Having 'Great Expectations' of Year 9

Inter-disciplinary work between English and history to improve pupils' historical thinking

What scope does studying a classic novel in both English and history provide for meaningful cross-curricular work and how might engaging with historical fiction help pupils engage more effectively with the realities of the past? Michael Monoghan reports a cross-curricular project and reflects on successes and on lessons learned.

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Unpromising beginnings

During the academic year 2008-2009 the history department of the Bishop's Stortford High School felt under siege. We were facing up to not only the likely introduction of a two-year Key Stage 3 but also the more frightening possibility of the skills- and competence-based curriculum of Opening Minds. The possibility of integrated humanities courses taught by a single teacher across Key Stage 3 filled us with dread. The two-year Key Stage 3 was bad enough, we thought, but the loss of the subject altogether? It was a horrifying prospect. The barbarians, we believed, were at the gates.

What the department had objected to most about the competence-based approach was the loss of rigour that it would bring. We felt that this 'new' cross-curricularity, with its anti-subject rhetoric and its false distinction between competences and knowledge, would lead to watered-down teaching, generic thinking skills and the loss of any kind of intellectual framework. We believed in cross-curricularity, just not this kind of cross-curricularity. What we needed was a way of showing people that smart **inter-disciplinary** projects led by subject specialists were better. In other words, that people rooted in their own subjects as 'ways of knowing' could work together to improve the thinking of pupils in more powerful and profound ways than the emptiness of a competence-driven approach.

In looking for people to work with, the English department were natural allies. A dynamic and enthusiastic group, they were also one of the least likely departments to be dragged into the single teacher approach, at least in the short term, and this mattered. We wanted to make the point that smart **inter-disciplinary** work was about more than just lumping together subjects with related subject matter. Furthermore, we share many values; both departments believe students enjoy difficult work and that by challenging pupils and introducing them to complex ideas we interest them. It was with this in mind that the two departments decided they would work together on a Year 9 inter-disciplinary project focused on Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

Aims

Both departments had many interlocking objectives for the project. The English department were concerned with encouraging reading of high-quality literature, increasing the reading stamina of students and improving

Figure 1: Integrated schemes of work

Extracts from English scheme of work		History scheme of work		Touch points
1	What makes a good story?	1	What makes a good historical story about the early nineteenth century?	Pupils discuss what they thought made a good story in English and go on to build up criteria of what makes a good historical story.
4	How is a story introduced? [Story prediction exercise using setting, character & event]	2	Why is *Great Expectations* so useful to historians?	In history pupils pull together what they have learnt so far in English about the characters and the setting of the book to make suggestions about the early nineteenth century. They then use the first ten chapters of the book (already read in English) to create a layers-of-inference diagram to draw out inferences about crime and punishment, village and town life, education, the way people lived etc. Therefore by the second history lesson the pupils are already using a huge chunk of the book as a historical source.
8	How is setting created in *Great Expectations*?	3	Why is PLACE and SETTING so important in *Great Expectations*?	Explicit link drawn with English work on the understanding of setting and place to frame discussion of Pip's move from the countryside to the town. Pupils place themselves in pictures such as Constable's 'The Hay Wain' (1821) Turner's 'Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway' (1844) and 'A court for King Cholera' (*Punch* 1851) and examine sources such as Sala's *Twice Round the Clock* to create pictures of rural and urban life in the mid-nineteenth century. Discuss forthcoming English story-writing – how might what we have done be used in English lessons?
10	How is character created through dialogue?	4	How is language and dialogue used to create an authentic sense of period?	Pupils use list of nineteenth-century expressions to role-play dialogue. Pupils use the vocabulary provided to take back to English lessons for their work on dialogue. English teachers explicitly encourage use of history work on setting and language in early experiments with writing stories.
13	Character comparison in *Great Expectations*	5	How do the characters in *Great Expectations* help us to understand society?	Pupils use the characters in *Great Expectations* to form society lines. The society lines are used to explore the nature of power in the early nineteenth century. How is power determined? What role is played by, for example, wealth, connections, job, gender, age and marriage? Pupils are encouraged to use their knowledge of the characters in the book to explore these themes and to consider what we understand by the concept of 'society'. Where, for example, does Magwitch fit in society? Pupils go on to examine what happens when the different worlds of Pip and Herbert Pocket collide.
15	Practise story-writing on crime and punishment	6	How does Dickens create a story about crime and punishment we want to read?	Pupils examine an extract from *Great Expectations* on Newgate Prison. How does Dickens use historical detail to create a richer text? Pupils use source material such as visitor accounts of Newgate Prison (for instance Dickens' own, *Sketches by Boz*), Broadsides, accounts of the Metropolitan Police, speeches by Robert Peel, descriptions of the hulks etc. to gather rich detail to on prisons, crime prevention, types of crime and punishments. This rich period detail is then taken to English lessons and used to write a short story with the theme of crime and punishment.
17	Final piece of story-writing	7	What makes a good historical story about the nineteenth century?	Pupils review how the book has helped their understanding of life in the nineteenth century and practise incorporating historical detail into their writing. Using story recipes pupils then write their historical stories in both English and history lessons. Both departments mark stories using their own criteria.

their story-writing abilities. The history department's aims overlapped and complemented these objectives. Inspired by the work of Counsell, Brooke and Martin and Brown, we hoped to develop a richer sense of the nineteenth century than a text book could provide.[1] The novel would, it was hoped, provide a window into the nineteenth century, a vivid picture of the past. This would allow pupils to improve their historical understanding and use the visual picture painted by the book.[2] The fiction would thus allow the pupils to be closer to the facts and this in turn might allow us an access point to explore the past as something diverse and complex.[3] The novel, its characters, settings and storylines, would be used to encourage pupils to engage with the extent and nature of similarity and difference in the early nineteenth society.

These basic aims dovetailed with those of the English department: we wanted pupils to take this rich background knowledge and greater sense of the complex nineteenth century into English lessons. It was hoped that they would then produce richer pieces of writing by incorporating the skills learned in both subjects. The final outcome task would be an historical story about the early nineteenth century in which pupils would be encouraged to 'go with the grain of the evidence'.[4] The story would give a focus to the students' historical research with their characters, settings and detail as faithful to the sources studied in history lessons as possible. We wanted, in Counsell's words, the students to become 'dogged' in their search for authenticity.[5] These stories would, therefore, be pieces of valid historical writing and hopefully not be 'bad empathy' exercises.

Although we were encouraging a move away from analytical argument about the past we were influenced by the work of people such as Byrom and felt that *this* mode of expression (i.e. narrative) provided a valid way of exploring historical 'truth'.[6] In a sense all historical narratives are literary constructs and in getting our students to construct narratives from close readings of historical sources they were engaging in work not dissimilar to historians such as Figes and Schama. Both Figes's *A People's Tragedy* and Schama's *Citizens* create rich, literary narratives a long way away from a traditional recounting of facts.[7]

For the history department, however, the most important of all our aims was the desire to improve our students' historical thinking. As Counsell says, 'fiction takes some beating as a tool for historical thinking. It is as if another world breaks into this one'. We wanted students to *think* carefully about the attitudes, beliefs and values of the people they were writing about.[8] It was in the process of writing the stories and engaging in their 'dogged' quest that they would hopefully begin to enter the world of the early nineteenth century and be able to analyse it. In other words the book would become an access tool for discourse about the early nineteenth century.

Putting it all together

To achieve these aims it was essential that the two departments wrote integrated schemes of work. The logistical challenges were considerable. There were five mixed-ability history groups all taught by different members of staff and with nine hours of teaching time in the half term. The English department taught eight groups, divided into sets and with 18 hours of available teaching time. Some members of staff were not specialist subject teachers, some were senior

Figure 2: Dickens with and without history

a) 'Dickens' without a sense of time and place

'So, I came into Smithfield and then went to Saint Paul's. Finally I arrived at Newgate Prison. While I looked about me here, a minister of justice asked me if I would like to step in and hear a trial or so. I declined but he took me inside and showed me around instead. This was horrible, and gave me a sickening idea of London: the more so as the minister wore mildewed clothes. I could not wait to get away.'

b) Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Chapter 32.

'So, I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So, I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison. Following the wall of the jail, I found the roadway covered with straw to deaden the noise of passing vehicles; and from this, and from the quantity of people standing about, smelling strongly of spirits and beer, I inferred that the trials were on. While I looked about me here, an exceedingly dirty and partially drunk minister of justice asked me if I would like to step in and hear a trial or so: informing me that he could give me a front place for half-a-crown, whence I should command a full view of the Lord Chief Justice in his wig and robes – mentioning that awful personage like waxwork, and presently offering him at the reduced price of eighteen pence. As I declined the proposal on the plea of an appointment, he was so good as to take me into a yard and show me where the gallows was kept, and also where people were publicly whipped, and then he showed me the Debtors' Door, out of which culprits came to be hanged: heightening the interest of that dreadful portal by giving me to understand that 'four on 'em' would come out at that door the day after to-morrow at eight in the morning, to be killed in a row. This was horrible, and gave me a sickening idea of London: the more so as the Lord Chief Justice's proprietor wore (from his hat down to his boots and up again to his pocket-handkerchief inclusive) mildewed clothes, which had evidently not belonged to him originally, and which, I took it into my head, he had bought cheap of the executioner. Under these circumstances I thought myself well rid of him for a shilling.'

managers busy with their own challenges around school, and some were PGCE students teaching these Year 9 groups for the first time. Most staff had also not read the book. Some staff, in both departments, questioned the whole basis for the project. It was, therefore, essential that the rationale was clearly communicated to all the staff involved – the success or failure would be determined by ensuring the buy-in of the many staff who would deliver the teaching.

In a sense it was the logistical challenges of the project which held the key to success. Joint meetings of the English and history departments were held to communicate our objectives, and lesson planning responsibilities were divided out among staff in the history department to help everyone feel ownership of what we trying to accomplish. The fact that the novel itself could be read in English lessons – where students focused on plot, character, setting, style etc. – meant that the history department could use the **whole book** as a source, something that would have been next to impossible if the history department had tried to accomplish this on its own.

The policy of setting in English meant that we could craft pathways through the novel for all of the students. The top sets read the whole novel while the other groups would read varying amounts, but even those students who did not read the entire book would follow a journey which gave them a sense of having read a work of literature from start to finish. As the English department moved through the novel the history department would then simultaneously teach a sequence of nine lessons examining life in nineteenth-century Britain. Each lesson focused on a particular theme (e.g. social structure, crime and punishment, differences between urban and rural life etc.) and used the novel (alongside other sources) as an entry point to move on and build up the students' understanding of the topic. The pupils would be focused around the enquiry question: What makes a good historical novel about the nineteenth century?

The two schemes of work were created to incorporate 'touch-points', moments where the English lessons and the history lessons would either explicitly or implicitly join together (see Figure 1). The history lessons, borrowing heavily from Geraint Brown's work on *Private Peaceful*, were framed and positioned to reflect when the students had read certain key episodes in their English lessons. English lessons were also constructed to directly use knowledge and understanding gained in history. Careful timetables were constructed to ensure that all staff reached these 'touch-points' at agreed dates either so work could be carried directly by the students from one lesson to another or, in the case of the implicit moments, teachers were aware of what students had learnt in the other subject. For example, one of the key English assessments was a story written about a hanging which used the sources studied in history. In history lessons pupils were shown a piece of writing with all the 'history' removed and compared it with the text from Dickens (see Figure 2) to draw out both the power of the original and the greater sense of the nineteenth century which it gave the reader. Using a range of sources pupils were then encouraged to search 'doggedly' for evidence and detail which would allow their own writing on crime and punishment in their next English lesson to create a more vivid picture of the past.

The lessons

Throughout the lesson sequence the benefits of the inter-disciplinary work became clearer and clearer. Influenced by Woolley, we wanted to enthuse students about the possibilities opened up by using a long text in the history classroom. At the start of the processes the initial reaction by a vast majority of the students to the knowledge that they would be studying this long work in both English **and** history was not overwhelmingly positive, especially in groups where literacy was a problem. It was, therefore, important to give them immediate access into the text, confidence in handling it and instant success with it. The pupils were split into groups with responsibility for a particular topic, for example, crime and punishment or rural life. By using a layers-of-inference diagram with the first eight chapters of the book (which they had already read) they were able to build up a picture of their own topic area.[9] Careful modelling allowed them, first, to pull out what the text 'told' them about their topic area and second, what the text therefore 'suggested' about early nineteenth-century life. Through feedback and discussion the students filled in their diagrams for the other topic areas. Like Woolley I was struck by the speed with which pupils selected the relevant pieces of text for their topic by discussing what chapters were likely to contain information on their designated area. The sense of satisfaction in the room at the end of the task was obvious. They had just 'read' eight chapters of very difficult prose in about half an hour and they were delighted with themselves. As one student said 'we've got the whole book on one page'. It was an extremely important moment in the lesson sequence which showed them that they could access this text. Discussion on the topic areas illustrated clearly that they had already created a richer and more diverse sense of the past for themselves than I had been able to give them in the previous three weeks looking at the causes of the industrial revolution.

As we moved through the scheme of work, it was in a lesson focusing on status and power in the nineteenth century that I felt we had begun to achieve our objectives. The lesson title was *'How do the characters in Great Expectations help us to understand society?'* and in it we wanted students to come to conclusions concerning notions of relative power and people's place in society. It was the book that enabled us to move away from simple ideas of rich/poor and rural/urban and into a richer view of society. Creating a 'society line' (See Figure 3) using the characters from the novel, allowed the students to talk meaningfully about place in society. Getting the students (representing characters) to place themselves in a 'power' continuum allowed discussions on the complex nature of nineteenth-century power and how that might be determined through, for example, land, social status or gender.

This was the project at its best, the book unlocking good, complex history and history feeding back a greater understanding of the novel to English. It was a fantastic example of the book allowing access into discourse that otherwise would have been impossible. Simple teacher-led intervention and questioning along the line of 'What *sorts* of hierarchies in society were there?' allowed the students to enter into analytical and critical debate. The knowledge of the characters in the book allowed the students, *whatever ability*

Figure 3: Great Expectations Character Cards

Miss Havisham A wealthy old woman Lives in a counrty manor	**Herbert Pocket** Young gentleman Good education	**Molly** Jaggers's housekeeper	**Biddy** A country girl and orphan. Kind, intelligent but poor.
Estella Adopted daughter of Miss Havisham	**Jaggers** Important criminal lawyer in London.	**Abel Magwitch** A convict and fearsome criminal	**Pip Pirrip** A young orphan boy Raised by his sister and brother-in-law, the village blacksmith
Uncle Pumblechook Merchant Obsessed with money. Claims to be part of high society.	**Bentley Drummle** A coarse, unintelligent young man from a wealthy family	**Mr Hubble** A simple man from Pip's village. Thinks he is more important than he is	**Sarah Pocket** 'a dry, brown corrugated old woman, with a small face that might have been made out of walnut shells'
Wemmick Legal clerk Works for Jaggers	**Joe Gargery** Village blacksmith. Kindly.	**Clara Barley** Wife to Herbert Pocket. A very poor girl that lives with her father who is suffering from gout.	**Matthew Pocket** Cousin of Miss Havisham's. He is the head of the Pocket family
Mrs Joe Ambitious wife to blacksmith. Hot-tempered.	**Dolge Orlick** Blacksmith's labourer. Strong, rude and sullen	**Camilla** Ageing, talkative relative of Miss Havisham. Only interested in money.	**Compeyson** A convict, and enemy to Magwitch

Figure 2: Dickens with and without history

Example A

'Robert got up and put on his smelly waistcoat over his dilapidated shirt. He was already wearing his little mangled shorts. On the floor lay two wooden bowls of porridge. Robert ate slowly with his grubby fingers as his sister often told him off for eating quickly. Robert had been four when his parents had died and his sister had been eight. Now seven years later they were in what some might call a half broken shack but what they called home'.

Example B

'Standing alone as the only convict there in the press yard in Newgate Prison, a blacksmith walked towards me. He was in his late thirties with a tired face and a shabby shirt and trousers. His beige apron was smeared and his hands were hard and dirty as he reached for my arm and leg fetters. He took out a key and undid them. Afterwards, another man walked forward and put a cord around my elbows and body so that my hands were in front of me. He placed the halter, a noose with a slipknot, around my neck and coiled the free end around my body. By about midday, I thought, I would be dangling from this piece of rope and that would be the end. All around me was brick and mortar, with the walls reaching into the sky with spikes running along the top, rusty with age. I could smell sweat, blood and fumes in the air and the stench stuck to the back of my throat, making it impossible to breathe properly. I was sweaty and hot and my cotton shirt stuck to the back of my body, itching and uncomfortable. I raised my hand to peel it away from my skin, but a guard quickly grabbed my arm and forcefully pulled it down.'

Example C

'My first name being after my father's middle name Kyle and my last name being Smith after my father's last name, so I was therefore known as Kyle Smith. I have not had an easy life so far and it is getting worse. The day had come for the hanging, there were people everywhere, bakers selling bread from their carts, pie sellers selling their famous meat pies from Fleet Street and old women trying to sell their potions promising they could cure any disease. People everywhere, jostling to see the bloodthirsty action.'

level they were, to be self-aware about the generalisations they were making. The awareness came from character knowledge which was far deeper than they would have had in a 'normal' society line activity with only a few words to base their judgement on. In other words the book was making 'history more historical'.[10] The pupils were thus able to talk about the extent of diversity in society and people's place within it. For example, much interesting discussion was had concerning Magwitch, his place as an 'outsider', and whether he was part of society at all. This of course led on to discussions about what nineteenth-century 'society' was and whether this definition was different depending on who you were. This was what we had sought to achieve – students thinking about a rich, complex and diverse past: crucially, they were starting to do that most unnatural of acts, think historically.[11]

The stories

As we moved on to the final outcome task, pupils also worked on techniques that allowed them to improve their writing by incorporating their understanding of the nineteenth century into their narrative writing. We wanted them to understand the 'tune on the page' in *Great Expectations* and use this in combination with their sense of period to create atmosphere and suspense in their own writing.[12] The most effective technique used was that of 'delaying the final moment'.[13] Modelling the use of non-right branching sentences gave pupils a scaffold to slow down their narratives, capture the thoughts of their characters and introduce a period feel to the stories. It gave the pupils tremendous confidence to write practice pieces which they could work on and improve. The work done at this point can be seen clearly in the final stories that they wrote and it is in these stories that we see the biggest success and failure of the project.

Like all inter-disciplinary work this project involved compromise and give and take on both sides. From the beginning of the project the English department were keen that the top set English group should write stories about **any** period in past. In the history department this was justified in terms of the historical research the students would have to do in order to the able to write the stories. Despite the work done by the history department to introduce pupils to suitable reading material the results were predictable. It was immediately noticeable that the top set pupils had reverted to cliché, vagary, sentimentality and waffle. They, for the most part, produced stories that could have been set anywhere and at any time. All the richness in their writing had been removed. This is well illustrated in Example A (see Figure 4).

In contrast, however, many of the students in the lower sets (and the few in the top set who decided to write about the nineteenth century) produced far better work. These accounts, which went with the 'grain of the evidence', created a fuller and more rounded sense of place, time and attitude, which, in turn, made for more convincing narrative writing (see Example B). Most pleasingly of all though was the way that so many students had felt the 'tune on the page' and what comes through very strongly in much of their work is ***respect*** for Dickens. They were borrowing explicitly from the text, its rhythms and patterns, and developing a more literary style. They had unquestionably been 'absorbed in the quality and structure of the experience engendered by

the text'.[14] Example C, a low-ability student with behavioural concerns, shows this clearly. It respects Dickens, it feels his tune and it goes with the grain of the evidence in its attempts to portray a diverse past. The data associated with the stories bears out these improvements in their writing. Many of the students in the lower sets achieved the best English marks they had all year.

Overall, the impact on motivation and achievement was high, with, for example, one very-low-ability student commenting that the book was the best he had ever read. If, therefore, we have learnt anything we have learnt that, unsurprisingly maybe, students, regardless of ability, are motivated by great literature. There will, however, be changes next time. Despite the fact that a significant majority of the top set students did read history books and historical novels relevant to the periods they chose to write about, the quality of their end product was poor. We will get them to write about the nineteenth century next year! Furthermore, although most pupils were motivated by the book, a significant proportion found it 'difficult' enough to suggest that we need to start building scaffolds towards work like *Great Expectations*. In many ways Year 9 is too *late* to be reading Dickens for the first time. The earlier students are exposed to high-quality literature the better and with this in mind the English department have changed their schemes of work to incorporate a work by Dickens in Year 7 (*A Christmas Carol*) and Year 8 (*Oliver Twist*). The project is now embedded into the schemes of work of both departments and although there will be logistical changes in future years the core of the integrated schemes of work will still form the basis of a whole half-term of English and history teaching.

In the end, the proposed merging of the humanities never happened. Wise heads prevailed. This experiment probably did not affect that decision in any way but, at the very least, I hope we showed that intelligent i**nter-disciplinary work** driven by subject specialists is the best way of improving 'thinking skills'.

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