debate and controversies surrounding any comparative study involving the Holocaust. History teachers in our local history teaching communities are well versed in such debates through the work, for example,



of Nicolas Kinloch.<sup>5</sup> In this way, as well as ensuring that pupils had a firm grounding in factual knowledge, we helped them to draw their own provisional conclusions about whether studying the Rwandan genocide and Holocaust in parallel was appropriate and to understand some of the complex considerations involved in drawing any such comparisons.<sup>6</sup> We encouraged them to reflect on how far such comparisons could be enlightening or limiting. At this stage, the learning was purely, necessarily historical.

## A different discipline: international law

A richer, broader understanding is the best way to guard against the many risks in working with such content – the risk of trivialisation, the risk of reaching quick judgements that confuse the different bases for judgement. Legal, historical and moral judgements are not the same, but they can inform each other. Without adequate knowledge and without understanding the different grounds and purposes of judgement in different domains, pupils easily slither into superficial or inappropriate comments. They need to learn about the kind of truth that any one human practice tries to seek. We wanted pupils to understand another way of talking about the Holocaust and other genocides, that which occurs in the context of international law. The next step in gaining richer, broader understanding therefore came through the symposium where legal frameworks could be introduced and explored.

Led by Seán Lang, of Anglia Ruskin University, and Mike Levy, of Keystage Arts and Heritage Company, the symposium introduced pupils to international law in the area of genocide. This was, first, an exploration of the historical origins of the legal framework behind the Nuremberg trials, the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the International Criminal Tribunals of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Second, it provided pupils with a rare opportunity to consider the legal processes and complexities of defining crimes, identifying whether such crimes might have taken place and then bringing alleged perpetrators to justice. Through this work, pupils could place modern events and recent history into a wider historical framework. Moreover, having seen the challenges presented by the need for due legal process, pupils were much less likely to make simplistic moral judgements about the effectiveness of the legal processes.

## Music extending history; history deepening musical exploration

The final stage of pupils' learning was in their preparation for the commemorative service. Rebecca Haworth, then a music teacher and our school's International Coordinator, led pupils in composing music that would provoke questions about the parallels between the Holocaust and other genocides. In the first year, she worked with pupils jointly to compose



an arrangement of Gorecki's Third Symphony, adapted to include central/eastern African drumming. The result was haunting and powerful, the juxtaposition of contrasting and complementary musical elements reflecting the ways

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in which these events perhaps had parallels but were also distinct. Pupils had already thought about parallels, historically. So their prior historical work both served and was extended by this exploration of musical accounts. In the following year, the same collaborative process saw Rebecca work with pupils to adapt Steve Reich's 'Different Trains', using words from letters written by children at our partner school in Rwanda. These letters hide moving, passing allusions to absent parents and siblings, their superficial innocence in some way mirroring the initially innocuous domestic train routes described in 'Different Trains'.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusions: what might a senior curriculum leader learn from all this?

What did we learn about cross-curricularity from these projects?

First, it confirmed to us the importance of careful curricular planning to ensure the retention, not the compromising, of the integrity of the relevant subject disciplines (in our case, history, music and law). Cross-curricular projects should present pupils with complexity and offer them new ways of looking at and thinking about that complexity, but those 'new ways' need to come from what the discipline distinctively offers, and not surface connection from its surface products only. This can only be secured by close collaboration between colleagues in all relevant disciplines and by each teacher being aware, at least to some degree, of the nature and requirements of each subject in this context. It requires thorough teaching beforehand, in each curricular area. But the planning involved is not just practical or even pedagogic. Just to say 'staff need time to plan' does not do justice to the

intellectual preparation required. Staff need time to talk in order to explore and understand the way in which distinctive disciplinary knowledge in one subject can serve another, and to make sense of one another's disciplinary considerations.

Second, it highlighted to us the value of working with expert third party organisations. The opportunities that groups such as Keystage Arts and Heritage Company can offer, with their connections and resources, exceed what we as a school can realistically provide independently. Over the years, pupils have had exclusive audiences with: a Holocaust survivor; BBC journalist and former MP, Martin Bell; and a UN prosecutor of Radovan Karadzic, the prosecutor answering pupils' questions live over Skype.

Third, related to this, these projects succeeded because the work pupils was doing was real; they did not have to suspend disbelief and imagine what they *might* do to commemorate these events. The UN prosecutor was mid-trial; Martin Bell had personally witnessed so much of what to pupils was modern history; the Rwandan letters were from pupils' own pen pals; and the commemorative performance was at a real, public event, part of a national day.

**With thanks to:**

*Rebecca Haworth, now Head of Music at Harris Academy, Peckham, formerly Music Teacher and International Coordinator at Sawston Village College*

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*Lesley Ford and Mike Levy, Keystage Arts and Heritage Company, Cambridge*

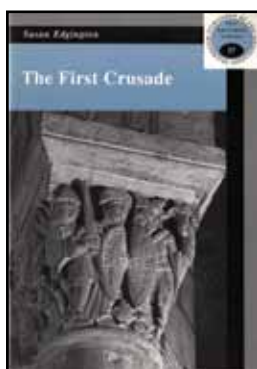
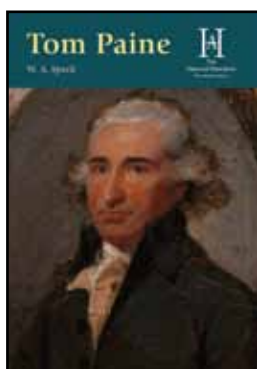
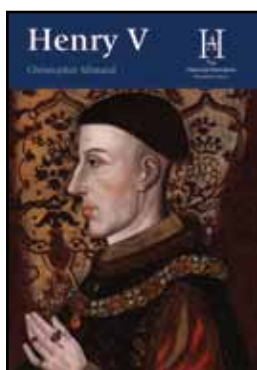
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- <sup>1</sup> In recent years, a common trend in schools in England has been to move to integrated or competence curricula in which subjects are downplayed and, instead of developing distinctively disciplinary knowledge and thinking, focusing on generic skills. Some schools do cross-curricular theme days, where subjects look for opportunities to work on a common topic such as 'war' or 'power' or 'balance'. Andrew Wrenn has explored the limitations of such projects and suggests a richer, more disciplinary alternative: see Wrenn, A. (2010) 'History's secret weapon: the enquiry of a disciplined mind' in *Teaching History, 138, Enriching History Edition*.
- <sup>2</sup> Woodcock, J. (2010) 'Disciplining cross-curricularity? Cottenham Village College history department's inter-disciplinary projects: an evaluation' in *Teaching History, 138, Enriching History Edition*.
- <sup>3</sup> Monaghan, M. (2010) 'Having great expectations of Year 9: Interdisciplinary work between English and history to improve pupils' historical thinking' in *Teaching History, 138, Enriching History Edition*.
- <sup>4</sup> [www.keystage-company.co.uk/](http://www.keystage-company.co.uk/)
- <sup>5</sup> For some of the historical issues that arise in comparing the Holocaust to other events, see, for example, Kinloch, N. (2001) 'Parallel catastrophes? Uniqueness, redemption and the Shoah' in *Teaching History, 104, Teaching The Holocaust Edition*.
- <sup>6</sup> A useful and thought-provoking summary guide to these issues is Salmons, P. (2010) 'Universal meaning or historical understanding? The Holocaust in history and history in the curriculum' in *Teaching History, 141, The Holocaust Edition*.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Different Trains' is a three-movement piece for string quartet and recorded speech written by Steve Reich in 1988. Its three movements are entitled 'America: Before the War', 'Europe: During the War', and 'After the War'. The recorded speech is taken from interviews with people in the United States and Europe about the years leading up to, during, and immediately after World War II.



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