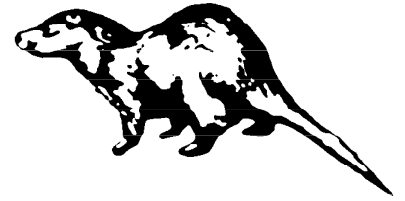


NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



SLATE MINING IN VICTORIAN TIMES

TEACHERS' NOTES

Two classes of mixed Year 5/6 children were taught this lesson early in the summer term. The account below describes the lesson taught by me to one of the classes. A colleague taught the other class, but did not have time to complete the final activity (episode 4).

In the autumn term both classes had studied the Victorians. In June, the Year 6 children in each class were to visit the Slate Caverns in Llechwedd Slate Mines as part of a school field trip. With the background of the Victorians, and with the imminent visit to Wales, it seemed a good time to introduce the lesson. We hoped the children would then have a greater understanding of the slate mine when we visited it.

The lesson linked closely to National Literacy Strategy requirements, dealing with two specific genres: autobiography and non-chronological report.

Editor's note: the teaching described could be adapted and used with a range of texts, with or without a site visit looming!

Year group/class, and teaching time

Year 5/6, mixed ability and gender, 28 in the class ; teaching time: 1 hour

Learning objectives

History: for the children to acquire knowledge of a miner's work in a slate mine in Victorian Britain.

Literacy:

- for the children to read challenging texts, working on two different genre types (autobiography and non-chronological reports, as specified in Year 6, Term 1, numbers 11 and 13 of the National Literacy Strategy)
- to see if the children could identify the flow and sequence of each text and give a reason for their choice.

I particularly wanted to see whether, after the work taught on genres over the year, the pupils could identify the two different genres presented to them: autobiography and non-chronological report.

Cross-curricular: for the children to examine the concept of work, what it involves and how it has changed.

Personal skills: for the pupils to work co-operatively on problem-solving.

Key question

What was it like to work in a Victorian slate mine?

Resources

Two texts:

- short autobiography of a slate miner, in the form of a magazine article.
- report about slate mining at Llechwedd, also in the form of a magazine article.

[Both texts are adapted from the *Llechwedd Slate Caverns Guide*.]

They were broken up into random paragraphs on two A4 sheets – see below.

Two A4 sheets, containing the autobiography and the slate mining report, with the paragraphs jumbled; also the two photographs described below.

Photograph of the Llechwedd Slate Mill (from <http://www.westwales.co.uk/graphics/cutshed.jpg>)

Photograph of the Ffestinog railway from <http://www.festrail.co.uk/photolib1.htm>

The address is: Ffestinog Railway, Harbour Station, Porthmadog, Gwynedd, Wales, LL49 9NF. Tel: 01766-512340. Fax: 01766-514715.

A frame for reconstructing the two texts, blown up to A3 size, containing the headings and initial paragraphs of each text.

A4 sheet showing how the re-assembled texts and the photographs fitted within the frame.

THE TEACHING

The teaching was divided into three main activities:

- Introduction to the life of a slate miner.
- Pupil work on re-assembling two jumbled non-fiction magazine texts: a report on slate mining and an autobiographical account of a miner's life.
- Discussion to develop insight into, and understanding of, a miner's life.

Episode 1

Focus: Examining two different genres: report and autobiography

This part of the lesson was conducted with the whole class sitting on the carpet. I gave out the A3 frame, one per pair of children, containing the heading and first paragraphs of each magazine text. We read together both sets of introductory paragraphs – the autobiography and the report. I asked them if they could tell me what were the distinctive features of the two genres.

The children were a little slow to get started. Gradually, by trawling their memories, they were able to identify the different features of reports and autobiographies. They discussed the identifying elements of the two genres:

- Reports: non-chronological, objective, factual, transactional language, in the third person
- Autobiographies: chronological, subjective, opinions/ judgements/ feelings, in the first person.

Episode 2

Focus: Sorting and categorising the paragraphs according to genre; arranging the paragraphs in the correct order.

Sorting:

I arranged the class into seven mixed ability groups, with four children per group. I gave each group a copy of the two A4 sheets containing the texts, cut up into separate paragraphs and jumbled together. I asked the children to consider which paragraphs belonged to which text genre, and why.

The children worked together on sorting out their paragraphs and putting them into the right genre category. From all the groups came animated discussion. Most of the groups were able to identify surprisingly quickly the paragraphs belonging to each article (text type).

Ordering:

The arrangement of the paragraphs in order took much longer; it was this part that elicited the most discussion.

In the other class the groups compared their ordering of the paragraphs with each other, thus deepening and developing their explanation of why they had selected a particular sequence. The inter-group discussion gave the children the chance to change the order of their paragraphs.

Each group now glued its paragraphs onto the A3 frame, in the right section and in the order they had decided was correct.

In my class, five groups placed all the paragraphs in the right category, i.e. report or autobiography. Four of the groups got all the paragraphs in the original order, too. The fifth reversed the order of two paragraphs in the report.

The two other groups didn't identify correctly the last paragraph of each text, swapping them with one another.

The children were able to identify the chronological flow of the autobiographical text and the links from one paragraph to another. One pupil identified one of these links by drawing attention to the first sentence in the third paragraph. It read: 'But when I got inside I felt so small', which flowed from the previous paragraph's assertion: 'I felt six feet tall already. I felt like a man!'

With the report, I was most surprised and pleased that one child was able to express clearly the progressive links in the report. He correctly identified the sequence of the slate's journey from the rock face to the mill and then to the ships for export.

Episode 3

Focus: Discussing the sequence of the paragraphs in the texts.

Here we drew out some of what the children had learnt. As a class, we discussed the arrangement of the paragraphs. This was done in relation to prompting questions:

- Which paragraphs belong to which text genre/magazine article, and why?
- In what order did you arrange them, and why?
- Is the autobiography strictly chronological?
- If reports are not chronological, do they still follow any order?
- Which article was written first?

Our discussion showed children had gleaned much from the passages. Both this activity, and the requirement for them to give a reason for their choice of paragraph sequencing, were designed to ensure they read the texts for meaning. (On reflection, I should have prepared a set of questions to give to each group as it completed the task.)

Episode 4

Focus: What have we learned about slate mining in Victorian times?

This was in a sense the crux of the lesson – certainly in terms of historical learning. A knowledge of genre, and how it helps to interpret and understand text, is only of value if it enhances the quality of pupil knowledge, judgement, and ability to comprehend, to evaluate, to make connections, to recreate situations mentally, to have insights into why things happened.

The historical questions I now posed were:

- Why was slate mined?
- How was it mined?
- What were conditions like for the miners?

- What else did you learn about the miners' lives that was not directly to do with mining?

The children used the two texts and the two photographs to answer the questions.

Some groups took longer to complete this activity than others. Each group knew in advance it would be asked questions of fact from the two texts. However, giving them a prompt sheet earlier would have made their reading more purposeful and made it easier to include all the members of each group.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- acquired knowledge of miners' work in a Victorian slate mine, and of how slate mines operated
- engaged in genuine social and co-operative learning
- identified the features of report and autobiographical genres
- read, engaged with and understood two challenging texts
- identified, reconstructed and justified the flow and sequence of each text.

Reflection/evaluation

The lesson provided a clear focus for the children, in terms both of engaging with the two genres and developing an understanding of slate mining prior to the visit. It served as a basis for them to engage with both report and autobiographical writing, using as models the two texts and their identifying features.

Comparing the slightly different experiences in the two classes is interesting. The fact that my colleague didn't have time to discuss the historical aspects (episode 4) regarding the life of miners would suggest I failed to convey to her the ultimate aim of the lesson, namely, to understand the life of a Victorian slate miner. She focused more on the literacy aspects than the historical ones (she is a scientist really!) Nevertheless I liked her idea of allowing the children to compare each other's results before gluing their own paragraphs down.

Nuffield Primary History project

General editors: Jacqui Dean and Jon Nichol

Author of this unit: Paul Brown, Shropshire

© in this format Nuffield Primary History 2003

downloaded from www.primaryhistory.org