

# **What is the impact of multisource learning on History at Key Stage 3?**

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**Geographical area where research conducted:** England-Eastern region

**Educational sector of participants:** Secondary

## **Abstract**

This small-scale case-study examined how the use of multisource learning, by using a wide range of resources including electronic, helped develop the teaching and learning of History at Key Stage 3. The approach employed was based on the idea that key elements of children's historical understanding could be enhanced through a multisource approach. The study examined the use of this approach in work on the First World War and was carried out with two parallel, high achieving Year 9 groups. The pupils worked on this project for twenty lessons lasting fifty minutes each. The main findings of the study are that multisource learning especially through the use of ICT makes a wider range of resources more readily available at low cost where the equipment is available. It can encourage pupils to become autonomous learners as well as collaborative partners. There are more opportunities for pupils to be creative in the way they communicate their ideas, for example, it helps the teacher encourage pupils to apply ICT skills in a more meaningful way.

## Findings

Multisource learning has enabled pupils to access information which would otherwise not be easily available. For example, in the lesson which explored propaganda posters, pupils were able to analyse documents from all the leading participant nations whereas in their class textbook only a few British posters can be seen. In one lesson pupils had to analyse war art through labelling pictures. This 'interaction' with paintings, along with partner discussion led to a higher level of analysis than one would normally expect. A much wider range of sources has helped pupils to appreciate the multisource nature of historical inquiry. In turn this gave them the chance to empathise more widely. The project has enabled pupils to support their findings in a more sophisticated way, by the ease of incorporating evidence into their work. This was demonstrated through their final assignment when pupils used original art work, posters and written sources to support their arguments.

We found that our teaching changed to the approach we usually adopted with these groups in a number of ways. Firstly we found that we were far less didactic in our approach. This was borne out by our discussion with the pupils who noted that more teacher time was spent with individuals and pairs. We both found it was easier to intervene as there was already ongoing dialogue between the pupils. Having work on the screen enabled both pupils and ourselves to view and discuss the work collaboratively. This contrasts with our previous classroom experience with these groups where it is often difficult to do this. On a number of occasions pupils discovered sources which we had not seen. This happens rarely when students do not have access to the range of information available and led to the teacher and pupil unravelling the sources together.

Planning was helped by having time to work together on this. We spent two days searching websites and selecting the materials we thought would best help the pupils. We quickly discovered there were too many sites to explore fully so we looked at the ones which looked most interesting and copied these into a text file. We selected some appropriate education websites such as Spartacus as well as a wide range of sites which individuals and organisations had put on the web. Two days may seem somewhat of a luxury, however it did allow us to find some really interesting sites which gave the project more depth. Our initial aim was to focus on the battle of Vimy Ridge but despite there being many websites we felt they alone would not provide sufficient opportunities to develop pupils' thinking about wider aspects of the war. Our final teaching plan gave more scope for looking at the other aspects of the First World War as well as looking at Vimy Ridge.

Both interviews with pupils and responses to questionnaires revealed a general feeling that pupils collaborated well together. For most of the project pupils worked in the same pairs although several factors prohibited this from happening all the time. Pupils were grouped by the teacher to help them learn best. In some cases this meant placing a pupil with high ICT skills next to one with fewer skills. Two pupils in particular expressed frustration at working with someone else, preferring to work on their own. Most pupils said they valued the exchange of ideas which helped them appreciate a wider picture. There were some particular examples of pupils with advanced thinking skills and less developed writing skills for whom collaboration helped overcome this issue. Slower typists also appreciated working with those who

were quicker. This helped bring about a culture of pupils as teachers as well as learners. Working in pairs helped pupils cope better with a range of sources

During the project there were times when the teacher became the pupil and the pupil the teacher. This usually occurred when pupils were using a form of ICT the teacher wasn't familiar with or when there was a computer error. The ICT technician played a significant part in the success of the project.

The final task of this project was to write an essay exploring the issues of interpreting evidence from the First World War. Whereas all previous assignments had been produced in pairs, this was to be done individually. Although pupils were not obliged to type their essay, all of them chose to do so. All pupils were encouraged to make their plans and take notes on the computer. A few pupils preferred to use their exercise books to make notes but the rest chose to do all their work using ICT. By this stage of the project, pupils had collected a lot of evidence which they were able to access readily. Sorting through the data, classifying and supporting arguments with evidence were all facilitated through the use of ICT. Creating tables helped pupils to classify their ideas and allowed them to manipulate what they had found out more easily.

An important aspect of this research was monitoring pupil perception on a regular basis. Whereas the vast majority viewed the experience very favourably a few had reservations about working with someone else. All pupils enjoyed working with computers over a long period of time but this perhaps in part reflected the lack of exposure to ICT in any other lesson. From the responses to the questionnaire, some pupils valued the autonomous way of learning. We feel that this was partly due to the multisource nature of the work and the open questions built into the unit. The tasks encouraged the pupils to explore the resources we had selected to the full. Pupils had a greater opportunity to work at their own preferred pace. For some pupils this enabled them to spend more time on fewer sources to a greater depth whereas they have felt more rushed in the classroom. All pupils valued spending more time analysing sources and less time writing. They saw the benefit of thinking more and writing less.

### **Participants' information**

Two parallel groups of 30 pupils each NC levels 6-8 Year 9  
Rolf Purvis and Lloyd Brown

### **Equipment used**

Most lessons took place in the College resource centre where there is a suit of fifteen computers all networked. On a few occasions we used another room with the same number of computers with the addition of a smart board. We created an intranet site containing most of the materials needed. The project also included a field trip, visiting the battlefield at Vimy Ridge. The software most used by pupils to complete the work were: Microsoft Word, Microsoft Publisher and Powerpoint. In addition, books artefacts and other resources were used where appropriate.

## **Applied method of analysis**

This is a case study attempting to analyse the impact of multisource learning on children's thinking in history. We employed a variety of methods to ensure the validity of our findings. A diary was used to chart the development of our thinking on the project and this helped us refine both our research and the teaching plan. We also held regular meetings at school and with colleagues at the School of Education, University of Cambridge. This was an important contribution to highlighting issues during the course of the project. The pupil's voice was of paramount importance in our research. All pupils filled in a questionnaire at the start and end of the project. The questionnaire asked five questions relating to their enjoyment, benefits of paired work, comparison with ordinary classroom work and the contribution of the activities to their knowledge and understanding. There were ongoing discussions with pupils during lessons about the above issues as well as more formal interviews carried out by the partner teacher. Observations were carried out by our mentors followed up by interviews. The transcripts from these formed data that helped us focus on subsequent peer observations. The mentor observations revealed some new issues and confirmed others. The impact of the layout of the room was discussed. In one room (the Resource Centre) the computers are on large table arranged in rows with little space for the teacher to circulate, whereas in the other room all the machines face the wall around the edge and it also a smart board. We both felt it made a big difference having a smart board. This gave opportunities for both teacher and pupils to share work with the whole class. The mentor commented on how there was very little space in the resource centre which made it more difficult to help some children. This may seem obvious but the layout of computers appears to have a significant impact on teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion**

This case study, whilst only on a limited scale, has nevertheless enabled us to draw a number of tentative conclusions. We would maintain that multisource learning makes a wider range of resources more readily available. Using ICT as a main tool for learning provides the opportunity to use high quality materials at low cost where the hardware is already available. Whilst the initial investment of time is considerable, we have found that in the long run time can be saved. The speed at which one can adapt the intranet can encourage the teacher to improve resources quickly. This approach to teaching can encourage pupils to become autonomous learners. Working within a multisource framework gave more opportunities for pupils to explore with less teacher intervention. There was shared collaboration between pupil and teacher on a more equal footing. Working in pairs with a computer encouraged pupils' to talk more about their work and we feel that this contributed to a development in their thinking. The project gave more opportunities for pupils to be creative in the way they communicate their ideas. On many occasions, pupils were encouraged to present their work in the way they felt would be most appropriate. This included the use of powerpoint presentations which on occasions were shared with the whole class. In the final assignment, pupils were able to incorporate a wide range of sources, collected over the ten weeks. This we feel facilitated analysis rather than too much

description and allowed pupils to bring together and celebrate their knowledge. The work allowed pupils with high level ICT skills to deploy them and for the others to develop them.

## **Recommendations**

We would strongly recommend this approach to teachers across the curriculum for a number of reasons:

- it motivates pupils
- gives pupils opportunities to achieve highly
- enables pupils to be independent learners
- fosters a more collaborative approach between pupils and teachers
- it increases time to think
- teachers can spend more time with individuals
- saves time and money

We would offer the following advice for teachers:

- the teaching plan needs to be carefully structured
- work in partnership with ICT technician
- creating an intranet takes time but makes learning more effective
- think carefully about the layout of the room as this can facilitate teaching and learning
- use Email for pupils to send in work
- develop new ways of assessing formative work on screen
- place intranet on the internet allowing pupils access outside lessons
- pupils might save their work on both floppy and hard disc

## **Research evaluation**

We feel confidence can be placed in the findings about this case. A wide range of data was collected in our research. Our chosen methodology attempted to ensure validity by using two parallel teaching groups. In addition, we used the methods already outlined in the methodology section. The questionnaires and pupil interviews enabled us to gain some insight into pupil views. Peer observation helped us to look at some of the issues revealed in our preliminary enquiries. Mentor observation provided an 'outsider's' perspective as well as someone who had worked with colleagues from other schools. Regular meetings with colleagues from other schools and the university provided further opportunities to discuss the validity of the data. The work pupils produced played a significant part in refining then research focus. The findings of this particular case study are important to our College. As a newly designated Technology College, the role of ICT is developing. The findings of this research project have value to colleagues in other curriculum areas. We feel the setting up of an intranet could be adopted in subjects such as the Humanities and English. The findings have already contributed to the debate on how we can best use

new ICT facilities such as the positioning of laptops in the classroom and the wider use by pupils of Email. While we are confident about our research findings we feel that there could usefully be a second phase which would test the findings in a wider context through a network of critical friends in other schools. By placing our teaching resources on the web this would be possible. From the point of view of our own professional development we feel that this research project has demonstrated that working in partnership with pupils enhanced our own ICT skill levels.