

Using popular history magazines in history teaching: a case study

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Context of the case study

As in other European countries, the past decade has seen a proliferation of popular history magazines in England, with an increase in the variety of titles on sale, the types of history covered, and the circulation and readership of popular history magazines.¹ The circulation of the biggest selling popular history magazine in England, BBC HISTORY Magazine, is up year on year over the past five years, by over 7 %, and has now reached over 75,000 sales per issue. HISTORY TODAY has a circulation of over 28,000 copies per issue, and the popular children's history magazine, HORRIBLE HISTORIES, based on the cult television series and paperback books, has a circulation of over 46,000 per issue. This explosion of popular interest in history in magazine form is not unique to England, and is mirrored in many other European countries. Given the very rapid growth in popular history magazines as a cultural artefact, the EHISTO project aimed to explore the ways in which these magazines might be used in history education in schools, and as part of this, to explore their potential for the development of critical media literacy and intercultural understanding in young people.² However, an interesting paradox emerged from the baseline study which was conducted in the first few months of the project. A survey of 85 history teachers across the five countries involved in the project suggested that history magazines were not widely or frequently used in history education in many schools, in spite of the fact that nearly all respondents believed that the use of history magazines would improve the quality of history education, especially in the field of critical and media literacy.³

It should be stressed that it was not assumed that an increase in the extent to which history magazines were used in history classrooms would necessarily be 'a good thing' or that it would necessarily lead to improved pupil learning (or improved intercultural understanding and critical media skills). History magazines are not without their critics (see, for example, Monika Vinterek's article in this volume). Some English historians have expressed reservations about some of the popular history magazines which have become fashionable in

¹ Terry Haydn: History magazines in the UK. In: International Society of History Didactics: yearbook, Schwalbach/Ts., 2013, p. 191-206.

² Cf. URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/project/> (1.8.2014) for a fuller explanation of the rationale for the project.

³ The baseline study detailing the findings can be accessed at URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/baselinestudy> (1.8.2014).

recent years. John Tosh warns of the danger of ‘heritage’ type popular history, ‘encouraging a view of the past which is superficial, nostalgic and conformist.... Not so much a means of education as an adjunct to tourism’.⁴ One of the research questions explored in the study was to find out whether history teachers and student teachers considered the use of popular history magazines (and the EHISTO website and Learning Objects) to be helpful and worthwhile, both in general terms, and in terms of their potential for improving pupils’ intercultural and critical media understanding.

The English strand of the baseline study involved 20 history teachers and five interviews. This is clearly a very small sample and caution must be used in generalising from such a sample; however, the outcomes suggested that the rapid growth of popular history magazines as part of popular culture outside the classroom was not being translated into the use of these magazines inside schools. As tables 1 to 3 show, very few of the history teachers surveyed were regular readers of popular history magazines, none of them made regular use of them in their teaching (regular defined as more than once a month), and the teachers either did not think that many pupils read popular history magazines, or acknowledged that they did not know whether they read them or not.

Table 1: Do you ever read popular history magazines? (by popular, we mean on sale at W.H. Smith, stations, airports etc – e.g., BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE, HISTORY TODAY etc)

a) Yes – quite often (at least once a month)	4
b) Yes – sometimes (a few times a year)	6
c) Yes – Occasionally (perhaps once or twice a year)	5
d) No – I never read them	5
Other response?	

Table 2: Do any of your pupils read popular history magazines?

a) Yes, quite a lot of pupils do	0
b) Yes, a few pupils do	3
c) Hardly any pupils do	9
d) None do	0
e) I don’t really know (haven’t asked/question has not arisen)	8
Any comment?	
I asked but only one or two had	

Table 3: Do you ever use extracts/articles from popular history magazines in your teaching?

a) Yes, quite often (more than once a month)	0
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⁴ John Tosh: Why history matters. Basingstoke 2008, p. 11.

b) Yes, from time to time (a few times a year)	5
c) Yes, occasionally (once or twice a year)	7
d) No, I don't ever use them	8
Any Comment? Simply because of lack of availability with the department or time to organise myself.	

The aims of the case study

The aim of the case study was to explore the extent to which, and the ways in which popular history magazines might be usefully integrated into history lessons in high schools in order to improve learning outcomes generally, and in particular, to see if they could be used to develop pupils' understanding of multiperspectivity in history, their intercultural understanding, and their critical and media literacy.

There were three groups within the case study; the first group was the history department which was directly involved in the EHISTO project. By UK standards, it is a large department with 6 teachers working in the history department. The second group involved was the 2013-4 cohort of student history teachers at the University of East Anglia. This group of 15 students undertake a 36 week course to become trained as history teachers, having already completed their undergraduate history degrees. The third group of teachers involved were the history teachers who act as supervising mentors for the UEA student teachers, over the course of their two school placements. There were approximately 25 mentors involved (sometimes, more than one teacher in the department is involved in mentoring students, and more than 15 departments are involved in working with UEA students over the course of the two placements).

The baseline study revealed that at the start of the project (autumn 2012), very few history teachers were making use of popular history magazines, and a group interview with the student teachers in the first weeks on the course revealed that very few on them were regular readers of history magazines. In conducting the research we were mindful of the difficulties involved in attempting to change teacher pedagogy and practice. In the words of Tony Edwards, 'It is the hubris of policymakers to overrate their power to reshape practice by underrating the power of practitioners to subvert initiatives, or to simply carry on as before'.⁵ Michael Fullan also notes the tendency of many teachers to stick to 'tried and tested' teaching approaches, rather than be enthusiasts and 'early adapters' of new pedagogical strategies and resources.⁶ Our involvement in a previous research project involving schools linked to the

⁵ Tony Edwards: A change for the better. In: The Times Educational Supplement of 27.1.1995, p.11.

⁶ Michael Fullan: The new meaning of educational change, London 1991.

university had made us aware that even with schools directly involved in the research, the impact of the project was ‘patchy’, and that there were some schools where there were teachers who were not aware that their school was involved in the research.⁷ Given the plethora of other issues and priorities which schools are obliged to attend to, we were aware that teachers and student teachers had many other concerns to attend to, and that there were difficult judgement calls to be made in terms of how much time could be allocated to EHISTO.

Research approach

The intervention was structured around the promotion of popular history magazines in teaching sessions at the university, and at the three per year mentor meetings over the course of the project. This consisted of photocopying and circulating copies of particular magazine articles, and modelling the use of the EHISTO website as the Learning Objects were developed.⁸ In the case of the student teachers, some teaching sessions, for example the session on the ‘outbreak’ of World War One, were partly based around the materials on the EHISTO website, two sessions were devoted to ‘modelling’ activities and materials available on the website, and students spent some time exploring the website. It should perhaps be noted that pressure to cover all the required elements of the teacher education course placed some time limitations on the amount of time, which could be spent exploring the site and the materials developed. It was not, for example, possible to spend time on all the modules which had been developed in the handbooks for student and in-service teachers.⁹ Data was obtained through a combination of questionnaires individual interviews, and group interviews.

The main research questions were:

- to see whether exposure to the EHISTO website and Learning Objects (and the use of other popular magazine articles) would increase teachers’ and student teachers’ use of popular history magazines;
- to find out the ways in which history teachers and student teachers made use of popular history magazines and EHISTO resources;

⁷ The Norwich Area Schools Consortium project on the curriculum dimensions of pupil disaffection. In: URL: http://www.uea.ac.uk/care/nasc/NASC_home.htm (1.8.2014).

⁸ The Learning Objects developed on the project can be accessed at URL: <https://media.sodis.de/ehisto/en/index.html> (1.8.2014).

⁹ For the initial teacher education handbook, see URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/initialteachertraining> (1.8.2014), for the in-service handbook see URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/inserviceteacher> (1.8.2014).

- to explore the views of history teachers and student teachers on the age range of students with whom popular history magazines could be used as a teaching resource;
- to find out what factors either encouraged or discouraged the use of popular history magazines as a teaching resource;

Findings

- How much did involvement in the EHISTO project influence the extent to which teachers and student teachers read popular history magazines?

The baseline study which was conducted in early 2014 established that neither history teachers nor student teachers were regular readers of popular history magazines. Only 20 % of history teachers described themselves as regular readers of history magazines (defined as reading at least one magazine per month). Although this was based on a small sample, the figure was in line with an earlier survey of the use of popular history magazines¹⁰. Many of the student teachers had become members of the Historical Association, which gave them access to the association's journal TEACHING HISTORY, but this would be more accurately described as a professional rather than popular publication. As in previous years, a small minority of students reported that they sometimes purchased popular history magazines, but even within this section of the cohort, some of these students acknowledged that due to pressures of time and the general 'busyness' of the course, they often didn't have time to read any extracts from the popular history magazines they had purchased.¹¹

Within the department which was directly involved with the EHISTO project as a partnership school, interviews with the teachers in the department suggested that none of the members of department regarded themselves as 'regular' readers of popular history magazines, and even the teachers who had a subscription to a popular history magazine acknowledged that the magazines were not read in a systematic or routine way – 'I'd say it's quite uneven. I get the BBC HISTORY magazine and I flick through it every month and I put aside a pile of them.' Another member of the department flatly stated that 'I don't use them – and I'd be surprised if my pupils even knew the names of any popular history magazines.' The responses suggested that the teachers were not in any way hostile to popular history magazines, or that they believed them to be 'a bad thing', the feedback suggested that it was rather that reading them was something of a luxury, given the imperatives of having to prepare and teach fifteen to twenty lessons a week for their pupils.

¹⁰ Haydn (note 1).

¹¹ Ibid.

Involvement in the project inevitably led to greater immersion in the world of popular history magazines. The teachers in the department agreed to devise Learning Objects based on popular magazine articles, and to explore the use of popular history magazines with their pupils. As an incentive, and in order to improve access to some of the magazines, the department was given funding to subscribe to two of the bestselling popular history magazines in the UK, BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE, and HISTORY TODAY. Later in the project, the department was also provided with a subscription for HORRIBLE HISTORIES, a popular history magazine for young pupils, based on a popular television series.

There is no question that involvement in the EHISTO project (unsurprisingly) had an influence on the extent to which members of the department read popular history magazines. Towards the end of the project (July 2014), a second series of interviews was conducted, and all five of the teachers interviewed reported that they read more popular history magazines than previously. In response to the question ‘About how many history magazine articles would you say you had read over the last year?’, these were the responses:

‘I subscribe to BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE so I read it regularly although not from cover to cover and I am a bit behind as I’m still reading June’s issue. I would guess that I read about four or five articles per month so that would be 60 articles a year which, now I’ve worked it out, surprises me a little.’

‘It’s certainly one or more a week.’

‘Roughly? About ten. Nothing compared to X. But I’ve searched more. I’ve flicked back through about ten. I’ve been searching for different topics like Crusades or General Strike.’

‘As a result of the school’s work with the EHISTO project I have used popular history magazines more, though not as much as I would have liked.’

‘I currently have a personal subscription to the BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE, and have recently started to purchase the ALL ABOUT HISTORY magazine. These are both magazines that I enjoy reading on a personal level.’

When asked to estimate how many popular magazine articles the student teachers had read between September 2014 and June 2015, the responses were as follows (see table 4):

Table 4: Student teacher estimates of the number of popular history magazine articles they had read over the 9 months of the course

Student 1	10-15 – those that were relevant to the topics I teach.
Student 2	I read many articles regularly – 100+.

Student 3	30ish.
Student 4	5-10.
Student 5	Not sure how many articles I've read but have filed them for future reference.
Student 6	5-6.
Student 7	5-6.
Student 8	50+.
Student 9	Probably between 5 and 10.
Student 10	I have not read many of the articles given out but I have read every magazine article in BBC history magazine over last 12 months.
Student 11	5-7.
Student 12	10-15.
Student 13	A few – 4-6.
Student 14	10-15.

(Student 15 was not present on the day of the review).

Two points are worth noting. One is the substantial difference between students in terms of the number of magazine articles they had read – in spite of the fact that all student had the same 'input' in terms of prescribed reading, and exposure to the training in the use of EHISTO resources. The other is that the reading of popular history magazines was not always a matter of choice – the course handbook contained several references to popular history magazine articles as compulsory reading, and all students undertook the training in the use of the EHISTO website and resources. This means that those students who reported reading only a handful of magazine articles may well have only read those that were prescribed as compulsory reading, and not opted to read anything beyond these prescribed readings.

- How did involvement in the EHISTO project influence the ways in which history teachers and student teachers made use of popular history magazines in their teaching?

The outcomes of the baseline study (Spring 2014) suggested that most history teachers and student teachers either did not use popular history magazines in their teaching, or used them primarily to augment their subject knowledge of the topics which they had to teach. In the questionnaire survey of 20 history teachers, there were no teachers who reported that they regularly used history magazines in their teaching (defined as more than once a month), and only 5 who reported using them 'from time to time' (defined as a few times a year). Of the

teachers in the department participating directly in the project as a partnership school, in answer to the question, ‘Do you use popular history magazines in your teaching?’, the responses were as follows:

‘The answer would be no.’

‘Not really, occasionally, but very rarely.’

‘I don’t use them.’

‘I’d say it’s quite uneven. I get the BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE and I flick through it every month and I put aside a pile of them and I quite often refer back to them, but more often than using articles, I’ll just use pieces of information from them.’

In terms of the reasons given for not using popular history magazines as a teaching resource, teachers pointed to accessibility problems (the department did not subscribe to any popular history magazines at that time), the reading level demanded of pupils – most teachers in the department thought that the magazines would be very challenging for younger pupils in terms of their reading abilities, and the belief that the ‘audience’ for such magazines was adults (and mainly well-educated adults rather than school pupils). It was generally felt that text books and the internet provided materials which were more tailored to students’ needs. The following extracts from teacher testimony exemplify these points:

‘It’s not that I’ve never used them. I use them extremely rarely, I’d say. I think there are so many other resources out there that are perhaps more accessible and easier and so in some ways magazines would be the last choice, rather than the first and by the time you’ve got to the magazine, you’ve already found the resources that are good enough that you need.’

‘Mainly it’s access to them. I don’t subscribe to one. If I come across an article it’s quite random. My husband buys them and I pinch his magazine and perhaps come across things. The audience, the number of students who could actually access it is quite limited; our sixth formers could and GCSE students could, but the articles are a bit too dense for the majority of the Key Stage 3 (11-14 year old students). So that’s an issue. I feel they’re aimed actually for an older audience than we’re actually dealing with. So as extension work they’re good, but actually for day-to-day, for your bread and butter teaching, the text books are actually at a better level and we use the Internet quite a lot too, rather than, if we need to get the magazine.’

With regard to the history student teachers’ use of popular history magazines, it should be noted that they would be working in history departments which were not making extensive or regular use of history magazines (with the exception of the school which was part of the

EHISTO project), and so would be unlikely to ‘absorb’ the use of history magazines in their practice through observation and working in the departments in question. However, the teaching sessions at the university, and the reading prescribed by the course handbook did make extensive and regular use of history magazines, and included two workshop sessions on the use of the EHISTO website and materials, so there was some pressure on them to consider the use of history magazines, and some modelling of the practice of integrating the use of history magazines into classroom practice.

The students were asked about their use of popular history magazines in the last month of their course of training (June 2014). As table 5 indicates, most of the students had made use of history magazines in their teaching (12 out of the 14 students who responded), but often, this was principally in the form of strengthening their substantive subject knowledge of the topics they were teaching, although eight of the students had used them as teaching resources in at least some of their lessons.

Table 5: student teachers’ use of popular history magazines in their teaching

Student 1	Good for my subject knowledge – too hard for KS3 – I did use them for controlled assessment A* students –department very glad.
Student 2	Useful more for myself plus some A level – behind the scenes rather than overt.
Student 3	Generally for my own knowledge but didn’t go back to them during placement. Hope to use them more, especially for KS5 (16-18 year old pupils) to encourage research.
Student 4	To build my knowledge.
Student 5	Find them very useful for SK and for teaching resources.
Student 6	Good for own knowledge but that was all I used them for. I would hope to use magazine articles to stretch high achieving pupils and gifted and talented pupils.
Student 7	I have referred back to a couple when I had to teach topics e.g. workhouses. Good for my subject knowledge.
Student 8	Very helpful for subject knowledge.
Student 9	It depended on whether the subject grabbed me or not! Very helpful for subject knowledge.
Student 10	Very useful – sessions taught me how to use them well.
Student 11	A level lessons = used them for my pupils to read sections of.
Student 12	I used the Mao one in lessons.

Student 13	Subject knowledge –brilliant. Optional homeworks for KS4/5 pupils (14-18 year olds).
Student 14	Helpful for SK, some used as extension tasks and homework.

The outcomes of the survey of student teachers suggested that almost all of them had integrated the use of history magazines into their regular classroom practice, and read articles from history magazines to develop their subject knowledge of the topics they had to teach. However, they had not generally explored a wide range of different approaches to using history magazines in their lessons, and use tended to be limited to the setting of homework or extension work for older or more able pupils. This was in contrast to the ways in which teachers in the school directly linked to the EHISTO project used the magazines, with much more extensive trialling and experimentation with the use of magazines, and the use of the EHISTO website.

Several teachers in the department made use of the online adjuncts to popular history magazines – the search function, which enabled them to track down particular articles from the magazines’ archives, the podcast feature, and the ‘apps’ associated with some magazines. The following list gives an idea of some of the ways in which the department made use of history magazines in their teaching:

- ‘And it was an online thing ... I also get the BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE on my iPad and I’d like to do more of that.’
- ‘I have a regular ‘History in the News’ news feature on the wall outside of my classroom, which includes short snippets from both BBC HISTORY and ALL ABOUT HISTORY.’
- ‘The March issue had an article on Henry VIII’s wives: ‘A witness to the six wives’, which I used to update an information hunt for my Y7s. Also the June issue had a discussion about ‘D-Day Tragedy or Triumph?’ which inspired me to create an enquiry lesson for Y9.’
- ‘I have asked Y9s to create magazine pages using ICT and I have brought in a selection of magazines so students can flick through to look at examples of how articles are set out and to encourage the students to think about how they are going to use headlines, pictures, captions etc in their work.’
- ‘For the Sixth Form, I’ve given them useful articles to look at for just extension-work and revision.’
- ‘And we’ve also got now a magazine-rack in the class with all kinds of history-related magazines.’

- ‘Yesterday ... a boy from Year 7 ... The lowest set in Year 7. He wanted harder work, so I gave him a magazine, which was what I had to hand! I asked him simply to read an excerpt from it on Anne Boleyn and try to pick out what kind of character she had from that section. It was very simple but he looked up words in the thesaurus, ‘astute’ was the word he looked up, so’
- ‘We’re trying to develop things, to get a bit of a library of extension-texts so I think as we have more extension-texts in books, we’ll also use magazines.’
- ‘I like the idea of having a folder of articles from magazines for them to access easily. Because as much as I say “go online, there’s this subscription” I don’t know how regularly they do that. So I’d prefer almost to have it printed out, in front of them.’
- ‘I’ve used the letters page with them... it’s where all the controversies are, and arguments.’ It was clear that the department had developed a number of methods of exploring the use of popular history magazines, including groupwork exercises and ways of working with history magazines with younger pupils. In the baseline study most teachers had felt that history magazines were mainly appropriate for use with A level pupils (16-18 year olds) and as extension work for more able Key Stage 4 pupils (14-16 year olds), but this perception shifted slightly over the course of the project. There were however still some teachers in the department who felt that the extent to which history magazines could be used with younger pupils was limited by considerations of literacy levels.

The wider group of history mentors working in the regional initial teacher education partnership, who attended the mentor meetings and Eastern Regional Seminar where EHISTO was modelled and explained, and who were provided with a number of magazines articles from the EHISTO site and articles on other ‘European History Crossroads’ topics, said in a group interview in May 2014 that they had found the magazines and materials useful, and either had used or planned to use the EHISTO site in their teaching. However, individual interviews to try to ascertain more precisely the extent of use, which elements of the site were most useful, and the ways in which history magazines were used have not yet been conducted. It was felt that in terms of sustainability issues, it will be more helpful to enquire about EHISTO use and practice in the autumn term, 2014.

In terms of the student teachers’ views on the extent to which popular history magazines and EHISTO had been used on the course, it was interesting to note that when asked whether they should be used ‘more’, ‘less’ or ‘about the same’, 11 of the 14 respondents felt that the

resources should be use ‘about the same’ amount with next year’s student teachers (3 students did not respond to this question directly).

To what extent and in what ways were the EHISTO materials used by the teachers and student teachers involved in the project?

In terms of student teachers’ use of EHISTO resources and materials, some students said that they had made use of the site and resources, but a larger proportion of students indicated that they had not had chance to use it in their lessons, but intended to use it next year as qualified teachers. Some students mentioned that the school they were working at did not teach ‘Columbus’ or ‘World War One’ during the period on which they were on placement. The students’ responses are shown in table 6:

Table 6: Did you make any use of the EHISTO website and materials on your second teaching placement?

Student 1	Yes – shared EHISTO with the department.
Student 2	Honestly – no, but should like to use when less pressed. I think they are a mature resource to encourage independent learning in older students.
Student 3	Looked back on it – details weren’t overly relevant to the topics I was teaching.
Student 4	No. However, I will use them in the future.
Student 5	Have looked at EHISTO but not deployed it in classroom yet.
Student 6	Haven’t accessed EHISTO since our session but would like to.
Student 7	No.
Student 8	I intended to but forgot but I will use it next year as I thought it was great!
Student 9	Will want to implement them a lot more with KS4-5 next year.
Student 10	Not used EHISTO.
Student 11	No.
Student 12	I didn’t but would like to.
Student 13	Looked at once or twice for ideas.
Student 14	No.

Unsurprisingly, the closer and more intense and ongoing involvement of the partnership school which was part of the EHISTO project resulted in more extensive use and trialling of the EHISTO resources as the following extracts from the July 2014 interviews with members of the department illustrate:

‘As a result of the schools work with the EHISTO project I have used popular history magazines more, though not as much as I would have liked. Previously I had not used them at all but now use them as a different way of looking at controversies/concepts etc and show how history is presented in different ways. It is useful to have shorter articles to use with students. In year 9 in particular I have done activities about the causes of ww1 and using an article to look at causal factors and comparing these to textbook information. I have also used the website with my pgce student and compared some of the questions on there as well to compare with what questions students would want to ask.’

‘I am aware of EHISTO and we have discussed it on several occasions in department meetings. I can’t say I have personally made use of the website as yet but I know there are some useful materials which we will be using in an upcoming collapsed curriculum day on World War One.’

‘In April, X asked me to lead a series of lessons for the EHISTO project with my top set year 9 groups. Prior to the lessons, I read the materials and articles she provided. However, I have not used the materials with any of my other groups. I have also not accessed the website since completing the short series of lessons.’

‘One thing the students were really interested in was what the Swedish students thought about the articles and one of my comments about the feedback was they kept saying well what do they think about this and that was something I didn’t really expect. They knew that students in Sweden were doing exactly the same questions and that’s what engaged them.’

‘The pupils were really interested in the idea that pupils in other countries had a very different ‘take’ on World War One.’

The teachers were keen to stress that they would have liked to have explored the EHISTO website and materials more extensively, but time to do this was constrained by other exigencies. In a sense, the exploration of EHISTO was ‘a luxury’, and other commitments had to be given priority:


‘Because there’s so much curriculum change going on. We’ve got new Key Stage 3 we’re starting to teach next year, the new A Levels, that’s going to be massive, we’ve been implementing a new Controlled Assessment since Easter, it’s been... and also increased pressure on results ... the time, even trying to organise next Tuesday... there’s no time.’

Conclusions and lessons learned

Perhaps the single most important outcome of the case study was that all the three groups involved (student teachers, mentors and the history department directly involved in the project) had found popular history magazines to be a useful resource for history teaching, and had integrated their use into classroom practice to a much greater extent than at the time of the baseline study (Spring 2014). Moreover, this use in many cases went beyond reading magazines to augment subject knowledge, and extended to the use of history magazines with pupils, in a range of ways. Although not all the teachers and student teachers involved had made use of the EHISTO site and resources, they were very positive about the potential of the materials, and welcomed the focus on both European perspectives and critical media literacy. In terms of sustainability, there were indications that the EHISTO project would impact on practice beyond the life of the project:

‘This next academic year we’re going to try and do something with Germany and Sweden and I think that’s got a lot of scope a bit like the World Maths Day model I don’t know if you’re aware of that where they play ... they really enjoy it they play students from you know you are up against four others and some are in America and some are in Portugal and they really love that and they have the picture of the icon of the person they’re up against and I think that sort of thing as an organisation EHISTO could have a huge amount of impact through their website and just having access to students across Europe.’

‘As a department with our new Year 9 we’re planning to have an EHISTO unit – an EHISTO based one and a school based one.’

Although history teachers were generally positive about the potential of popular history magazines for enhancing teaching, some concerns were expressed about the language and reading level difficulties involved in using some of the magazine articles with pupils, particularly younger pupils. Subsequent piloting of some of the materials with 16 year old pupils revealed that one of the Columbus articles selected proved to be quite challenging, and had a negative influence on the motivation and engagement of pupils – an unintended outcome of the experiment. This raises questions about the choice of articles for focus – there is sometimes a tension between which magazine articles have the most potential for developing the critical media literacy of students, and which articles are better in terms of ‘readability’. In the UK, there is a significant difference between the length and difficulty of articles in HISTORY TODAY (longer and more academic in register) and BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE (shorter and ‘easier’ articles, and therefore perhaps more appropriate for school aged readers). 

Feedback from the respondents also made the point that history magazines were in competition with other very rich sources of materials, such as the internet and newspaper archives, so care was needed in ‘filtering’ the very best and most useful magazine articles. Time to fully explore history magazines and the EHISTO site was also thought to be an issue – often, teachers were very keen on the articles and the resources, but struggled to find time to fit them into classroom practice. It remains to be seen whether teachers will develop Learning Objects on other ‘European History Crossroads’ topics. It will also be interesting to explore the extent to which the Learning Objectives which have been devised are adapted and changed so suit particular classes and contexts – again time is an issue here:

‘There could have perhaps been a bit more variation in the format of tasks; quite a lot of them involved reading the resources and then doing written answers. This could be a bit ‘dry’; it would be nice if we could find time to adapt some of the materials and resources to work in more debate and discussion work and we hope to do this next year when we build in an EHISTO unit in year 9, but time is always an issue... And remember the teachers’ feedback really at Lodz was keep this simpler and shorter don’t complicate it too much.’

It was clear that the history department which was closely involved with the project as an EHISTO partnership school had really enjoyed their involvement with EHISTO and thought that it had been a very helpful and worthwhile experience:

‘I think it’s really good we’ve been involved and I think [going to] Poland was great just talking to people from other countries that was fantastic.’

‘And I think the potential there was very good I think... whether it is working as it was intended to work where you just go to the website and pull off the task I still think there’s issues with that and there always will be because people have different lengths of lessons or amounts of time that they can allocate to things so it’s not going to be a perfect system.’

‘There are resources there you can do something with, or a network you can do something with, that could be really powerful I think.’

However, whether the EHISTO project will have a powerful impact over a longer period of time, beyond the duration of the project, remains to be seen. Will history teachers use the project to develop their own Learning Objects on other topics which are ‘European (or world) History Crossroads’, will history teachers across Europe routinely integrate popular history

magazines into their classroom practices to develop students' critical media literacy? In the words of Chou en Lai, it is too early to say.¹²

¹² Chou en Lai's alleged response to a question about the significance of the French Revolution of 1789. It has been argued that he was actually indicating the French protests of 1968, in: Richard McGregor: Zhou's cryptic caution lost in translation. In: Financial Times of 10.6.2011.