

Year 7 pupils collaboratively design an historical game about a medieval peasant

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Jacques Haenen and Hanneke Tuithof describe an activity that they developed for pupils as a part of an initial teacher education course. Teams of Year 7 pupils were given a structure and guidelines within which they were to work collaboratively and at their own direction and pace. Pupils were given various tools for monitoring the success of their own learning and for evaluating the results. As well as a structure and resources for a motivating, collaborative six-week long activity in which Year 7 pupils designed their own historical game, this article offers insights into the impact of self-assessment and self-monitoring processes on pupils' attitudes and learning. Haenen and Tuithof also share their evaluation of the project and explain the changes that they made as they reflected on its effectiveness in developing independent and collaborative learning. Issues raised in this article are particularly pertinent to the debates about 'Assessment For Learning' explored in *Edition 115* of *Teaching History*.

'I found it really fun to do, especially with a small group; it was a different experience compared to always working alone.' This is a quotation from the 1997 evaluation. Another quotation: 'I found it much nicer than simply reading of it in a book.' All the pupils of Year 7 of the Dutch Combined School 'De Breul' collaboratively designed a game on the life of a medieval peasant. Beforehand, they received texts and materials describing the daily life of the medieval peasant. What moments of bad luck and good fortune can such a peasant meet in his life?¹

Introduction

In our teacher education courses, we look for approaches which enhance pupils' involvement in historical topics.² We have been conducting classroom research focusing on the use of co-operative learning as a means of achieving a deeper understanding, by pupils, of historical concepts. Co-operative learning has become very important to our courses. We use its results when discussing with trainee teachers the pros and cons of using more learning-centred teaching strategies. To promote this discussion, we systematically observed a lesson series developed by one of us (the second author). We videotaped parts of the lessons and designed a questionnaire to evaluate the results and the pupils' opinions.

Our approach has been influenced by a sociocultural theory of teaching and learning.³ Basic to this is the creation of a learning community inviting the pupils to participate in a process of negotiation and co-construction of knowledge. Or, in the words of Lev Vygotsky, the founder of the sociocultural theory, 'learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with peers'.⁴ This article illustrates ways of practising this new pedagogy, situating it within

the context of specific historical content. We describe how we proceeded with the experimental curriculum, how we assessed its products and how we evaluated the pupils' opinions. We also summarise what teachers have to keep in mind when managing a curriculum with such a wide range of objectives.

The educational context of our experimental curriculum

We started to develop this experimental curriculum more than ten years ago, at a large combined school in the neighbourhood of Utrecht, The Netherlands. 1993 was the first year of a major educational innovation in Dutch Basic Secondary Education (Year 7-9). It resulted in a broad core curriculum for this three-year period, the same for all schools, although the level varies depending on the type of school. Great care is taken not to teach subjects in isolation from each other, and to encourage the pupils to apply that knowledge whenever practical, using content-specific and general skills.

This implies a new pedagogy on the part of the teacher, and new ways of teaching and interacting with pupils. For teachers, one of the possibilities of developing new interaction patterns can be found in cooperative learning. Our experimental curriculum is meant to deepen the pupils' understanding by having them collaboratively make an historical game. Through working collaboratively on the issue of the ups and downs of medieval peasants, and discussing the meaning of this specific historical theme from different angles, Year 7 pupils are being introduced to 'historical significance'. Moreover, such an approach leads to a range of activities that help the pupils achieve an empathetic understanding of people in the past. Such activities lead the pupils to delve into source materials and, after reading and evaluating these, to re-write

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them in such a way that they suit the purpose of their own game. In general, the purpose of the lesson series is to teach for meaning by personifying the historical content. This approach links up with recent discussions on the teaching of specific historical content.⁵

The Peasants' Dice Game

In teams of four, Year 7 pupils design an historical game on the daily lives of medieval peasants. We have called it the Peasants' Dice Game. The construction of such a game is used as an introduction to medieval history, and partly replaces whole-class instruction of this particular curriculum item. Our curriculum, of course, meets the demands of those official Dutch attainment targets that specify the knowledge and skills on medieval history that pupils should have acquired when finishing basic secondary education. Given these requirements, we have designed our own curriculum along the following lines. First of all, whole-class instruction is restricted to an absolute minimum, and introduces only some basic knowledge about terminological, contextual, societal and religious aspects of medieval history. The materials used for this introductory part are taken from the history course book used in Year 7. We adapted these materials slightly to suit our content objectives. This introduction involves the transmission of 'factual' knowledge and brings out the pupils' prior knowledge necessary for designing the game, e.g. the two-field and three-field system. We also provided general information on the daily lives of medieval peasants, e.g. the medieval class system with its feudal and manorial arrangements. We made an appropriate and meaningful selection, but these are all themes that cannot be dropped from a curriculum dealing with the Middle Ages. Pupils should somehow be aware of these themes when working on their game.

Apart from these content objectives, we explicitly focused on several practical skills related to history. These skills are taught during the construction of the game. An important historical challenge involves comprehension through establishing a mental connection with past happenings – in our case, grasping what life was like for peasants in the Middle Ages. This kind of imagination leads to distinguishing causes and effects in a simple historical setting, and to ranking essentials and inessentials in terms of their relevance to daily lives. Apart from these historical skills, we have contributed to the pupils' general skills by providing them with an opportunity to be creative and critical, to work together and to plan and structure their own learning activities.

Description of the designing of the game

Starting in 1993, the Medieval Peasants' Dice Game has since been made across various school years by ten or eleven Year 7 classes. Five or six colleagues of the history

Figure 1: Picture from a medieval woodcut of a farmer couple.



department were involved in the project. The arrangements and overall planning were agreed upon by all of the participating teachers together. Putting together groups and imposing specific class rules were the responsibility of the individual teacher. One teacher let the pupils themselves compose the groups, another teacher made a social diagram of the class, while yet another made the group arrangements by herself. The guidelines for the designing of the game were put in the pupils' study planner, which we have introduced into the school from 1996 onwards. We have constantly improved the planner to adapt it to our purposes. The pupils' planner handed out at the beginning of the lesson series. In it, the lesson timetable is specified, as well as the rules to follow while designing the game (see Figure 7).

Whenever the crops were ripe for collection and the farmers were busy harvesting, there would also be all sorts of rabble around the fields. They would hope to find 'leftovers'. At night it was entirely possible that some of the harvest would disappear from the fields. Because of this, the farmers of a town would appoint a guard. He would keep an eye on the crops in the fields. He would also try to prevent that a cow on the loose would put her teeth into the fresh crops.

Figure 2: Format of the pupils' team logbook (originally in Dutch)

| | |
|--|--|
| Logbook | Date: |
| | Names of the team's pupils that worked on the game during this lesson: |
| We worked on: (blacken the circle, more than one circles may be blackened) | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> instances of bad luck or good fortune taken from the texts<input type="checkbox"/> design of the game board<input type="checkbox"/> determining which frame represents bad luck or good fortune<input type="checkbox"/> the selection of pictures and the decoration of the game board<input type="checkbox"/> constructing the game board<input type="checkbox"/> writing explanations and playing cards for back luck and good fortune<input type="checkbox"/> writing instructions and the rules of the play<input type="checkbox"/> designing and making pawns and dice<input type="checkbox"/> playing the game (your own or that of another team) | |
| We divided the work among the team members as follows: | |
| | |
| This is what we are planning to do next lesson: | |
| | |
| We have to bring with us the following items for the next lesson: | |
| | |
| Are there any problems that require the teacher's help? | |
| | |
| <i>Did you as a team succeed in doing what you planned to do this lesson?.....</i> | |
| | |
| What mark would you give your team for the work done during this lesson?..... | |
| | |

We decided to make a distinction between subject matter lessons and designing lessons.

This is one of the 22 texts from the materials used by the pupils in designing the medieval Peasants' Dice Game. With these texts in hand, the pupils have to do their work. First, they have to gather from the text any instances of bad luck and good fortune related to the daily lives of a medieval peasant. Next, they brainstorm what the game would have to look like and make sketches accordingly. Frames then need to be drawn on the (empty) game board and around it farms, meadows, fields, streams and so on. Frames that represent bad luck and good fortune must be indicated. Besides this, cards or leaflets bearing some explanation have to be written. The game is completed by making up rules, making dice and pawns and by decorating the game board with houses, trees, livestock and so forth. To help them remember the stage that they are at and the arrangements that they have made, each team of pupils records an entry into a logbook (see Figure 2).

Development of the lesson series

The Medieval Peasants' Dice Game was first introduced into the school's history curriculum in 1993-1994. Although somewhat hesitantly, the entire department courageously adopted this experiment in all of the eleven Year 7 classes. Before its introduction, each step in the lesson series had been presented to the other colleagues of the history department. The department then decided to implement it in all classes. There were four reasons for this unanimous decision: the game offered an excellent opportunity to meet the attainment targets of Basic Secondary Education; developing imagination and mentally linking the pupils' own experiences with historical events have had a long tradition in our department; much preparatory work and a lot of development time had been invested to make this experiment a success; and colleagues received a well-prepared and ready-made lesson series covering six to seven weeks.

Originally, twelve lessons were planned, with each lesson blending work from the history text book with work on the game. This combination of two different activities in one lesson did not have the desired results. It prevented the pupils from working in a purposeful manner, because there was not enough time for them to really stick to the job of designing the game. Nevertheless, they worked with great enthusiasm, imagination and creativity. As a result, there was a great variety of differently designed games – for example, a donjon of half a meter in height, a game board with a surface of approximately one and a half square meters, skilfully moulded peasants, beautifully designed instruction sheets, and even pastures with real grass on it. Consequently, several lessons had to be added in order to allow the pupils to play the games. It appeared, however, that much time and energy had been spent on cutting and pasting. In retrospect, the teachers involved felt that the design work had cost too much time.

In order to finish the project, the pupils had to administer a test and the games had to be assessed. The best designed game of each class went to the finals, where the games were assessed by an expert jury consisting of the school head, a handicrafts teacher and a history teacher. Other teachers asked us to present the project to them and show them the games because they had heard of it in their own lessons with the Year 7 classes. For example, during other lessons the pupils had asked permission to go to the play ground in order to collect grass. To streamline the lessons, we decided to make the planning stricter and tighter, to insert specific assessment moments, to impose rules for designing and to make a distinction between subject matter lessons and designing lessons. So we started the school year 1995-1996 with a revised program. The following important revisions had been made:

- in the initial four weeks we alternated game's design lessons with content lessons from the course book;
- in all, we planned a program of fourteen lessons, ending with a final assessment of the Peasants' Dice Game (see Figure 4) and a closing test;
- three interim assessment moments were inserted, with the teacher's approval signature to be put into the pupils' team logbook;
- the pupils received a cardboard plate, and they were not allowed to design their games beyond the fixed format of this plate (see Figure 3);
- when the pupils designed and constructed houses and additional decorations, they were not allowed to fix these onto the plate, but had to keep them separate. This appeared to be a solution to the problem of storing all these materials (80 games each year!);
- the pupils received a detailed planner replacing the teacher's oral instructions, and they had to make extensive use of a logbook for keeping track of their activities.

We later made an additional adaptation in the year 1996-1997. We decided to use four lessons to introduce the subject matter using the course book. During the next eight lessons, the pupils worked in teams constructing the game. Figure 7 gives the details and the schedule together with all the activities and homework for each of the eight construction lessons.

Evaluation

In 1997, we evaluated the curriculum for the first time using a questionnaire filled in by all Year 7 pupils. This questionnaire was designed to evaluate the process of working in teams with responses to items such as 'The work has been divided fairly between the team members' and 'I learned a lot by working in teams' and 'I would like to design such a game more often'. The results indicated that the pupils were positive about the organisation of and

Figure 3: An example of a board game made by one team



instructions for the game, as well as about the composition of the teams and collaborative manner of working. Where the teacher did not allow the pupils themselves to compose the teams, the pupils answered that they wanted more influence on the composition of teams. In general, it appeared that the pupils liked to work in teams and to design games. Less prolific and unambiguous are the results regarding the use of the planner and the learning gains. It may well be that we did not succeed in making the learning targets clear enough to the pupils. Based on these results, we have adapted the curriculum along the following lines.

As a result of the evaluation, we decided to individually assess the pupils' knowledge as acquired in the small teams. In particular, we wanted to diagnose the level of imagination by asking such test questions as 'Describe five moments of bad luck (respectively: good fortune) for a peasant's child', and (after giving them a picture with medieval images and situations – see Figure 5) 'Explain what is happening here'.

In addition, we wanted to have the pupils reflect on the acquired skills by asking them to formulate some advice for future Year 7 pupils. Advice for future pupils included: 'Don't forget to take with you all the things you need for your game: make a to-do list to remind you', 'Assign each pupil an equal share of the work to be done and assign roles', and 'Don't waste too much time! Be sure to stick to your plans and your schedule'.

Additionally, we changed the way we introduce the programme and the instructions for the logbook. For us, it was of the utmost importance to urge the pupils to work on the logbook conscientiously - not a few superficial or descriptive remarks, but a genuine and adequate account of how the work in their teams was done. So at the beginning of each lesson, they had to write down what they planned to do and, at the end,

Figure 4: Assessment sheet

| Assessment sheet | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Names: | | | | | |
| 1) Cooperation | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2) Presentation | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3) Use of the sources | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4) Playability | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | _____ + | | | | |
| | points total | | | | |
| Explanation: | | | | | |
| 1: Also includes logbook and own evaluation. | | | | | |
| 2: Also includes attractive and original things. | | | | | |
| 3: Is it historically correct? | | | | | |
| 4: Can you play the game? Is everything OK, such as the rules? | | | | | |
| Is it fun to play the game? | | | | | |
| A team can acquire 20 points in total. | | | | | |

Figure 5: Picture from a medieval woodcut of peasants at work (picture used to test the pupils imagination)



Figure 6: Picture from a medieval woodcut of dancing peasants.



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important.

what as a team they had actually done and what the precise results were. For the pupils, this was not easy. To some extent, they even disliked such an extensive and detailed use of a logbook but to the teachers it was precious information about the whereabouts of a team and what each member was doing in order to stick to the team plans.

To achieve all this, we introduced elements of working together productively in the form of the PIES as these have been called by Spencer Kagan: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, and simultaneous interaction.⁶ We did not use these terms with the pupils, but we did encourage them to divide and assign the different roles in their teams in accordance with each skill and to specify this in the logbook. In the logbook, we put questions about the evaluation of their own efforts. For example, they had to mark the outcomes and processes of working together.

Gradually, assessing the look of the game became less important, and some teachers even started to ask the pupils to evaluate the games of other teams. Each team played the games of other teams and could assess it with the help of an assessment form. These pupils' judgments on the playability and appearance of the games were used by the teachers in awarding marks.

Conclusion

Initially, we systematically observed the lesson series developed by one of us (the second author), conceived and carried out together with a fellow history teacher, when herself still a teacher. At that time, we loosely used some co-operative learning strategies, but did not yet possess the structured knowledge of it nor know how to tailor its basic principles to classroom use. We simply wanted to let the pupils work collaboratively and learn from each other. As a result, we expected the pupils to be more involved in the subject matter, and to become truly motivated by the content of history. To guide us, we used our practical experiences ('learning-by-doing'), and we discussed these with the other colleagues from the history department. As the project proceeded, however, we became more familiar with the theoretical issues related to co-operative learning. Gradually, we introduced its core principles. These principles led to the explicit and concrete visualisation of what and how the pupils were learning and designing, both individually and in their teams. We wanted to keep track of the learning outcomes in order to put in moments of assessment. However, we did not want to inhibit the pupils' freedom and creativity because these were basic to the motivation of the pupils for this project. There is a tension between giving latitude and opportunities to the pupils on the one hand, and keeping track of and assessing the process and learning outcomes on the other.

This issue of tension (letting the pupils go versus regulating them) has become a major topic in discussion about the practice of new pedagogy. We see both teachers and pupils as being responsible for what is going on in the classrooms. We should keep in mind that teaching and learning will be more effective when the teacher's and pupil's roles are focused on participation and co-construction of knowledge. This also holds for the activities within our school history department itself: we have learned a lot by working together and developing professionally as a teaching team.

This brings us to the moments of 'bad luck and good fortune' for the teacher while working on this lesson series. What are the pitfalls related to such a curriculum project? First, it is a project with a mix of classroom instruction, working individually and designing collaboratively. This asks for unambiguous arrangements between the teachers involved and their pupils. Planners, handouts and a logbook are essential instruments to communicate these arrangements. Second, the assessment procedures should be clear and transparent to the pupils. Third, there is the matter of handling and storage of all the games and material products. These three aspects should be carefully considered in order to experience 'moments of great teacher joy'.

In the later grades, pupils apparently keep mentioning this medieval project. Student teachers, alumni and colleagues from other schools are now using our scenario and materials to develop such a project in their own schools. We are currently working on an extension of the project using the Internet and ICT, and this looks very promising. Or, as it was written in one of the texts the pupils had to choose while working on the Medieval Peasants' Dice Game: *after collecting the crops and harvesting, there was time for a large and exuberant celebration.*

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Figure 7: Study planner for Year 7

| Study planner Year 7 | WESTERN EUROPE AROUND THE YEAR 900 The Medieval Peasants' Dice Game |
|---|--|
| <p>Using some texts on the lives of peasants in the early Middle Ages, you will work in teams to design a game. This game will show the life of a medieval peasant.</p> <p>Your teacher will be available if you have problems, but by using this study planner, you can do most of the work on your own and/or in your team.</p> <p>In this study planner you will find:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What rules you have to follow in designing the game.2. How the game should be constructed.3. A schedule with all the activities and homework for each lesson. | |
| 1. Rules for making the game. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Each team will receive texts, pictures, a cardboard plate and a logbook.➤ From home, you will bring scissors, glue, crayons and other materials for decorating your board-game. These materials will remain at school. Your teacher will take care of storing them. Because you cannot store tall objects on your board, bring a box in which to keep them. Put your name on this box.➤ At the end of each lesson, you will record in the team logbook what you have achieved as a team.➤ You will show the game to your teacher to have it approved <i>three times</i>. After approving it, your teacher will sign your team logbook. | |
| 2. How do you design the Medieval Peasants' Dice Game? | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ From the texts, take the examples of bad luck and good fortune (ups and downs) in the life of the medieval peasants (lesson 1, 2, and 3).➤ Think, discuss and make sketches of what the board game will look like. Draw frames, and around the frames, meadows, fields, streams and so on (lesson 3).➤ Decide which frames create ups and downs, and which create nothing (lesson 4/5).➤ Choose pictures from the sheets. Cut them out and stick them onto the board game (lessons 4/5).➤ Draw or stick everything made by your team onto the board game (lessons 4/5).➤ Make special cards for each frame explaining the ups and downs (lessons 4, 5, 6).➤ Think up some rules for your game. Put these on paper. Design the dice and pawns. You could design them in the style of the game, perhaps using peasants or animals (lesson 6). | |
| 3. Schedule of lessons | |
| <p>At the end of each lesson, fill in your team's logbook.</p> <p>Lesson 1: Instruction and setting up of teams.</p> <p>Lesson 2 and 3: Choose your "ups and downs" from the texts. Design your board game (frames, drawings, pictures, objects, and so on).</p> <p>Lesson 4 and 5: Make your board game. Make the special cards explaining the ups and downs.</p> <p>Lesson 6: Make up the rules for the game and write these down. Think of some pawns to use with your game and design them.</p> <p>Lesson 7 and 8: Now prepare the game for playing. First, have a try-out of your own Medieval Peasants' Dice Game. This will give your team the chance to change and improve it. Once the game is completed, you can play the game for real.</p> <p>When each team has played its own game, it will play the game of another team.</p> | |