

Activity 4

Not easy being British

– a citizenship test and points arising

Summary

Working in small groups, young people answer questions of the kind that are asked in citizenship tests. How relevant do they consider the questions to be? If a question appears irrelevant can they nevertheless guess why it was asked? What suggestions do they have for questions that are more relevant? More specifically, can they come up with questions which are more appropriate for people such as themselves? They then go on to discuss concepts of Britishness and national identity and to compare their own views with those of others.

Why?

- The benefits that young people gain from this exercise include the following. They:
 - gain basic information about the UK's history, law and political system
 - identify what is valuable in the teachings and influences of others and of the past, and make it their own
 - gain in readiness to look critically at the influences and pressures they experience, and in resilience and strength to withstand those they consider harmful or not particularly useful/meaningful
 - appreciate that concepts of Britishness, citizenship and national identity are contested, and that there are few if any final answers
 - citizenship is inherently to do with taking part in debates, disagreements and questioning, not in being uncritical and conformist
 - gain in readiness to take responsibility for upholding structures and procedures of fairness and democracy, and for strengthening and enhancing them.

Preparation

You need some questions from real or imagined tests. The test in Handout 6 was devised by a panel of experts convened by the BBC.

Also on the BBC website, incidentally, there is an online quiz that is not intended to be taken very seriously. However, it does raise some interesting questions. It's at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4099770.stm>.

Procedure

Young people work in groups, and each group decides the correct answer to each question. They may also say with each question whether a) they are confident they have the correct answer, b) they are fairly but not wholly sure they have the correct answer, or c) their answer is based entirely or almost entirely on guesswork.

If time and facilities are available, young people may be asked to research the answers on the Internet or in books of reference, rather than simply be told the correct answers.

Either way, a follow-up concern with each question is its relevance. What is the point behind each question? Is it really reasonable to expect all British citizens a) to know the correct answer, and b) to appreciate the point behind it? The answers to the questions, together with some notes about them, are provided in Handout 7.

(Young people may be interested to know, in this connection, that the BBC administered the test in Handout 6 at a primary school in the Midlands. A class of Year 6 children, working together, scored 8 out of 10. Their headteacher, however, answering on her own, scored 4!)

Young people may then proceed to surf the Internet and to collect quotations from writings about Britishness. Which three quotations do they find most striking?

Comment

A youth worker involved in the piloting of this pack reported that the young people knew very few of the correct answers. 'But it created great debates, which led to some good discussions. The biggest debate on any question was number 6 [the one on domestic violence].'

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 6 UK Citizenship Test

(As devised by BBC Radio 4, 21 January 2006. Answers and notes in Handout 7.)

1. **Which king had his powers curbed by the Magna Carta?**
 - a) Alfred the Great
 - b) Charles I
 - c) John

2. **Which year did all women over 21 get the vote in Britain?**
 - a) 1945
 - b) 1900
 - c) 1928

3. **Which three branches of authority need to agree to a law before it can come into force?**
 - a) The House of Commons, Lord Chancellor and the Queen
 - b) The House of Commons, the Lords and the Queen
 - c) The Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the police

4. **Are you**
 - a) a subject of the Crown?
 - b) a citizen of the Crown?
 - c) a defender of the Crown?

5. **Why is the Union Flag made up of its particular colours?**
 - a) It was chosen by Henry VIII
 - b) It's made up of the flags of St George of England, St Patrick of Ireland and St Andrew of Scotland
 - c) It's made of the flags of England and the flags of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex

6. **Is a man allowed to punish his wife physically as long as it's in his own home?**
 - a) Yes, although not with any recognized weapon
 - b) Yes, though only under provocation
 - c) No

7. **Which English monarch broke away from the Roman Catholic Church?**
 - a) Charles
 - b) Elizabeth I
 - c) Henry VIII

8. **Who was the only politician in British history to abolish parliament?**
 - a) Cromwell
 - b) Gladstone
 - c) Churchill

9. **What building did Guy Fawkes famously fail to blow up?**
 - a) Buckingham Palace
 - b) Houses of Parliament
 - c) 10 Downing Street

10. **How long can a British government stay in office before a general election?**
 - a) 4 years
 - b) 6 years
 - c) 5 years

Background: The BBC Today Programme invited a politician (Barry Sheerman MP), a historian (Andrew Roberts), a race equality specialist (Trevor Phillips), a Muslim journalist (Sarah Joseph) and an economist (Madsen Pirie) to devise these questions, to test the knowledge of British law, history and constitution of potential UK citizens.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/politics/citizenship.shtml#>



Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 7

Answers and Notes on UK History and Law

(These notes refer to the questions in Handout 6)

1. **Which king had his powers curbed by the Magna Carta?**
The answer is John. His name during his lifetime, incidentally, was Jean, not John, as he was French.
2. **Which year did all women over 21 get the vote in Britain?**
The answer is 1928. The decision to permit women to vote at all was made in 1918. But at that time only women aged at least 30 were allowed to vote. Women first used their vote on the same basis as men on 30 May 1929. It was not until 1969 that people aged 18, both women and men, were allowed to vote.
3. **Which three branches of authority need to agree to a law before it can come into force?**
The answer is the House of Commons, the Lords and the Queen. The Lords frequently make amendments to proposed legislation, but when there is disagreement between Lords and Commons, the view of the Commons prevails – in practice, though not constitutionally. The role of the monarch is purely symbolic and does not involve her or him personally.
4. **Are you a) a subject of the Crown, b) citizen of the Crown, or c) defender of the Crown?**
The answer is that strictly speaking the British are subjects, not citizens.
5. **Why is the Union Jack made up of its particular colours?**
The answer is that it's made up of the flags of St George of England, St Patrick of Ireland and St Andrew of Scotland. It was created in 1801. Subsequently (1923) the country now known as Ireland (as distinct from Northern Ireland) left the UK, but the flag remained unchanged. The correct name for the flag is the Union Flag, not the Union Jack. The latter term is derived from sailors' slang.
6. **Is a man allowed to punish his wife physically as long as it's in his own home?**
The answer is No. It is arguably worrying, or indeed very worrying, that the experts who phrased this question thought it worth asking.
7. **Which English monarch broke away from the Roman Catholic Church?**
The answer is Henry VIII. The break occurred in the 1530s and the monarch's motivation was secular not religious. For example, amongst several other reasons, he wished his marriage to be annulled. (For much fuller information, see The English Reformation at Wikipedia.) As individuals, not all English people converted. Within the Church of England to this day, there are individuals whose practice and beliefs are barely distinguishable from those of members of the Roman Catholic Church. (see Anglo-Catholicism at Wikipedia for fuller information.)

8. Who was the only politician in British history to abolish parliament?

The answer is Oliver Cromwell (mid-17th century). The episode is a reminder that British history has at times contained major conflicts and disruptions. So are several of the other episodes referred to in this test – in particular numbers 1, 2, 5, 7 and 9.

9. What did Guy Fawkes famously fail to do?

The answer is that Guido Fawkes, known after his death as Guy, failed with his fellow-conspirators to blow up the Houses of Parliament. The year was 1605 and the day was 5 November. Nowadays, 'Guy Fawkes Day' is widely celebrated by children with bonfires and fireworks. Fawkes and his fellow conspirators were Catholics and did not want a Protestant monarch (James I) on the English throne.

10. How long can a British government stay in office before a general election?

The answer is five years. Most governments, however, last rather less than this. Typically, the government of the day calls an election when it judges it has the best chance of winning – usually after about four years.

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