



Creating bridges into the past

In preparation for the new primary history curriculum and its increased emphasis on acquiring knowledge, **Tim Taylor** highlights a teaching strategy to bridge the gap between the past and present and engage students in exploring the curriculum content from within an imagined historical context.

Of all the changes in the new National Curriculum, the ones made to the programmes of study for history at Key Stage 2 are going to have the most significant effect on the way primary schools organise and plan their provision.

For one reason, the units of the history curriculum will have to be taught chronologically – from the Stone Age to the Battle of Hastings. For another, there is a substantial increase in the amount of content to be studied. Curriculum 2000 put the emphasis on developing study skills, allowing more flexibility in terms of the topics and the order in which they were covered – the new curriculum is more prescriptive and content heavy. Schools can no longer choose between the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons or the Vikings, they must now teach all three, and in order. Overall there is a 20 per cent increase in the number of units. Furthermore, the new curriculum is more explicit in terms of what should be learnt in these units, putting more emphasis on acquiring knowledge. This is particularly true of the three units covering early British history.

In the new curriculum, the single 'Invaders and Settlers' unit from Curriculum 2000 has been expanded into three separate units:

- The Roman Empire and its impact on Britain
- Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots
- Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor.

For many primary schools, this is going to represent a substantial increase in both the content and the depth that these historical periods have been planned for and studied previously.

In the spring edition of *Creative Teaching and Learning* (volume 3.4), I outlined a plan for teaching the Roman Empire unit through an imaginative-inquiry context. In this article, I'm going to introduce part of a plan for teaching the two Anglo-Saxon units. The full plan is too extensive to cover in the required detail here, so I have restricted myself to a brief outline (see box 'Lesson overview: The history research team').

The main purpose of this article is to explore a teaching strategy that can be used to create an imaginary context in the classroom – in particular, shifting the student's thinking into an imagined space that creates opportunities for them to ask and answer historical questions, explore implications and meanings, and develop deeper knowledge and understanding. The term for this strategy is a 'bridging device', which sounds rather technical and academic, but is really – as you shall see – child's play.

Lesson overview: The history research team

Theme: Anglo-Saxons

Age Range: KS2

Inquiry Question: What effect did the Anglo-Saxon invasion and settlement have on the culture and history of Britain?

Expert Team: History researchers

Client: BBC

Commission: To do the background research for a series of programmes called 'The Really Interesting History of Britain'.

Context: This unit begins with the children looking at the notice-board of a team of successful and busy history researchers. The associated inquiry introduces the students to the work of the team and creates an opportunity for them to 'step into' the fiction. The first task for the children is to create the meeting room for the history team from the furniture of the classroom. The second (as the experts) is to give feedback to the BBC for their newly commissioned series 'The Really Interesting History of Britain.'

They then 'visit' a local Anglo-Saxon excavation site and talk to the archaeologists with the aim of deciding if the site would make an interesting location for filming. To begin with, the site doesn't look promising. However, once the team start looking a bit more closely at the background to the artefacts they realise that even the most mundane objects can tell amazing stories.

The found objects in this unit operate as 'bridges' into the past, creating opportunities for the children to engage in learning and experiences, both from the points of view of the history research team and the Anglo-Saxon people who lived in the settlement.

This unit works across the curriculum, giving students the chance to:

- Apply their imagination, reasoning and inquiry skills.
- Acquire and apply history skills and develop knowledge and understanding.
- Develop knowledge, skills and understanding in areas of history, geography, science, art and design, design technology, music, and ICT as well as skills in English and maths.

To download the full plan and the accompanying resources, visit: www.imaginative-inquiry.co.uk/2012/12/anglo-saxons.

Creating imaginary worlds

Bridging devices are objects or situations that connect two worlds – the real world of the classroom and the imagined world of the context. As an abstract idea this sounds rather complicated, but in actual fact, it is something children do all the time without being consciously aware of it.

Here is an example from a game I played with my youngest daughter, Ettie, when she was about four:

Ettie liked Scooby-Doo and loved getting me, my wife and her older brother and sister to chase her about the house being the monsters from the show. The problem was, she didn't really want us to catch her – if we did, she would scream and the overwhelming emotion would make her cry. This was frustrating because she obviously enjoyed the game so much. The answer was to negotiate with Ettie how scary she wanted the monsters we were representing to be. At first, she didn't understand the idea completely and she turned us into pathetic monsters that could hardly walk. This meant that when she ran away, the monsters were too far behind her to be scary. This was boring, so we renegotiated the game again. This time, she said she wanted the monsters to be scary and quick, but not too scary or too quick. We had to get close to her, but not close enough to catch her. This was just right and we all chased her about the house, always almost, but not quite, catching her.

Ettie was using us all as 'bridging devices'. Of course, she was completely unaware that this was what she was doing. For her, it was all a game and that's how games work – if you don't like something in a game, then you keep changing it until it works the way you want it to. Viewed as playing, it was all very simple and just needed our co-operation and understanding. However, viewed sociologically, it was incredibly sophisticated and involved elaborate methods of thinking and communication.

This is what makes using bridging devices so useful and effective as a classroom strategy. Children understand how they work from their experiences of playing, either alone or as part of a group. If a child picks up a toy crown, puts it on his head and imagines himself as a king, he is using the crown as a bridging device – the crown creates a 'bridge' between the real world of his life and the imagined world of kings, castles and knights. This process of change does not need explaining to the child. He understands it from experience and the way it makes meaning within his own real and imagined worlds. It is, for him and for us, a perfectly natural process – so much so, we almost take it for granted.

However, playing and playfulness is something many people in education frown upon after children reach a certain age, disparaging it as 'fun' or 'frivolousness'. Learning, they insist, is something hard, something serious, something that requires dedication and practice – not something to play with. Yet, playfulness and imagination when used 'seriously' in a learning environment can create an unlimited number of possibilities and opportunities for curriculum exploration and development. It is an ancient medium that uses both an instinctive understanding of play and the formal conventions of drama and theatre.

Moving in and out of the fiction

In the context outlined on the previous page, the children imagine themselves as a team of history researchers commissioned by the BBC to research the history of Anglo-Saxon Britain for a programme called 'The Really Interesting History of Britain'. Their task is to visit an excavation site where a team of archaeologists are uncovering the remains of an Anglo-Saxon village. The aim of their visit is to access whether the site could be used as a possible location for filming. The planning steps to establishing this scenario are quite straight-forward – here is a summary. For more details and access to all the necessary resources, please visit the imaginative-inquiry website.

1. Share the news that the BBC wants us to visit an Anglo-Saxon excavation site.
2. Show the team the archaeologist's map of the dig.
3. Come out of the fiction and watch the slide-show of archaeologists at work.
4. Prepare the classroom with the children as if it were the archaeological site using ropes, tape, tools and so on.
5. Move back into the fiction and interview an adult-in-role representing one of the archaeology team about what has been found.

This process of moving 'in' and 'out' of the fiction can be illustrated using the diagram shown in figure 1.

In steps one and two, the children are 'inside' the imagined world of the history research team. In steps three and four, they come out of the fiction into the real world of the classroom. In step five, they move back into the fiction, to work with an adult-in-role.

The negotiation for each move into and out of the fiction is done linguistically – for example, 'We are just going to stop our story for a short while to look at this slide show'. There is no need for any elaborate drama moves. As we have already discussed, children find this movement in and out of imagined worlds entirely natural.

Each move into and out of the fiction has a strategic function. As with the negotiations with Ettie, stopping and starting the story creates opportunities for learning, discussion and preparation. It is a mistake to think that the story can't be stopped once it has started for fear the fiction will somehow lose coherence or credibility. In fact, the opposite is true. As with the example above, it would be less believable and less coherent if the history research team watched the slide-show in the fiction, since they would already know a great deal about the way archaeologists work. Stopping the story and giving the students the chance to watch the slide-show and ask questions outside the fiction (as themselves) is much more coherent and can create valuable opportunities for learning. Indeed, this process of shifting into and out of the fiction, creating imagined world scenarios that generate real world reasons for study, is at the very centre of how this approach works.

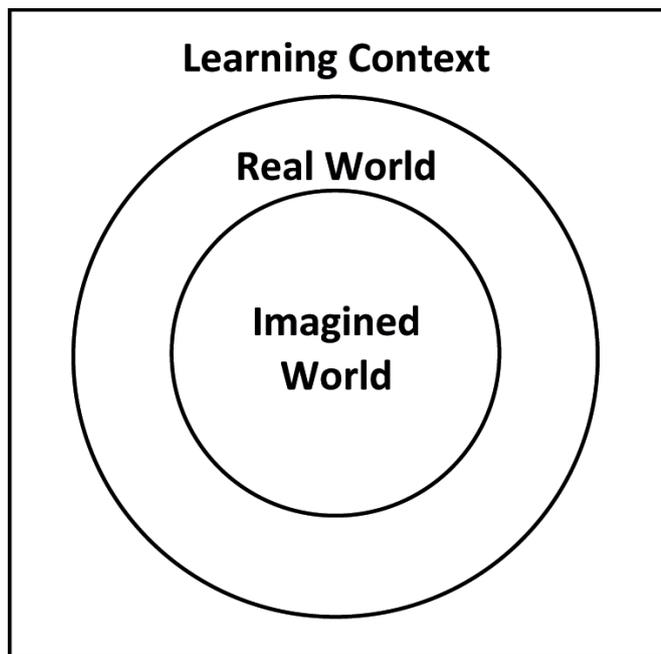


Figure 1

Stepping into the past

So the imagined context of an excavation site has been established as a meaningful, coherent scenario. The children have become members of the history research team and are acquiring, applying and developing curriculum knowledge and practicing their emerging skills of historical research in the role of an 'expert'.

However, the excavation site can also be used as a way to step 'into' the past, creating new scenarios where students can explore the content of the curriculum from 'within' the historical world of the Anglo-Saxon people.

The slideshow of archaeologists at work contains a picture of two skeletons apparently in an embrace. In this next sequence of planning, I suggest focusing an inquiry on this photo and using it as the first step in a sequence that invents a second imagined world of an Anglo-Saxon community.



I first used this planning sequence with my Year 4 class in 2012. The ideas and the language used in this sequence come directly from the children's own reactions and thoughts during that session.

Step 1: Looking at the photo in the slideshow

I put the image on the whiteboard for the children to look at and gave them the opportunity to ask questions, answering as many as I could (my knowledge was very limited). I reminded them that this image is from a real archaeological dig and these are real people.

'This photo is from a real dig. I don't know who these people are or why they seem to be cuddling. They are not from the archaeological dig in our story. However, they could be, if we wanted to invent something like them.'

Step 2: Drawing the skeletons

They thought they would, so we took a large sheet of sand-coloured sugar paper and drew an outline around two volunteers (one child at a time, to spare them their blushes). I then asked some of the other children to add drawings of bones – skulls, ribcages and so on.

At this point, I took the opportunity to do some direct teaching on skeletons using a computer programme, a model of a skeleton, and pictures I photocopied and laminated from a book. The class were fascinated by these images and wanted to make a number of different skeletons in different positions around the classroom. When this was done, we returned to the original 'embrace' drawing.

Step 3: Clues

Next, I wondered out loud what had brought these two people together... There followed a short discussion, where children suggested a number of different ideas.

I continued with: 'It might be that there were some clues on the bodies that were discovered by the archaeology team when they looked closer.'

At this point, I asked one of the children to take a lead. I chose a student who I thought would understand the task and give the others something to think about: 'Leon, could I give you this pen and ask you to draw a mark on one of these skeletons. This mark represents an injury, not noticed initially by the archaeology team, but discovered later when they examined the skeleton back in their lab. It might give a clue to how this person died.'

Leon drew a small crack at the back of one of the skulls.

Step 4: Inquiry

I leaned over to look more closely: 'What do you think might have caused an injury of this kind?' The aim of this question was to create an opportunity for the children to explore a range of different ideas. I was encouraging them to be playful with their thinking, not frivolous, but open-minded and divergent. I was not asking them to come up with the 'right answer'.

After a short discussion, I decided to shift the inquiry in a different direction.

Step 5: Using drama conventions

I asked the children if they would be prepared to represent their ideas as if they were images from the past – a picture of the action that caused the wound, but the moment just before it actually happened. This stopped the general discussion we were having around the picture of the skeletons, but opened up a new activity for exploring the same question. The children quickly organised themselves into smaller groups and found spaces to work around the room. Some needed a bit of support to get started and I moved around the groups offering help and asking questions where I thought I was needed.

After some time working together, the groups were ready to share their different ideas. Each group took a turn while the other children watched and asked questions. The children answering the questions answered them as the people they were representing, rather than as themselves. Something like:

Children: 'What have you got in your hand?'

First soldier: 'It's a sword.'

Children: 'Do you know the soldier is behind you?'

Second soldier: 'No, I'm fighting. I can't see what's behind me.'

And so on. My role in this exchange was to help the children asking the questions to make meaning from the image the group was making, while also protecting those in the image from frivolous, embarrassing or unnecessary interrogation.

Teacher to the children watching: 'It seems this was a blow from behind. Does that seem cowardly to you?'

Children: 'No, it was during a battle. That's what happened in a battle.'

Teacher: 'Yes, I see. But how does this explain the way the person was buried. That is still a mystery.' I then turned my attention to the people in the image: 'Can we ask if there is another image we could see, that would explain how this person was later buried in an embrace? It is still a mystery to us.'



The work continued in this way for the rest of the session, with each group offering different ideas about how the people died and why they were buried in such a strange way. Gradually we began to gather some information about their lives – what things were important to them (family, clan, ritual, beliefs) and how their lives were different to our own (threats from violence and invasion, struggles against hunger, disease and injury). This was an emergent process, involving four sequential steps – experimentation (exploring possibilities in groups), action (the creation of the images), inquiry (asking questions), and reflection (making meaning).

Later, we collected this information in various ways:

- As a class on the whiteboard.
- Individually through writing (a recollection written from the point of view of someone who witnessed the event).
- In groups through drawings and models.

In this way, the embracing skeletons functioned as a bridging device into the imagined (historical) world of the Anglo-Saxon community, creating a new context for the children to explore the curriculum and develop their knowledge, skills and understanding. In effect, we now had two imagined worlds – the imagined world of the expert team and the imagined world of the Anglo-Saxon community, as illustrated on the previous page (figure 2).

This created a much wider and more flexible range of opportunities for engaging the students in both the work of historical investigation and the world of the Anglo-Saxon community.

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Knowledge trail

1) Exploring history

through drama

– Tim Taylor uses visual tools and dramatic conventions to transport his students back to the times of the Romans and the Celts. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/exploringhistorythroughdrama.htm

2) Virtual Vikings

– Using drama to bring history to life, this innovative project allows students to converse with 'real' Vikings across Skype and discover what life was like as a bloodthirsty Scandinavian warrior. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/virtual-vikings

Further activities

The following is a list of some of the activities we planned and used in the classroom following the creation of this context:

- Built a 3-D model of the Anglo-Saxon village
- Made maps of the site
- Wrote reports to the BBC
- Invented the artefacts found by the archaeologists and made replicas
- Made drawings of the objects
- Invented stories about the objects' histories
- Recreated drawings of the Battle of Hastings for the Bayeux tapestry
- Researched the Christian conversion and created 'evidence' for the archaeological site
- Researched what happened to Harold's body after the Battle of Hastings and how this news reached his wife and family
- Wrote an account of these events from the point of view of various characters – soldiers who were there, family who heard the news, servants who watched and heard
- Researched Anglo-Saxon history for the BBC commission
- Researched Sutton Hoo and how the Anglo-Saxon invasions changed England
- Researched the Staffordshire Hoard and how the Norman invasions changed Anglo-Saxon England
- Wrote draft scripts for the BBC episode on Anglo-Saxon history
- Read Beowulf and wrote 'lost' legends
- Researched burial rituals and how these have changed over time
- Researched Alfred the Great and the Viking Invasions
- Creating drawings, writing, art work and artefacts that 'hinted' at or gave archaeological clues about life during these periods in history