History Curriculum External Review Visit – Report

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Methodology

The History Curriculum Review was carried out in two stages.

The first was a review of the History department's curriculum on paper. This included the actual curriculum itself, of course, but also a review of supplementary documentation including: the History department's curriculum vision; examples of previous evaluation of the department by line management and departmental self-evaluation; the History department's Departmental Improvement Plan 2021/22.

The second stage was an in-person visit to Castle Mead Academy. This involved observations of lessons, discussions with pupils, interviews with History staff and Curriculum Lead (CL), and the Principal.

Findings

History at Castle Mead Academy is a very strong department. It is extremely well-led. This leadership should be singled out for credit. It is very clear that the CL is a gifted History teacher, but leadership requires more than this, and the CL recognises this fact and has built up the department accordingly. The whole culture of the department is hugely positive and there is an all-pervading sense of a delighted interest in the subject, a calm and purposeful learning environment and a genuine passion and commitment to exposing scholars to rigorous disciplinary knowledge conveyed through engaging story, challenging original source material and up to date academic scholarship.

The vision of the History department is clear and ambitious. The clarity can be seen in the school website's curriculum page for History. Any observer can discern from this document that the History department has a clear commitment to rigour and challenge, encapsulated in the headline term 'Discipline and Discovery'. In addition to this, the document is impressively clear in setting out the commitment to a broad and balanced curriculum with a particular mindfulness towards narratives of groups or individuals who may have been under-represented in mainstream historical narratives. This commitment could be clearly seen being enacted in the teachers' classroom practice and the resources created by the department.

The culture of the History department is collaborative and extremely positive. There is clear guidance and leadership, combined with encouragement and support for teachers to take ownership of particular elements of the curriculum. There is support to experiment without fear of criticism or censure. The classroom atmosphere is similarly positive. Routines are established and adhered to, contributing to purposeful starts to lessons with minimum loss of time for learning. The History team clearly contributes to the very positive wider school culture in this and many other respects.

Recommendations

The following observations and subsequent recommendations should be seen more as a platform for potential further improvement than as concerns which need addressing. There is also the inevitable caveat that it is impossible to build a complete picture in one day and a small number of exchanges and that it may be that several of the points below are already in place or being considered.

Curriculum

The KS3 History curriculum has many strengths. It enacts many of the principles referred to above. Based on lesson observation and analysis of documentation the department may want to give some consideration to some possibilities.

- The current Y8 Africa unit is a perfect example of the department's commitment to exposing pupils to under-represented historical narratives. It is also based on a commendable desire to present African history as a subject in its own right and not as an adjunct to the Transatlantic Slave Trade (TAST). In this aim it succeeds, underpinned by a programme of study based on scholarship and excellent resources. The department may, however, want to consider the unit so that it does at least touch on the origins of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Several instances in lessons suggested that pupils knew about the TAST. They were interested in where it sat in relation to the History they were studying. While the department should be credited for making sure that pupils' first and or only encounter with African History was TAST there is a clear opportunity to extend the unit to cover the impact of first encounters between Africa, particularly West Africa, and Europeans. This would place TAST and the African History pupils have been studying in a broader context and probably help to connect some events in the minds of pupils who clearly had some prior knowledge of TAST but who were unsure where it sat in world History. This would sit well with current scholarship which tends to emphasise the emergence of an 'Atlantic world' c1500 onwards.
- The Y7 programmes looks to be engaging and interesting but it is very focused on medieval England. Given the nature of the intake of pupils at Castle Mead, and of course the commitments in the History curriculum vision to under-represented narratives, there might be scope to consider other areas to look at in Y7. Possibilities would include: The Roman Empire (perhaps even the lesser-known North African regions and or Eastern empire, particularly Syria); The Silk Roads; The Crusades; The Mongol Empires.

The Story, Source, Scholarship Model

One of the great strengths of the department is the use of this model, as highlighted above. It is tempting to believe, as the department currently does, that they have a cast iron model which works superbly and that there is no need or incentive to deviate from it. It is possible to propose the converse to this argument. The model is so strong and well-embedded and well-delivered that the History curriculum would not be adversely affected if it were *not* used in some circumstances.

The History team acknowledged in discussions that the model may not be entirely compatible with the new Edexcel GCSE course which will be starting next year. From my

experience supporting schools teaching the Edexcel course and writing textbooks for the course I am inclined to agree.

There is also a rigidity to the model which could potentially limit the scope of some types of historical study. Historical research is messy, complicated, frustrating and usually heavily disputed. At some point scholars should be given the chance to see this. It is important that the model does not leave scholars with the impression that History is a tidy process!

In addition, the model does not lend itself particularly well to the study of a historical controversy, such as changing views of the Origins of the First World War, for example. In such a study, pupils would study how and why received orthodoxies about the war changed over time. The story, source, scholarship model would be potentially confusing in such a study. It would make sense to simply study scholarship and chart changes in 'the story of the story'. This may also be true of a unit which focuses very heavily on the use of original sources, such as the Edexcel Historic Environment Study or perhaps the discovery or re-interpretation of particular sources challenged prevailing views on a topic.

It should be stressed that this is not a criticism of the Story, Source, Scholarship model. If anything it is more of an endorsement with a suggestion that it be used as a platform to consider other approaches on occasion.

Pedagogy

The Story, Source, Scholarship model provides an excellent basis for a consistent and clear pedagogical style. This works well. Cold calling was handled expertly. Exposition was impressively clear and well-informed. Teachers do an excellent job modelling the use of sources for pupils and pupils clearly understand the process. The modelling of note taking, and pupils' actually carrying out note taking, is very impressive indeed.

Based on observation and documentation there a few possibilities worthy of consideration.

- In the lessons observed, the Do Now sections tested only current or recent work. It would probably be helpful to expand the range of coverage of these questions to reach back further into prior learning.
- It might be possible to encourage pupils to think further about the nature of sources, in addition to using them. Teachers would not need to go into huge depth but scholars might find it helpful and interesting to learn more about archives: how sources are collected; recorded; catalogued; accessed etc. This might help them to understand how narratives become under-represented and also how under-represented narratives can sometimes see the light of day. The National Archives has a number of engaging video clips which help to explain how archive collections operate.
- In several lessons teachers asked pupils to read aloud. This was a little surprising as the prevailing wisdom is cautious on such approaches and favours teachers, as the best readers in the class, leading whole class reading aloud. and it might be interesting to consider what the department's policy on reading is. There is a good deal of excellent work by the Historical Association on reading in History. Once

again, a caveat here is that the department may well have a developed policy and there was not time on the visit to observe or discuss it.

- A further area to consider might be an additional approach to checking understanding. Teachers did this well, and did it regularly, mainly by cold calling. One approach which can be a valuable addition to the toolkit is the use of whole class checking tasks. Typically such tasks could involve the use of a Likert Scale, for example to assess how far a particular individual was significant. Similarly, a formative assessment task of this sort could be used to model thinking and check understanding at the same time by presenting a class with a bold statement and asking how many agree or disagree. Another approach is to ask them to respond to a question structure along the lines of 'If you were an expert in [historical field] would you be happy to say …..?'

Terminology

The consistency and clarity of the department's approach has already been mentioned. There is no doubt that this is a major strength. One area to consider with regard to this consistency might be the use of terminology.

- Across the lessons observed there was frequent use of the term inference (or infer) with regard to using sources. There was some inconsistency over the exact meaning of this term across different lessons. In some lessons inference was not used at all. One possible approach to consider might be an approach to sources which consistently asks scholars to make observations and inferences from sources. By differentiating between the two the meaning of inference is given greater clarity and consistency.
- On a related note, the department may want to consider the use of the terms source and evidence. Sources are sources. They only become evidence when they are used as evidence to support a claim. It may seem pedantic but scholars might find it helpful to be picked up on this.