

# THE POWER OF THE VISUAL IMAGE IN LEARNING

## THE NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY APPROACH

— Jacqui Dean

*Painting should call out to the viewer ... and the surprised viewer should go to it, as if entering a conversation.*  
Roger de Piles, *Cours De Peinture Par Principes*, 1676

Visual images are powerful teaching and learning tools, providing windows into the past. Every picture has information, a story, woven into it. Pictures, like words, can be read as texts in their own right, not as mere illustrations. The best quality to bring to reading pictures is curiosity: by asking questions we can winkle out the multiple and often hidden meanings in any image.

We need to teach visual skills to children, and that means treating pictures as sources of information. Although children are surrounded by visual images, particularly on television, they often cannot comment on or remember what they have seen - they have not engaged with the images, have not 'read' them. For that they need to look deeply, to enter imaginatively into the picture, to question, to hypothesise.

### History and literacy

There exist strong natural links – more, a rich interrelationship and interdependence between history and English. Both are concerned with language and its uses, including the language of pictures. Both explore human feelings, situations, motives, relationships, and both require the use of an informed imagination to reach an understanding of the human condition (Fines and Nichol, 1997; Hoodless, 1998).

The language of historical texts, both visual and written, is challenging. Full understanding of them demands deeper knowledge than contemporary texts require. For example, Jackie, whose Year 4 class had been interrogating a picture depicting an Anglo-Saxon farmstead, noted: *The vocabulary seemed to be the greatest obstacle to expressing ideas. Many children had no idea what was meant by a loom, what thatch was, what weaving, spinning and dyeing were.* For the children fully to understand the patterns of Anglo-Saxon life depicted in the picture, they had not only to look and to question, but also to learn the language for the activities and objects they were observing. Historical pictures thus present endless opportunities for children to develop their linguistic range.

### The nature and analysis of visual texts

In the multi-media world in which children are growing up, it is perverse to restrict the notion of texts to written texts. Images are texts in their own right, with their own modes, functions, affordances and logic (Bearne and Kress, 2001). They, like words or artefacts, are modes of representation requiring careful 'reading' to understand their forms, meanings and purposes. Although a reader may need different ways of looking to understand the different text modes – written, visual and visual/tactile – the process will be the same.

When questioning visual images, we ask the same questions as we would of written texts, namely:

<b>Content:</b>	What is the image about?
<b>Structure:</b>	What form does the image take (e.g. photo, painting, sketch, film)?
<b>Message:</b>	What is the artist/film-maker/designer trying to say?
<b>Method:</b>	How is the artist choosing to say it?
<b>Time:</b>	When was the image produced?
<b>Situation:</b>	What was the context, the situation, the location of its production?
<b>Reason:</b>	Why was this image produced and for whom? Why was it produced in this particular form?
<b>Meaning:</b>	What can it tell me about people, places, events, society?

These, and more, are standard questions to ask when interrogating pictorial (and other) sources of evidence. They mirror and extend questions familiar in literacy teaching – about genre, field, mode, tenor and audience. A sterling example is Julian Barnes' brilliant literary and historical analysis of Géricault's painting: *Scene of Shipwreck* (1989).

### The Nuffield Primary History approach

The Nuffield approach is to challenge children to look deeply into visual images and to pose questions that the images can help answer – in short, to give them reasons for looking, and for persisting in looking. Seven principles help shape and form Nuffield History pedagogy. Questioning is the key to unlocking visual sources.

#### Nuffield Principles

##### 1. Challenge

Challenge the pupils throughout facing them with problems to solve

##### 2. Questioning

Pupil and teacher questioning drive on genuine historical learning

##### 3. Study in depth

Study in detail/depth is the only way to achieve genuine understanding

##### 4. Authenticity

Where possible use real, authentic sources

##### 5. Economy of resources

Use the minimum amount of resources needed

##### 6. Accessibility (and respect for children)

The teacher mediates the learning: he or she makes the past accessible to the pupils and provides guidance and support as needed.

##### 7. Communication

The pupils should communicate what they have learnt to an audience using an appropriate mode and genre.

The Nuffield Primary History website ([www.primaryhistory.org](http://www.primaryhistory.org)) describes the Nuffield approach to teaching using the visual image. It also carries many accounts of actual teaching using pictures. You can find these accounts in both the *Lessons* and the *Exemplars* sections of the website. See the end for a full list.

The accounts demonstrate different forms of visual image in use, from film to pictures of objects, from paintings of great events to personal photographs. They illustrate how pictures can be incorporated into the wider context of an historical investigation. A picture is a rich source of information about the past, supplying multiple details about people, clothing, activities, homes. It can form the focus of the lesson, provide the starting stimulus for an investigation, or a portal for entering imaginatively into the past. It can be the basis for reconstruction of the past through drama or role play.

Groups of pictures can be closely observed for insights into the nature of a particular society; they can be used to show different perspectives on the same event; they can provide evidence to confirm (or otherwise) information in a document or account; children can be challenged to organise them in order of relevance, or to form a story or sequence of events (good for kinaesthetic learners).

The lessons give ample evidence of the ability of visual images to foster language development. Observation and questioning of a picture develop speaking and listening, as well as vocabulary. An investigation of a picture can also stimulate children to write extensively (see e.g. Case Study 2 below).

Teaching accounts on [www.primaryhistory.org](http://www.primaryhistory.org):  
In **Lessons** section:

- Samuel Pepys and the Great Fire of London (KS1)
- The Great Plague of London (KS1)
- The Roman Market (KS1)
- Grace Darling (KS2, but suitable for KS1)
- The Roman Army – Spy! (film)
- The End of Roman Britain

- Saxons: Sutton Hoo
- Saxon Ship Burial
- Viking Travel
- How the Tudors came to Power
- Queen Elizabeth I
- Tudor portraits – Who am I?
- Brunel and the Victorian Suspension Bridge
- Victorian Britain: Down the Mine
- Britain since 1930: The Jarrow March
- Britain since 1930: World War II Air-raid (film)
- Ancient Greece: the Olympic Games
- Ancient Egypt: Tutankhamun's Tomb

In **Exemplars** (briefer accounts of lessons, exemplifying specific teaching approaches):

- Toys and games (KS1)
- Scott and Amundsen (KS1)
- Old and new telephones (KS1)
- Local: a Visit to Petworth House Gallery
- Roman Britain
- Saxons: Sutton Hoo objects
- The Battle of Trafalgar (literacy/history)
- World War II: Questioning a photograph
- Ancient Greece: Minoan boxing boys

## References

- Barnes, J (1989) *A History of the World in 101/2 Chapters*. London: Picador, 115-139
- Bearne, E and Kress, G (2001) *Editorial. Reading*. November 2001
- Fines, J and Nichol, J (1997) *Teaching Primary History*, Heinemann Educational
- Hoodless, P (Ed) (1998) *History and English in the Primary School*. London: Routledge

**Jacqui Dean** is co-director of the Nuffield Primary History Project and editor of its primary history website.

## Case studies 1 and 2 are from in-service courses

For the past 16 years, the Nuffield Primary History Project team have carried out action research in classrooms across England, teaching children in a range of schools. They have also run varied and extensive in-service courses for teachers across England. The courses focused on theoretical and pedagogic aspects of both literacy and history, their separate disciplinary demands and their interdependence. On the Nuffield courses, the tutors used the cognitive apprenticeship model of demonstration, modelling and reflective action research by participants to extend the teachers' repertoire of pedagogical strategies (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989; Dean, 2000; Nichol & Turner-Bisset, 2001). In particular, the emphasis was on extended, coherent historical investigations utilising a range of authentic texts and genres, key questions (learning as enquiry), scaffolding structures/frames to support thinking, reading and writing (Lunzer & Gardner, 1984; Wray and Lewis, 1995; 1997; Nichol, 1999), and – crucially – engaging participants actively in their learning through discussion and debate, as a whole class, in groups and in pairs. At a presentation day at the end of each course, the teachers produced case studies reporting on their action research in school and the results achieved.

The two case studies on pages 22 to 23 describe two course teachers' use of the visual image in their classrooms.