

Some thoughts on Knowledge in Key Stage 3

These notes are about historical knowledge - but not about the minutiae of which bits of content should be in the KS3 curriculum. Instead they try to tackle three larger questions, the first two of which should perhaps be answered before anyone gets to the stage of selecting the detailed content to teach.

These three questions these notes address are:

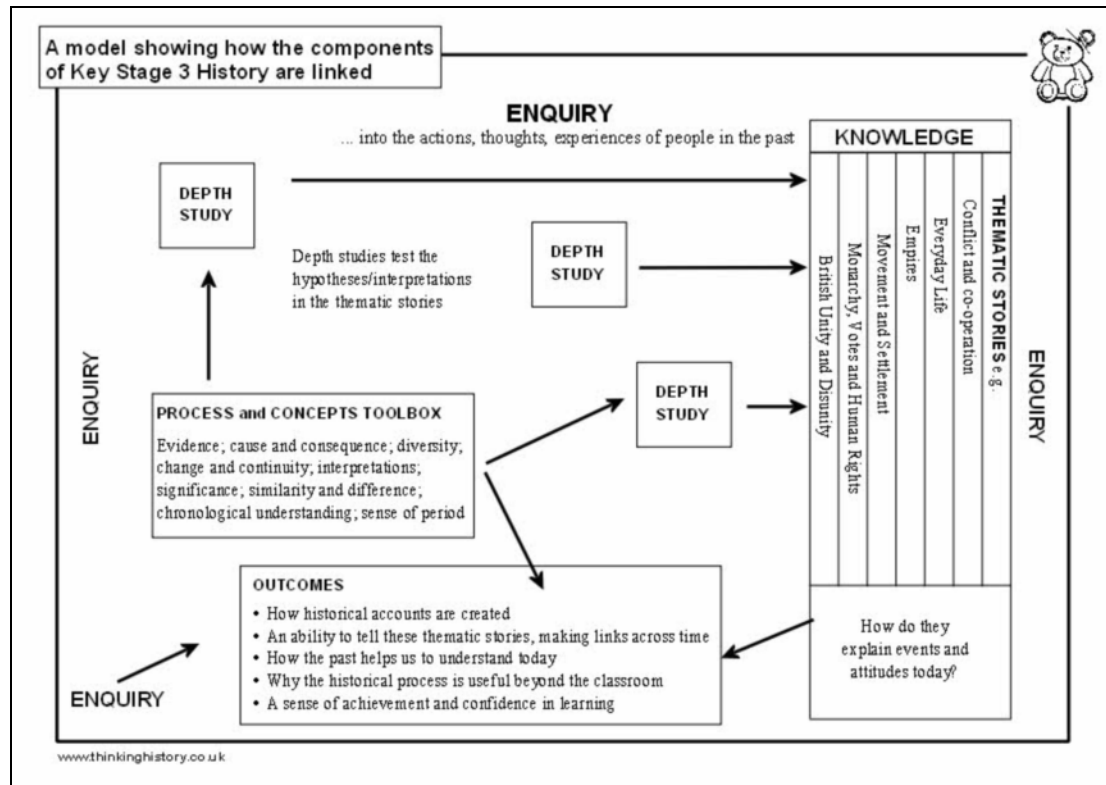
1. How does knowledge fit into overall plan of KS3 History?
2. What kind of historical knowledge constitutes a desirable to-be-aimed-for 'take-away' when children complete KS3 History?
3. What do we want students to know and understand about individual events and people and, perhaps, individual themes within KS3 History?

Three points of importance to note, as these are by no means the only questions to be asked about 'knowledge':

- a) by focusing on knowledge I'm not suggesting that concepts and skills don't have a place in the History curriculum. Far from it – they're essential components as question 1 demonstrates.
- b) I haven't addressed the balance of British to other histories question here – not because it isn't important but because that would have taken me into 'what history?', a different kind of question to those addressed below.
- c) I've worked within the content framework that's existed for KS3 since the National Curriculum was introduced. There are valid questions to be asked about the limitations of this NC coverage in terms of both chronology and significance but as 99% of teachers are focused on the statutory requirements it would be arrogant to ignore them and start from somewhere completely different.

1. How does knowledge fit into overall plan of KS3?

This section is a gloss on a visual chart of KS3 that I developed for an article on ‘sense of period’ for *Teaching History*.



See: <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/IssueKnowledgeModel.pdf> for a full page version of the chart.

At the time I felt quite apologetic about this chart – I wasn’t sure if it was too obvious, too theoretical to be useful or just plain arrogant to be putting forward this kind of model - but the more I’ve looked at it the more I think this kind of overview is extremely important because it shows everyone, teachers and students, how all the components of ‘doing history’ inter-relate.

The idea is pragmatically simple, that the underpinning methodology in History is enquiry, asking questions about the past. These enquiries can either be about periods, people or events in depth or they can be ‘overview’ enquiries and to tackle the enquiries we use a toolbox of skills and concepts – the more we understand about both the process of enquiry and also the skills and concepts the better our chances of conducting effective enquiries. The product of these enquiries is deeper knowledge – both of periods and events in depth and an understanding of the development of themes and issues across time, linking into an

understanding of today. And for students all this creates a series of wider outcomes which show why History is a worthwhile form of study in school.

So who could this model help? First and foremost I wonder if it could help students learn more effectively by giving them a stronger sense of what they're doing in History. We all learn more effectively if we make the process of learning explicit by:

- (a) knowing what we're trying to achieve and
- (b) identifying what we already do well and also what the next stage of learning entails – what needs to be improved.

One problem with History seems to be that while we've been doing all the elements on the chart – enquiry, conceptual understanding, content coverage in outline and depth – students often don't see how they all come together, what the overall outcomes are meant to be. And without an awareness of those overall outcomes then it's hard for students to see why they're working on sources or developing a sense of enquiry or learning about a particular bit of History. These activities may just seem to be hoops to be jumped through on lesson 3 on Monday (even if enjoyable hoops) before going off to jump through another teacher's different set of hoops.

What the chart offers is a big picture – what our outcomes will be if we keep doing and getting better at History. And if we get there – it's an achievement, something that's worth working towards, something that gives confidence because we now know and understand something we didn't know and understand aged 11. Those two or three years of History lessons have added up to something specific.

And at the heart of that 'something specific' is knowledge and understanding of the past. Building historical knowledge is important because:

- it's at the heart of the subject and its major end-product, what we use those skills and concepts to create and acquire
- it's what children and parents usually History is about. We have to meet that expectation and work with it before we can develop it and move beyond it, beyond the

level of 'History's about learning dates and facts' to a series of deeper understandings about how historical knowledge is constructed.

- the target of acquiring historical knowledge and understanding can be an important motivating factor in learning – and you need to know what the target is to be motivated by it. [This of course doesn't work for everyone as some students just lack the 'history gene' and never see the point - my father was one of those but then I never acquired the Maths gene that he strove hard to pass onto me.]
- the particular content and knowledge of History is one of the things that distinguishes it from other subjects. To put it crudely, History is the one subject that deals with the lives and experiences of real, individual people and allows us to learn from the experiences of people similar to and different from ourselves. At the same time our methodology can also be contrasted with, say, science – similar approach to enquiry but different ways of testing hypotheses and different types of conclusions because we can't reconstruct the past in the same way a scientist can reconstruct an experiment. [At one time much was said about History as a 'form of knowledge' – a fine idea but only practical if children can compare and contrast a variety of forms of knowledge – what are the similarities and differences between disciplines?]

So - should students have the chance to see and understand this 'model' or something like it? Would seeing it help them gain a sense of how the components of History fit together, how knowledge is developed and why they're doing the individual activities you are setting them? Would it improve their motivation and confidence to know where they're going across KS3 History in terms of something other than moving forward chronologically – and what they have a chance of achieving by the end?

And would this kind of model help colleagues understand what happens in History? Colleagues who may be called in to teach History but are stuck at the 'it's just about interesting bits of content' level? Colleagues who are struggling to create something coherent and worthwhile because they've been shoved together in a doom-laden integrated way to solve a timetabling problem? Colleagues such as Headteachers and other managers who need a clear guide to why History is worthwhile and what's distinct and what's similar to the work of other disciplines?

At the heart of this model is knowledge and understanding of the past – it's what all that enquiry, concepts and process creates. What goes into that large 'knowledge' box top right of the chart is the subject of question 2.

2. What kind of historical knowledge constitutes a desirable, to-be-aimed-for, 'take-away' when children complete KS3 History?

It's always tempting to leap into the deep end and start identifying detail that should go into a KS3 course but it seems essential to preface that stage with decisions about the nature of the 'knowledge 'take-away'. I have a feeling that this is the most important question you'll answer in planning a KS3 History course because all other decisions about details of content and course structure flow from it.

In the past it's been assumed but rarely stated explicitly that, by 14, children should have acquired a knowledge of the pattern of British history as a whole. This aim is hugely ambitious and, I suspect, impossible to achieve except with the brightest of the bright - and taught by teachers who themselves have a very clear picture in their minds of such an overview. However the level of demand isn't my only problem with the amorphous 'know the history of Britain' approach. At least as problematic is its vagueness which makes it

- a) difficult for students to see progress at any stage of the course and work out what they need to do next (other than move forward in time)

- b) impossible to set up clear, specific enquiry questions that link across time and to today

- c) extremely difficult to get any precise sense of achievement when KS3 History is completed – can you tell the story of the history of Britain? Is that a do-able end of course activity?

These three problems go strongly against the grain of what we've learned makes for effective learning. So what is the alternative as a knowledge 'take-away'? That's provided by the 2008 approach to KS3 which identifies a series of thematic stories. This makes possible a different aim – that by 14 children should emerge with sufficient knowledge and understanding to enable them to tell these thematic stories across time individually and maybe make some links between them. This seems a worthwhile and achievable aim that isn't bedeviled by the three

problems above that stem from aiming for an over-arching history of Britain. The overall ‘history of Britain’ approach, ironically given its aim, creates a greater likelihood that students end KS3 with a scatter of pieces of knowledge, often unrelated to each other, rather than a coherent pattern or patterns of knowledge.

[As an aside, the word ‘narrative’ is often used in discussions of knowledge – that it needs to be ‘restored’ to the curriculum after, apparently being taken out or ignored at some stage. Now I’m not quite sure what is meant by those who espouse ‘narrative’ as the meaning seems to shift from time to time and I wonder if the word sounds grander and more significant than the idea/s that lie behind it. On one level it seems to mean nothing more than *‘doing things in order and explaining how they’re linked together’* – something which, as suggested above, is actually very hard when trying to tackle all the threads of British history in an interwoven way. I suspect that narrative in this sense is much more likely to be achieved – and be more visible to students – when seen within the confines of individual thematic stories. Narrative may however be more about writing more complex accounts, entwining the story of the development of some particular event with an explanation of how it came about and what consequences it had – a laudable aim but one that’s more about the teaching of an individual topic than the overview of what’s taught at KS3 as a whole.]

An additional advantage of the ‘thematic story’ approach to defining content is that it encourages a much more effective interaction of overview and depth activities. Overview activities are crucial for helping students see the whole picture of a theme in one activity and also function as hypotheses to be tested by the depth studies. In practical terms, overviews also allow you to cover a great deal of material briefly and effectively and this, of course, is vital for solving the greatest practical problem – how do you fit it all in without leaving gaping holes in your content coverage? This applied whether you’ve got three years or two years or you’re using a carousel system. Overviews stay the same however much time you have but you increase or reduce the number of depth studies depending on time available.

That’s a fairly extensive list of reasons why it’s worth considering seeing the knowledge ‘take-away’ in terms of the ability to tell a series of individual thematic stories instead of one overall British history story. But another very powerful reason for adopting this objective relates to motivation and learning. One of the big problems students have with History is appreciating that what they’ve done before can help them with this week’s work. This is

because, in the wholesale history of Britain approach, we trick them each time we move on in the scheme of work by changing names, dates and places. Last week it was Magna Carta, this week it's medieval village life – what's this week got to do with last week? The danger is that students only perceive progress in terms of knowledge as they move forward through time – yes, they may be developing stronger skills in using sources and developing their abilities at independent enquiry but are they getting a sense of motivation and achievement by increasing their knowledge AND linking it into what they've done before? I suspect this is very hard unless the thematic stories provide the explicit core of the scheme of work and students know explicitly that their task this week is to continue, for example, with an overall enquiry into the history of conflict or everyday life and that by the end of this enquiry they'll be able to tell more of this overview story, linking it to what they've done before.

Therefore in this way the thematic stories provide a series of 'comfort zones' that students are familiar with – and the idea of working from within to outside your comfort zone may be very important in learning effectively. Take any topic, whether it's historical or something very different, such as gardening – it's a rare person who doesn't struggle when dropped into a subject that's outside their comfort zone. All too often you feel tentative and your brain freezes up – engaging with this new unknown problem feels dangerous and really you'd rather not. I wonder if that's how many children feel when moving on in History – they've just getting the hang of Henry VIII and we change the question and we're into Elizabeth or the Civil War. Everything depends on the teacher who becomes, in effect, the comfort zone – we're OK because we like Mr. X. But maybe the explicit use of thematic stories, along with a strong emphasis on enquiry, can provide comfort zones from within the content – yes, the Civil War may be new in terms of events but remember this is part of a bigger story, that of monarchy and parliament and it's helping us explain why we still have a monarch when most other countries do not. It's linked to a previous topic, not utterly new and so not a worrying unknown. What do we already know about why monarchs were challenged that might help why the Civil War broke out?

[Planning around thematic stories doesn't mean you have to take each in isolation – i.e. tackling everyday life in Y7 and monarchy and parliament in Y8 and so on. You could do this even though it creates a different problem, making it harder for students to develop a sense of period as they never spend consolidated time on any one period. However knowing this is the first step to solving it – and teaching 'sense of period' has rarely been anything other than an

implicit objective. A more traditional approach is to maintain your overall chronological structure – to c.1500 in Y7 etc - but within the broad periods structure material around the thematic stories and make sure children realise that they run through their whole course.]

Would a closer definition of the content to be covered at KS3 help? At the time of writing (August 2010) this seems a live issue as a new government works out what it wants to do with the National Curriculum.

The answer, as ever, is 'it depends'. Simply piling in more content seems likely to prove problematical, creating a big jumble of knowledge to be tackled and thus obscuring the patterns of knowledge for students and making a clear knowledge outcome at 14 harder to achieve. Specifying more detail to be covered doesn't increase 'knowledge' – and it probably won't even increase the amount of atomised information children acquire. But, if content is detailed in such a way as to mesh with the existing KS3 themes this additional detail need not be a problem at all. Indeed it may help teachers see and understand such themes more clearly for themselves.

One point that seems essential is the absolute importance of seeing knowledge in relation to learning, not as a separate 'list' which can be jotted down in isolation from what we know about how to help students learn effectively. This means treating knowledge on the same terms as concepts and skills – the learning process has to be visible to be effective. Therefore when students embark on studying the Civil War they have a sense of not only how they'll be developing their independent enquiry skills and conceptual understanding but also:

- a) how their new enquiry on the Civil War links to their overall History course – which thematic story or stories it relates to – and what that story is so far
- b) what they expect to emerge with – what questions about the Civil War and the wider theme that they'll gain the knowledge to answer.

3. What do we want students to know and understand about individual events and people and, perhaps, individual themes within KS3 History?

Debates about 'content' at KS3 seem to revolve around what's in and what's out rather than the at least equally important question of what we might want children to know and understand about individual topics and themes. A great deal of time has been spent analysing

levels of understanding of evidence, causation etc but comparatively little time seems to have been spent on thinking about what constitutes a desirable level of understanding of the Norman Conquest for a student in Year 7 – what counts as baseline knowledge and understanding, what would be an ‘average’ attainment, what would be outstanding? More broadly, WHY are we teaching the Norman Conquest – or any of the other individual events or people that might go into a scheme of work? What does knowledge and understanding of a topic contribute to children’s broader historical knowledge being developed at KS3?

The danger is that if we don’t have clear answers to those questions about individual topics then this again contributes to an atomized, bitty curriculum, potentially full of enjoyable activities, anecdotes and even developing worthwhile historical skills – but does such a collection of ‘events coverage’ add up to anything worthwhile in knowledge terms?

The Norman Conquest is the classic example. It’s a grand, enthralling start to Year 7 for many people – a great story, full of drama and personality, wonderful for source-work – but exactly why is it taught? What do Year 7’s take-away in terms of knowledge that links to later parts of their History course – and linking to later topics is vital to provide the opportunity to return, briefly, to that knowledge and keep it alive? Knowledge that isn’t re-used rapidly gets forgotten - we all discover that if we don’t teach a topic for a couple of years.

So, what are the possibilities within coverage of the Norman Conquest for helping students with any of the thematic stories? Do you focus on the power of the crown, ordinary people’s lack of power and why their views were easily suppressed? Or perhaps students could take away an understanding of why wars are fought and what motivates men to risk their lives in battle? Choosing either or both of those requires a particular choice of enquiry question/s and material, thinking through the desired knowledge outcomes and gearing the activities to those outcomes. The ability to tell the story of the events of 1066 is therefore necessary background, at whatever level the story can be told, but it’s what is then launched from that background that’s vital and re-useable later. A vital part of planning about teaching about the Conquest is identifying in advance what kinds of knowledge you want children to retain and use again about later events and issues.

This discussion of 1066 deserves more space and I hope to pick it up again in the future, along with discussion of other classic topics, the kind that perhaps have such an obvious place in the curriculum that’s it easy not to think about why they’re there. But for now, to sum up

question 3, I think there's real debate to be had, about why we teach any individual topic and what we know of each event we want students to retain. This in turn would open up a secondary question, one that researchers are used to asking about concepts – what understandings do KS3 students have about? But instead of completing the sentence with 'evidence' or 'significance' we might complete it with 'The Industrial Revolution' or 'The Black Death'.

Conclusion

These thoughts have been offered somewhat hesitantly in the hope that they may help departments think constructively about some 'knowledge' issues as a background to making choices about what to include in their scheme of work. In part my hesitation stems from the fact that I've written this 'out of my head' (maybe 'out of experience' would be a fairer way of putting it) – it's not based on extensive reading of articles or educational literature. Some readers may feel this is a severe limitation but time doesn't expand to make everything possible and I've chosen to hammer out ideas rather than sit and read. I hope this helps stimulate some ideas and maybe even lead to greater enjoyment and sense of achievement for both students and teachers.

Ian Dawson

August 2010