Washing Lines and Their Uses

'Washing line' activities or, to sound more pompous, continuum activities are extremely useful in helping students organize material and ideas and for making what can be very vague concepts much more comprehensible. They can also be used to build up plans for essays or other pieces of extended writing. These notes suggest some of many ways you can use 'washing lines' to deepen your students' understanding activities - at all levels and ages.

How do you build them?

In a variety of ways, for example:

1. Students take up positions along the line, wearing tabards or holding cards
2. Peg cards on a piece of string strung across the room
3. Position cards on a line on the floor
4. Draw the line and cards on your board

What can you use them for?

The examples below are only examples – there are myriad other topics they can be applied to.

a) Change …. Continuity

Example 1 – take an event such as the Norman Conquest or Industrial Revolution and prepare topic cards (Homes, Transport, Religion etc). Place them on the Change … Continuity line to develop a sense of the impact of the event. Either give students information on which to base their judgements of Change or Continuity or ask them to research them.

Example 2 – For a Study in Development on the history of Medicine place periods of history on the Change … Continuity line according to the degree of change they saw. You could turn this into a living graph by adding an axis showing the degree of impact on health.

b) Success …. Failure

Example 1 – Examine the success or failure of Gladstone's 1868-1874 government by putting events, reforms or policies on cards/tabards and decide where they go on the Success… Failure line. Move into interpretations by looking at whether everyone at the time would agree, whether there is a difference between contemporary views and those of historians and whether the pattern explains his defeat in 1874. This could be used for any government, monarch, leader.

Example 2 – for an overview use the Success … Failure line to compare 19th century Prime Ministers or the impact of protest movements. At A level these provide good revision activities, offering plentiful opportunities to look at why interpretations vary. At KS3 such activities can be carried out over a much longer span of time, comparing e.g. protests from the Middle Ages to the 20th century and bring cohesion to KS3 History.

c) Useful …. Not useful or Reliable ….. Unreliable

Example – begin with a question such as 'Why did the Normans win the battle of Hastings?' Place John of Worcester, William of Jumieges, Harald's Saga etc on the line according to their reliability or usefulness for that question.

But what happens if you change the question and ask 'Why did the Norwegians lose at Stamford Bridge?' The sources need to be re-evaluated and moved – a very good lesson that sources are not intrinsically reliable or useful – it all depends on the question.

d) Threatening …. Unthreatening

Example 1 - Which opponents of Henry VIII were most threatening? Gabrielle Reddington who teaches in Washington asked her A level class to 'dress' a chair with the name of an opponent, a picture, relevant quotations and place the chair cum opponent on the threatening … unthreatening line.

Example 2 – Extend the above to provide an overview comparing the threats posed by protests against the Tudors or 19th century protests and campaigns.

e) Harm …. Good

Example - Did the Roman Empire do more harm than good? This enables students to build up a complex sense of the impact of an empire. Cards/tabards can represent people e.g. Boudica, Cogidumnus or aspects of society such as home. Other possibilities include the Industrial Revolution, Norman Conquest, Totalitarian regimes or could be applied to decisions, policies or reforms.

f) Significant ….. Insignificant

Example 1 – Explore the factors involved in explaining Germany's collapse in 1918 and place the factors on the Significance … Insignificance line. Would historians, contemporaries, people from different backgrounds or countries agree? This can be used for all kinds of causal questions.

Example 2 – Place individuals or events within a period or over a long span of time on the Significance … Insignificance line. This makes a good synoptic activity at all levels and can create overall cohesion at KS3.

g) Strongest evidence for ….. Strongest evidence against

Example – begin with a statement e.g. 'Queen Elizabeth I was a highly successful monarch.' Place events, quotations or other evidence on the Strongest evidence for ….. Strongest evidence against line to build up a picture of the complexity of the case – this helps students choose which evidence to use in arguing a case and building an essay. This works at all levels and is a good introduction to a topic with the line being amended by further study.

h) Certainty … Uncertainty

Example – use this to chart students' progress during an investigation to help them feel comfortable with the idea that uncertainty is OK and with using words such as probably and possibly. When undertaking a source-based mystery investigation (see e.g. the Great Cheese Mystery) ask students to position themselves on the Certainty … Uncertainty line after looking at 3 clues. Ask them to rethink their position after looking at more clues and at the end of the investigation. This works extremely well with the Skeleton in the Fields mystery – see Digging up a mystery.

Variations on the basic model

1. Give students a completed washing line and ask them to research and assess its accuracy – good for stimulating group research at A level.

2. Use a digital camera to record a completed line and use this with another class or swap it with another school – do they agree with your conclusions? Why might they differ?

3. Save an image of a line e.g. in Y7 and compare with similar topics in Y8 and Y9, reinforcing knowledge and seeing your KS3 History as a course, not separate years of work.

What are the advantages?

1. Students become familiar with the basic idea and therefore work with more confidence. The number of variations reduces the likelihood of 'not again' reactions.

2. Washing lines make aspects of conceptual understanding concrete and directly address classic problems of learning e.g. students tend to assume a source is reliable for everything but the physical movement of sources on the line when a question changes makes it very clear that this is not the case.

3. Activities involve students physically. This will make fidgeters less negatively fidgety. The variety of activity helps everyone by breaking up sessions and stimulating concentration

4. Activities show that it's good to change your mind e.g. when more evidence or information becomes available

5. The physical construction of a line aids essay planning and construction. Sections of the line become paragraphs and students can see this manifested physically. Many students struggle with essays simply because they cannot 'see' essay structure and they are helped by grouping points physically, using people as paragraphs.

6. Washing lines enable comparisons across time e.g. in synoptic elements of A level or comparing the significance of events studied in different years at KS3.