



Cunning Plan

for showing students the complexities of constructing historical claims about the British empire

Enquiry question:

What advantages did the British Empire have for people living in it?

I wanted to give my Year 8 students ownership of their work on the British Empire by allowing them to suggest our 'enquiry question'.¹ In order to introduce the Empire, I brought in sugar, spices, bananas, chilli peppers and cotton. I then showed maps demonstrating the Empire at its height. Having already done some work on getting students to pose their own enquiry questions,² students were able to suggest several. The one that caught my attention was, 'What advantages did the British Empire have for people living in it?'. I decided that such an enquiry could include in-depth work on India while also allowing reflection on the British Empire in overview.

With only seven one-hour lessons, planning a meaningful enquiry was challenging. It would have been easy to oversimplify and distort. The Empire was so multi-faceted, the perspectives within it so varied and the perspectives from which it might be studied so widely contrasting, that it was difficult to find acceptable simplification for Year 8 without reducing their judgements to facile or naïve simplicity. I therefore decided to build the lesson sequence *around these very difficulties*. I constructed a scheme that would make pupils aware of the range of perspectives within the Empire *and* the range of perspectives from which the period might be studied, so that they would become newly thoughtful about the challenge of making any analytic claims at all.

The approach that I adopted was not completely successful, but I learned much from trying it across two consecutive years. I look forward to trying it again, and then to analysing it in more depth for a future edition of *Teaching History*.

Lesson 1: Preparing for depth with overview: the advantages of Empire for Britain.

Take in the big picture: explore the scope of the British Empire across continents. Use images from National Archives Learning Curve to build understanding that the Empire benefited Britain through trade, employment and goods such as tea, cotton and sugar.³ Link back to Industrial Revolution. Let students work out that the British Empire helped fuel the cotton mills of the North of England. Pupils do early speculating in relation to enquiry question: Who, *from our enquiry so far*, is likely to have experienced advantages from living in the Empire? Who in Britain? Who elsewhere?

Lesson 2: The East India Company Trading Game

Home in on India, but focus on advantages *for Britain*. Play the game.⁴ In role as an East India Company trader students learn how increasing political control of India benefited British traders.

Round off lesson with Lord Curzon, British Viceroy of India 1898-1905:

'There has never been so great an instrument for the good of humanity as the British empire.'

Ask students if they have yet come across anything that might challenge this view. (They haven't.) So far they have learned that the Empire benefited the British economy, created jobs and helped to stabilise an India that was plagued with war following the death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Leave with cliff-hanger: How might our enquiry shift? What might the next lesson bring?

Lesson 3: The Indian cotton industry

Examine Britain's impact on Indian cotton industry and on livelihoods across India. Before students swing completely and condemn Curzon's view outright, ask them, 'but how would British cotton weavers view this? How would it have been advantageous to them?' Now review Curzon quote. This time, expect dissent, discussion and earnest debate. So far, what would we say in response to our enquiry question? Complicated answers start to emerge ...

Lesson 4: What's in a name? The Indian Mutiny or ...

Familiarise students with causes and events of the Indian Mutiny using card sort activities. Then switch focus into *how the event was perceived*. Use Punch cartoon 'Justice'. Students annotate the source in detail to show British perspective at the time. Introduce modern, Indian term, 'First

War of Independence'. Speculate: what might Indians have called it at the time?

Divide class in two. Half the students write contemporary newspaper article in which they must refer to the 'mutiny'; the other half uses a different name for the event, staying consistent with that perspective. Supply them with more sources in order to strengthen narrative knowledge, sense of period and understanding of contemporary perspectives.

Lesson 5: Dadabhai Naoroji

Introduce students to Suttee through a 'slow reveal' of a picture. Students will be horrified. When asked to relate it to the enquiry question, they will state its abolition as a clear benefit of British rule. Introduce Dadabhai Naoroji – the first Indian MP in Parliament. In his report on British rule in India, Naoroji judged abolition of Suttee a benefit, but he also examined other issues, creating a more complex picture. Now prepare to zoom forwards into the present (anticipating Lesson 6) by asking students to think about Naoroji's report as potential *evidence* for modern historians. What kinds of questions can we ask of it? Can we use it as evidence to advance, test or challenge some propositions about beneficial and detrimental effects of British rule on India?

Use Luff's model for a modern, historians' debate (see his 'Activity One').⁵ Ask students to debate, 'Did British rule benefit Indians?' Divide them into two groups and give them a wide range of sources (in addition to Naoroji's report and suitable for contextualising it), including matters such as architecture and culture. Choose winners according to points system devised by Luff.

Lesson 6: Switch to late 20th and 21st century: cultural relativism and Shambo the cow

Students now see that reaching a judgement about extent and distribution of advantages is no easy matter. Interpreting the sources will be tough. But that's not where difficulties end. Looking back, how do we see the Empire? How might our position today affect what we see, or choose to see?

Introduce Shambo, adopted by the Hindu Skanda Vale Temple in Wales as a sacred animal. In 2007 tests confirmed bovine tuberculosis. He had to be slaughtered. Result: massive protest from the Hindu community. Shambo's supporters arrived from as far afield as New Zealand. What was to some a necessary slaughter was, to others, an insulting and immoral act. Ask students to think about how *their own*, twenty-first century, European perspectives shape their interpretation of advantages to Indian peoples. Relate this to abolition of Suttee. Expect fierce debate.

Bring out weighing scales. Ask students to 'weigh' one proposition against another. For example, weigh 'Indian widows were now allowed to marry after the death of their husbands' against 'British attention was engrossed by devising new methods of taxation without increasing the ability to pay.' During the 'weighing', provoke thoughtfulness about complexity by asking questions such as:

- Roughly how many people did each affect?
- Which affected people more deeply? (What does 'deeply' mean?)
- Which created more problems for Indian society?

Give students various propositions to 'weigh' on scales. Encourage them to see the issues that affect their judgements, and to examine each others' assumptions. Include at least one pair of propositions which requires the students to argue about whether cultural relativism should affect historical judgements. For example:

'Suttee was abolished. This affected hundreds of women each year.'

versus

'The British government failed to prevent famines and it was in their power to do so.'

Whole-class feedback. Whole-class debate. Whole-class decision: Was British rule beneficial to Indian people? Make human continuum: 'Britain benefited India' to 'Britain did not benefit India'.

Lesson 7: Joining James or Judd? Decision time!

Return to broader picture of British Empire introduced in Lesson 1. Do another card-sort, in which students place a broad range of events, covering as many geographical areas of the Empire as possible, on to a continuum (advantages to disadvantages).

Now introduce students to Denis Judd and Lawrence James.⁶ Read extracts. Their contrasting arguments will now make sense.

Students finally answer the enquiry question, 'What advantages did the British Empire have for people living in it?' in extended writing. Push students to come off fence by including judgement on whether people living in the Empire benefited overall. Remind them that their writing must show the *complexity* of *reaching* such a claim – *range* of sources, difficulty of establishing evidence from certain sources, diversity of experience across a vast, global empire, their own assumptions or unseen prejudices, not to mention methodological issues highlighted by James and Judd.

Laura Fyson teaches history at Twynham School (11-18 comprehensive), in Christchurch, Dorset.

With thanks to Richard Harris, University of Southampton, and Samantha Groom, Sholing Technology College, 11-16 comprehensive, Southampton, who both helped me with planning this scheme of work.

REFERENCES

- Riley, M. (2000) 'Into the Key Stage 3 history garden: choosing and planting your enquiry questions', *Teaching History*, 99, *Curriculum Planning Edition*
- Burnham, S. (2007) 'Getting Year 7 to set their own questions about the Islamic Empire, 600-1600', *Teaching History*, 128, *Beyond the Exam Edition*
- The National Archives Learning Curve: Case Study One: Living in the British Empire, the British view. Available at: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/empire/g2/cs1/default.htm
- The game can be found in: Byrom, J., Culpin, C. and Riley, M. (2008) *The Impact of Empire*, London: Hodder Murray, pp. 22-23.
- Luff, I. (2001) 'Beyond "I speak, you listen, Boy!" Exploring diversity of attitudes and experiences through speaking and listening', *Teaching History*, 105, *Talking History Edition*, pp. 10-17
- Judd, D. (1997) *Empire: The British Imperial Past from 1765 to the Present*, London: Fontana Press; James, L. (1995) *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, London: Abacus