

‘They took Ireland away from us and we’ve got to fight to get it back.’

Using **fictional characters** to explore the relationship between **historical interpretation** and **contemporary attitudes**

Helping students to understand how and why people in the present interpret the past differently is a challenge. It is also vital if we are to develop an understanding of why the meanings we ascribe to the past are not fixed, but rather are subject to our own prejudices or goals. A number of articles in previous editions have explored how students might start to explore the particular interpretations advanced in film, by historians or on the web. But what about exploring the way that particular *individuals* are both shaped by – and shape – their interpretations of history? Indeed, can we begin to engage students in a process of deconstructing their very *own* interpretations? This would be a powerful – and radical – approach in any context, but in Northern Ireland it is doubly so. Alan McCully and Nigel Pilgrim have written previously in *Teaching History* about the need for students in Northern Ireland to engage more directly with their emotional responses to the past and its links with the present. In this article they introduce us to a fascinating way to help *all* our students, wherever they live, do exactly that.

Two main objectives underpin the ideas in this article:

1. To help pupils to understand how and why different people today interpret the same historical events in different ways;
2. To help pupils to develop a sense of the ‘big picture’ – in this case, Irish history since 1169 (the date usually accredited to the arrival of the Normans in Ireland in significant numbers).

Both objectives are pertinent to all history curriculums and contexts, although the first objective has particular resonance in Northern Ireland for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, we believe that the principles of the activity outlined here could be applied to numerous contexts and offer an imaginative way for pupils to develop their understanding of historical interpretations and their ability to make links across periods, an integral factor in pupil progression.

‘Our Frankie’s not a clown. Our Frankie’s a hero.’ Enter Ken and Pat.

The initial work for this article was completed several years ago as part of *Speak Your Piece*, a media based project for teachers and youth workers on the handling of controversial issues. A series of Channel 4 programmes – *Off the Walls* – about Northern Irish cultural and political themes formed our core resource. In it, two fictional characters are introduced, Ken and Pat, who each represent extremes of the two main traditions in Northern Ireland (see Figure 2). The challenge for a small group of history teachers working

on the project was how to make these two contemporary characters relevant in a study of history. The outcome – the examination of possible historical influences on the values, attitudes and behaviour of Ken and Pat now – proved stimulating for both teachers and pupils.

The publication of the most recent Curriculum Review proposals in Northern Ireland reawakened our interest in the idea.¹ These proposals could change the way history is taught in the province quite radically and move it away from a model that most English teachers would be familiar with. As in England, achieving a creative balance between the desire to cover the prescribed content areas and the development of higher order thinking has at times proved problematic in Northern Ireland. This is perhaps one explanation of how students

Figure 1: Extract from the recent Northern Irish Curriculum Review (Environment and Society history strand)²

Objective 1

Developing pupils as individuals

Young people should have opportunities to:

- Explore how history has affected their personal identity, culture and lifestyle.
- Investigate how history has been used by individuals and groups to create stereotypical perceptions and to justify views and actions.

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Alan McCully and Nigel Pilgrim

Figure 2: Ken and Pat

QUOTATIONS: PAT

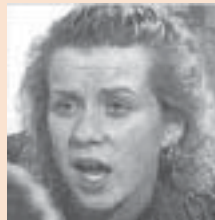
'My Ma says, "they took Ireland away from us." Our Frankie gets all excited... Aye, and we'll have to fight to get it back.'

'This is not of our choosing. We never wanted this state. It was forced upon us and now we are forced to shake it off.'

'Our Frankie's not a clown. Our Frankie's a hero. He's stuck in there [prison] because of his beliefs.'

'She hears nothing she doesn't agree with. She knows too much. Don't ask me if she is involved because I just don't know.'

(Aoife about Pat)



QUOTATIONS: KEN

'I'm a Prod and proud of it. My Da says, "once a Prod, always a Prod."'

'This is Ulster and it will stay Ulster for ever. If they don't like it they can go back to the Republic where they came from.'

'[Good Friday Agreement] must be a sell-out to the Fenians. Going soft we are ... we'll not give up. No choice. No surrender.'

'You think he's mad. You want to see his Da. He's a real nutter.' (Billy about Ken)



perceive the subject's relevance. Certainly, history teachers were disappointed that in a survey of 3,000 young people profiled through seven years of schooling, history was placed at the lesser end of the relevance scale.³

The Curriculum Review proposals that have evolved over the last three years are radical in several respects. They aspire to help each young person to develop 'as an individual, a contributor to society and a contributor to the economy and the environment' (see Figure 1 for an extract). In doing this, certain values – equality, justice, human rights and the resolution of conflict by democratic means – are explicitly identified and placed at the curriculum's core. The emotional dimension of learning is recognised as crucial in generating interest and motivation. History will have very little prescribed content and will no longer have statutory status as a subject in its own right. Instead, its inclusion in the curriculum – under the umbrella term 'Environment and Society' – will be justified not simply in terms of subject specific outcomes but also by the generic skills and values it promotes. Increasingly, young people will be encouraged to apply their learning to issues of contemporary relevance.

Such proposals for history are likely to generate considerable heat on three counts. First, the removal of most prescribed content is likely to cause significant anxiety and perplexity for a generation of teachers raised on specified core modules. Second, the objectives feed into learning outcomes which extend far beyond their application in the specific context of history. Once more 'history in danger', or at least 'history diluted', is likely to be the cry. Third, objectives relating to 'developing pupils as individuals and as contributors to society' have a much clearer social utility dimension than before. Should the curriculum come to fruition, teachers will have to come to terms with a more explicit relationship between history and citizenship. This might serve to bring to a head previous unresolved tensions within the history teaching community about the teacher's role in linking the past with the present and addressing controversial issues head-on in a divided society. This is not, of course, an exclusively Northern Irish debate.

***'She hears nothing she doesn't agree with. She knows too much'.
Tackling difficult issues.***

Northern Irish history teaching has made huge strides in tackling potentially contentious Irish history under the guise of what might be termed 'neutral objectivity.' A common curriculum with common teaching approaches is a considerable achievement in a contested society. However, limitations have also emerged as detailed in our previous *Teaching History* article, particularly with regard to engaging students' emotional faculties.⁴ The contention is that 'objective neutrality' is an illusion in any context (no surprise to the post-modernist) but that where emotional associations with contemporary views of historical events are deeply felt, there is a real danger

of dislocation between history studied in school and that peddled in the community. In other words, if history teachers in Northern Ireland – and other contexts – fail to consider the kinds of histories pupils encounter outside the classroom, however ill-formed and one-sided these may be, then pupils may consider ‘school history’ and ‘other histories’ to be two separate entities. The Curriculum Review, by seeking to explore the relationship between particular contemporary perspectives and the way the past is interpreted, offers students and communities one way forward in understanding the forces that divide society.

‘You think he’s mad. You want to see his Da.’ Re-enter Ken and Pat.

The five TV programmes that we used in the original project explored themes of identity, culture, religion, politics and future choices. Each programme contained drama cameos featuring Ken (a strong loyalist), Pat (a strong republican) and their friends. Ken and Pat were chosen as the focus for study because they represented clearly defined, polemic positions. It was agreed that the work would be best placed either after the completion of the core module, *Union to Partition*, in the final year of Key Stage 3, or at the end of the post-partition Irish History module at GCSE. The work had two objectives. The first was to examine how the contemporary attitudes of the two protagonists might be shaped by, and shape, their different views of the past. The second was to provide a vehicle to bring together students’ understanding of the ‘big picture’ in Irish history since 1169. In other words, we sought to transcend the fragmentary effects of modular study over three or four years to help facilitate a more secure grasp of the significant themes over several centuries.

The activities outlined below took place in a struggling high school, many of whose pupils were drawn from loyalist working class estates with a significant paramilitary presence. The students were preparing for GCSE coursework which required them to evaluate the Good Friday Agreement in relation to previous attempts to bring peace to Ireland.

‘I’m a Prod and proud of it.’ Exploring identity.


Initially, the students were shown the programme on identity. They then participated in a small group art activity, producing shields to define and affirm personal identity. Students then had to ‘get to know’ Ken and Pat. Video clips were accompanied by comments extracted from the programmes (see Figure 2). Two questions were posed: ‘what has shaped their thinking?’ and ‘might history have contributed?’ Their respective backgrounds were discussed and inferences made about the factors influencing their views, including the possible impact of family and community. The issue of history was then introduced. Drawing on previous study, and knowledge of the Northern Ireland cultural and political environment, we were able to explore questions such as: ‘What events might each character identify with?’ ‘How would they see those events?’ ‘Why might they hold very different views about the same event?’ ‘How might interpretations of history interact with contemporary standpoints?’

It was recognised that if this line of questioning was to be pursued, reference to precise subject knowledge was required. To recap, in detail, several centuries of history was likely to kill the activity at the outset. As an alternative, a series of short prompt cards for key events were prepared, each containing a visual image, key words, and two or three quotations reflecting different perspectives (see Figure 3). Students worked in pairs, supported by the teacher. As

Figure 3: A prompt card to remind pupils of specific historical detail

The Great Famine

Keywords: **Death Fever Emigration Population Blame?**



Quotations:

‘A people whose land and lives are ... in the keeping and custody of others, instead of their own, are not in a position of common safety. The Irish Famine of ‘46 is example and proof. The corn crops were sufficient to feed the island. But the landlords would have their rents in spite of the famine and in defiance of fever. They took the whole harvest and left hunger to those who raised it.’

James Finton Lalor, reformer, 1807 - 1849

‘Many landlords lost much money in trying to help; others did almost nothing. The Society of Friends (Quakers) gave food, clothing and seeds where they were most needed. This group was also useful for sending back to England accurate reports of the Irish situation.’

Russell Rees/Audrey M. Hodge (1995) *Union and Partition*.

a starter activity, students were asked to find quotations that Ken and Pat, respectively, might feel positive about and quotations that might provoke them to react negatively. The overall task was to talk through the significance of each event and to decide how Ken and Pat might react to each one in the light of their very different backgrounds. The chart in Figure 4 can be used to plot this activity and provide a stimulus for discussion. One spin-off of this exercise was the recognition by students that particular historical events – such as the Battle of the Boyne for Protestants or the Easter Rising for Catholics – are not exclusive to the commemorative traditions of one community or the other. In fact, their significance may be regarded differently depending on contemporary perspectives. For example, both Ken and Pat might share empathetic understanding of the experience of the poor during the Irish Famine of the 1840s, but Pat might then resort to dogma and use Finton Lalor’s views to justify her anti-British political stance in the present. In doing so, she would be laying claim to the Famine for Republicanism. In other words, perceived grievances from that period would then become equated with current ideology. In turn, this could provoke an emotive response from Ken that would make it more difficult for him to examine the validity of Finton Lalor’s argument dispassionately. The emotional block might take hold.

‘We never wanted this state. It was forced upon us.’ Exploring the pupils’ own views.

These are difficult ideas, but students’ thinking was stimulated by the distancing acquired through the use of these stereotypically extreme fictional characters as

opposed to abstract reflection about how different people might react. Our next task was to encourage greater personal critical reflection. First, we returned to the key questions to pull together the ideas generated up to this point. Four open-ended questions were raised:

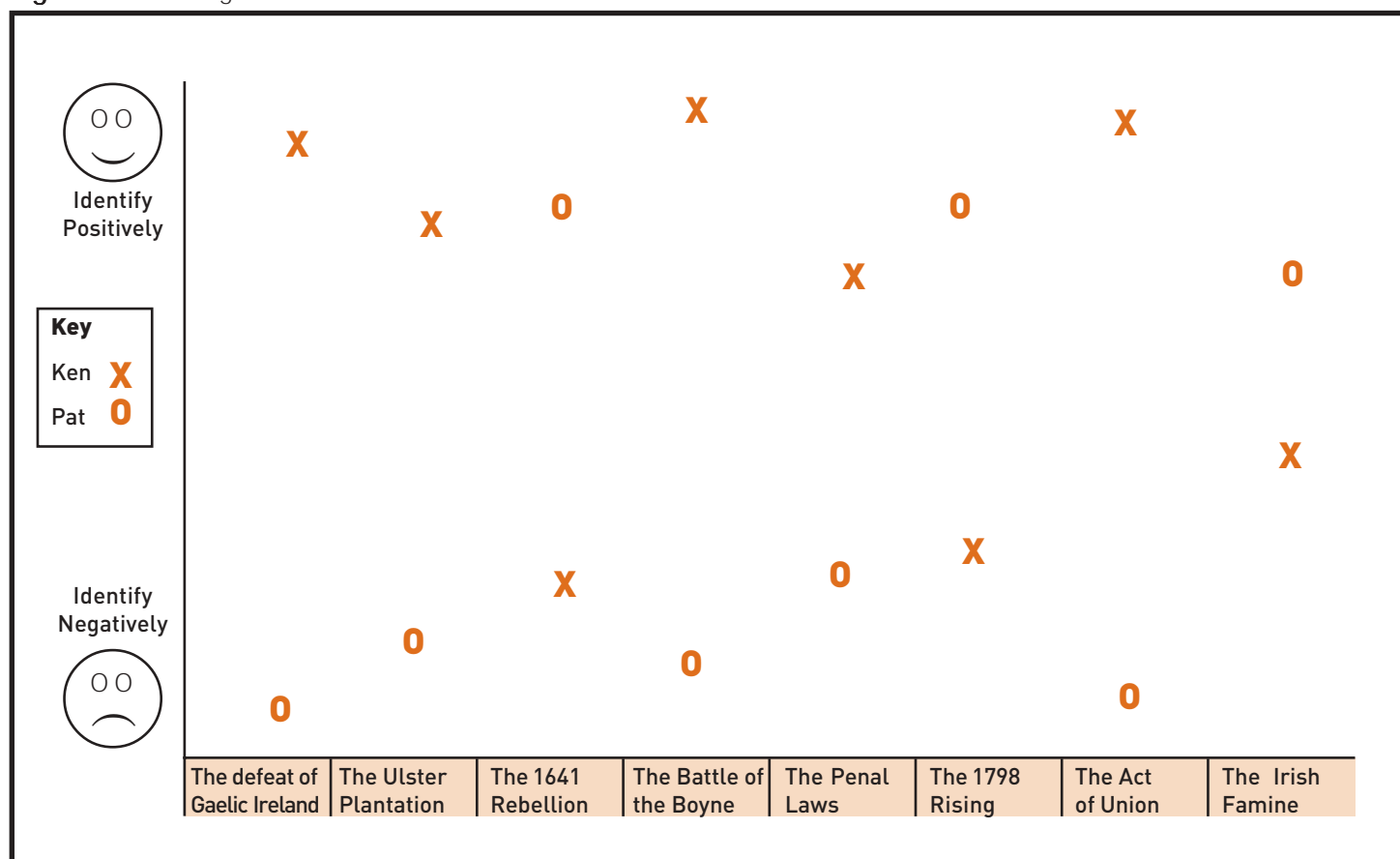
- How do we learn our history?
- How do we use it in our communities on walls, in slogans and so forth?
- How important is it to investigate the full story?
- Might the study of history help Ken and Pat to understand the conflict better?

This generated an encouragingly open discussion, without fully demonstrating that the students were applying the learning to their own situations. Observation also indicated that only about 50% of the class had participated in the discussion. Informal chat with the boys afterwards revealed that several of them were now keen to ‘get rid of the constraints of studying history’ in order to engage in contemporary political debate – a frustrating outcome.

The second double lesson was therefore planned to provide links with the historical themes of the first and to give the students more scope for the open expression of their own views, particularly on contemporary issues. The lesson used a walking debate strategy, the Four Corners exercise.⁵ Students were asked to respond to four statements:

1. Learning Irish history is a waste of time.
2. Partition has worked as a solution to the Irish problem.
3. The only future for Northern Ireland lies in integrated education.
4. There can be no real peace process without the release of paramilitary prisoners.

Figure 4: Charting Ken and Pat’s reactions to historical events



The informed debate generated by the opening two statements reflected the pupils' capacity to see beyond individual historical events to more general trends and to link these with the contemporary situation. The remaining two led to a more impassioned debate. Discussion of statement 4, for example, focused on whether or not the previous thirty years can be classified as 'war'.

***'My Ma says they took Ireland away from us.'* Evaluating the project.**

The lessons occurred close to the end of the summer term and systematic evaluation proved difficult to carry out. Writing early in the next school year, the class teacher declared himself 'very pleased' with the outcome:

'When thinking of historical and contemporary issues, the pupils have developed their own critical opinion..... As a result [their] understanding of the current situation has benefited..... it has noticeably improved their ability to discuss and debate contentious issues and they have been able to demonstrate a more informed awareness of how past events influence the present.'

He attributed this in part to his own increased confidence in drawing out pupil opinions and seeking clarification of views expressed in class. He also voiced some disappointment. The second lesson had revealed a small group of students with a 'hard core set of opinions'. This group had, like the others, acquired enhanced skills but there was less evidence of values clarification in the coursework they produced:

'In the final analysis, some have largely used these skills to further support their tribal identity and most to enhance their understanding of what is an extremely complex history.'

In fairness, the production of coursework was delayed until after the summer break when the impact of the sessions is likely to have diminished. However, the teacher's comments do again raise the possibility that pupils with deeply held cultural political positions might apply selectivity to their study of contentious history and emerge with a stronger justification for their restricted viewpoint.⁶

***'Going soft we are.....we'll not give up.'* The implications of the project.**

The work on Ken and Pat was not fully developed and its impact on pupils less than rigorously evaluated. However, the practice outlined here offers a potential approach to building bridges between the past and the present.

We would argue that the exploration of fictional drama characters has several strengths:

- 1) It offers a strong 'hook' for engaging students by introducing stereotypical but recognisable figures (when one girl was asked whether she knew any Kens she just waved her hand around the boys in her class!).
- 2) It creates a dialogue between the past and the present that tries to avoid the possibility that the formal study of the subject is left at the school gate.⁷ Such an approach is likely to emphasise relevance and engage students in debating the historical significance of past events on the contemporary situation.
- 3) The use of the fictional characters provides an initial distancing from personal emotions but can also provide a mirror to examine one's own interpretations of the past and, perhaps, those of public figures as well.

We intend to develop this work further in pursuit of the Curriculum Review objectives. BBC Northern Ireland produce a very popular sitcom called *Give My Head Peace*, featuring characters steeped in some of the more bizarre trappings of paramilitarism. Often these characters make reference to historical events, real or imagined. The programme may prove a fruitful context in which to develop the ideas explored here. Meanwhile, we pose a question. Might the approach have transferability to other contentious issues, for example racism in the British context? Are there soap opera or comedy characters that one might substitute for Ken and Pat? Feedback and criticism and alternative approaches of a still loosely formulated idea would be most welcome through the letters page of this journal or by email (AW.McCully@ulst.ac.uk).

Fictional characters provide a mirror to examine one's own interpretations.

REFERENCES

1. CCEA (2003) *Pathways: Proposals for Curriculum and Assessment at Key Stage 3: Background Rationale and Detail*, Belfast, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).
2. *ibid.*
3. A recent cohort study of 3,000 young people conducted for CCEA found that history was consistently one of the three least valued subjects, being cited as 'not useful, now or in the future'. See NFER (1999) *Real Curriculum reports*.
4. McCully A., Pilgrim N., Sutherland A. and McMinn T. (2002) "Don't worry, Mr. Trimble. We can handle it: Balancing the rational and emotional in the teaching of contentious topics", *Teaching History 106, Citizens and Communities Edition*. There, we argued that the NI history curriculum tends to stress the cognitive domain to the exclusion of the emotional, thus restricting the subject's potential to help clarify deeply held positions.
5. Four Corners is a walking debate. The corners of the room are marked *agree, agree strongly, disagree, don't know*. Participants are asked to move to the corner of their choice when a contentious statement is read out. Once there, they have the opportunity to clarify their position and question the position of others.
6. Barton, K.C. & McCully, A.W. (in print) 'History, Identity and the School Curriculum in Northern Ireland: An Empirical Study of Secondary Students' Ideas and Perspectives' *Journal of Curriculum Studies*
7. We have previously argued for precisely this approach in McCully et al (2002) *op cit.*