Hot-Seating

I'll start with the bad news. Your first teaching session using hot-seating will feel risky and you'll be anxious. Happily the good news easily out-guns the bad – hot-seating has a very powerful impact on students' learning and memory and you'll benefit too from the boost of confidence because it's worked and because you've been creative. So what is hot-seating?

By far the most common form is when the teacher plays the role of a named individual or of someone anonymous (e.g. a 1381 rebel or a survivor of Peterloo) or of a historian or archaeologist and is questioned by students. Sometimes the actual hot-seating is deliberately short – no more than ten minutes – but I have done a 40 minute session with Y5 (I was beginning to flag long before they did) and longer with A level students. In addition you have to build in time for very careful preparation and for debriefing afterwards to help students identify what they have learned.

There are numerous other variations with more or less structure. One is for students to take the hot seat but, to begin with at least, this works better if a group of students play a group of people (e.g. Levellers or opponents of these new-fangled anaesthetics) to reduce the pressure on individual students. Whichever style of hot-seating your aims are to make the complexity of events and ideas accessible to students and to help them understand issues they otherwise struggle with.

(The activities described in the text below can be found in detail via the links at the end)

An introductory example: King John in the hot-seat

One of my early ventures in hot-seating was to play the part of King John when teaching a group of second-year undergraduates who needed to get to grips with a range of different interpretations of John and his reign. Previously my introductory session had involved distributing extracts from books and articles and historians and asking students to identify historians' views of John and the evidence they used. It was an OK start but not one that galvanised students into asking lots of their own questions or digging deeper into the reading on their own initiative.

Replacing that 'everyday' start with half an hour in which I played the part of King John (having first prepared the students with enough information to get them asking questions) was very different in impact and motivation – but, even more importantly, it rapidly gave students a strong sense of the major reasons why historians have developed different interpretations of John. My aim was to show the complexity of the man – in turn intelligent, charming, bad-tempered, sullen, paranoid about

possible enemies and to drop in a lot of information that showed different aspects of John's work as king. As a result the students were able to understand that diversity of character and get an idea of its impact much better than from a list of adjectives in their books – and that then took us into our work on interpretations. Why might historians disagree or describe John differently? Which aspects of John's character did each historians emphasise? We could also explore what made a good medieval king by exploring John's strengths and weaknesses as king.

This use of hot-seating was therefore based on identifying a major problem students had with the topic - they had trouble seeing John as a human being, a real person with a complex character – because until then he was just another name on a page to add to the many they studied. By playing the part of John I gave them more sense of his complexity and therefore why historians might pick ot different aspects of his character and reign when assessing his success. In role I also threw a lot of information at them, much of which was remembered because they were concentrating so hard on my answers to their questions.

Having introduced hot-seating through my example of an undergraduate class it's obviously important to say that hot-seating works at all levels from KS1 to undergraduate level. My session with King John with undergraduates works just as well, with not too much reduction of the information I dropped in, for Year 7. Students of all ages benefit from experiencing variety of teaching methods. Just because older students have opted for history doesn't mean they don't still need to be challenged, motivated and enthused by the nature of your teaching. In addition, hot-seating is good for group dynamics and students' confidence, building their experience of asking questions (a vital skill) and focussed discussion. It also shows that the teacher is prepared to take risks to provide a stimulating lesson, something that students do respond well to. And, of course, it can improve students' motivation and thus the likelihood that they will learn more.

Objectives: What can you help students understand through hot-seating?

The starting point in planning is NOT 'who can I put in the hot-seat?' but what do students have difficulty understanding about a topic, event or person and asking yourself whether hot-seating is an effective way of improving their knowledge and understanding. Here are a handful of the possible issues you could explore:

> Understanding different interpretations – answer questions in role as one of Elizabeth I's courtiers or advisers to draw out her strengths and weaknesses as queen – perhaps looking back after 1603 to avoid being charged with treason! Possible follow up – can you find

evidence of this portrayal in historians' accounts? Why might historians disagree about aspects of Elizabeth's reign and rule?

Discussing significance – as Napoleon explain why you were so significant a figure. Possible follow up – What criteria is he using? Would an historian use the same criteria? Which criteria do you think are most important?

Analysing motivations and attitudes – as Wellington reply to questions on your attitudes to political reform or as William of Normandy explain why you invaded England. Possible follow up – look at sources and/or historians to compare with your answers in role.

Developing a sense of period – as Lady Agnes Luttrell answer questions about life in the 1300s. Possible follow-up – look at images from the Luttrell Psalter and ask students how they link to Lady Agnes's answers. Explore whether the villagers shown in the Psalter would have had different answers to the questions.

Understanding provenance of evidence – as William of Poitiers answer questions about why you wrote your account of William of Normandy's conquest of England. Possible follow-up – ask students to evaluate the usefulness of Poitiers' account for several individual questions or aspects of the story of 1066 (always ask students to think about provenance in the context of individual questions/aspects, not about a big topic as a whole).

Change and continuity – play the part of a 17th century physician and answers questions about your medical ideas and the treatments you use. What do you think of the work of Galen, Harvey and others? Possible follow-up – how does understanding the physicians attitudes explain the treatments he uses and the degree of change at this time?

The process of studying and writing history – as a historian or an archaeologist answer questions about the types of sources you use, what they can tell you and what you're trying to achieve in your work.

In all these examples it's important to underline that you're providing students with a considerable amount of historical knowledge while you're in the hot-seat because you're referring to events, other people, aspects of contemporary society – in this sense hot-seating is a form of story-telling in response to the questions you are asked, albeit a story broken up into small chunks.

Who do you put in the hot-seat?

It's always tempting to put the central character in an event into the hot-seat – just because they're the best-known name – but this may not be the best way of improving students' understanding. Often the best person to put in the hot-seat is someone whose views students find hard to understand, maybe even dislike. For example, students at A level are often unsympathetic to and have difficulty understanding the views and actions of Lord Liverpool and his ministers after 1815 – because they oppose the extension of the franchise – and so hot-seating Liverpool is much more likely to enhance students' understanding of those views and of the period than hot-seating a survivor of Peterloo whose perspectives students are likely to sympathise with. Your challenge in playing the part of Liverpool is to convince them of the complexity of your thinking and why you genuinely regard political reform as a risk to the country's stability and welfare. Once again this is using hot-seating to overcome a problem students have with a topic.

Another approach is to hot-seat someone who can comment on the actions of a leading individual rather than taking the part of that leading individual. I was once asked to be Richard III in the hot-seat for a Y5 class but, having thought about what students might learn from the session, I decided instead to take on the role of one of Richard's supporters who was looking back at his reign. This worked out well as I was able to give a more rounded, nuanced account of King Richard and the students kept up their questioning for the best part of 40 minutes. I also felt it was less intimidating for students to question a supporter and not the king himself as in role I could explain how I felt about the king whereas if I'd been the king the acting has to convey a degree of being unapproachable and intimidating.

It's also important to say that there are some individuals and views (e.g. anyone linked to Hitler) who I would never contemplate putting in the hot-seat.

Frequency of use, variations and building in structure

How often? Not just once a year. Any technique needs repeating so that students become used to what is expected of them so try using hot-seating about three times a year with a class so they develop familiarity and confidence and carry out their tasks better.

Variations and structure – there's a wide variety of ways to use hot-seating. They can be used as introductions or conclusions, with and without structure built into them. Here are just a few variations on the theme of hot-seating:

My King John activity was an introduction to the topic though one that followed a careful set up in which students were given enough information to enable them to ask questions. However once we'd started it was a very open, unstructured activity. Another introductory use of hot-seating but a much briefer one was playing the part of Samuel Pepys burning his cheese while flames spread through London. This is very much a stimulus starter to prompt questions about the Great Fire – why do you have a spade, what are you digging up or burying, why do you want to bury cheese – all leading into the story of London in flames. Now what questions do you want to ask about what was happening? So in this case, hot-seating Pepys was a n excellent way of creating a human lead-in to a wider topic and stimulating students' questions.

The Paulinus activity (exploring why the Romans wanted an empire) is another brief activity but combining hot-seating and card-sort. The teacher plays Paulinus explaining why an empire was wanted – and students have a range of motives on card that they have to identify when Paulinus mentions them. This helps students get used to the idea of the teacher in role and paves the way for more inter-active questioning – though there's plenty of opportunity here for students to question Paulinus about his motives (which was most important?) if you want to develop it that way.

'Shall we join the Chartists?' is a more open-ended activity – the teacher arrives full of excitement, having just been to a Chartist meeting and eager to tell his family – the class – about what he'd found out. This creates the opportunity for the class to ask you questions about Chartism – what is it, what are its aims etc? – a very different way of building core information, thinking about the pros and cons of joining the movement and prompting further reading. Greater detail can be built in by dividing the class into families and giving them identities and backgrounds.

Hot-seating can also make an effective conclusion to a topic. One KS3 activity which can conclude by hot-seating the whole class in a gentle way is The Black Death comes to Allton. In this activity each student is given a named part in the village of Allton and we follow them from before to after the Black Death and find out how the Black Death affected each of them. One way to conclude is to keep them in role and to question them as a group of villagers about their experience of the Black Death, how their fears grew and changed and how they feel afterwards (if they survived.) You could obviously do this more objectively, asking them as a class of modern children, but keeping them in role may well add an extra dimension to their thinking.

Another activity that can be adapted to conclude with two-way hot-seating is Henry VII – The Survival Game. I've generally used this as an introductory decision-making activity at A level but

also used the same set of decision questions and options after students have studied Henry VII. This has involved me being Henry VII and holding a extended meeting with the students as my councillors and going through the decisions, asking for their advice – as they've already studied the topic by then this could be just a memory activity (what did Henry choose?) but not if I push students to justify their choices and push them on the strengths of other choices. They do have to think and not just remember – so both I and they are in the hot-seat at the same time – and importantly, it underlines that Henry's choices were not always obvious and frequently difficult.

Props, dressing up and how do you get students to suspend their disbelief?

The key to the suspension of disbelief lies in your own confidence in being someone else - always look individual students straight in the eye and hold their gaze for a few seconds so they can see that you really see yourself as the character you're playing. Ignore giggles and whispers, just play the role. It's amazing how your own sense of conviction – that you are that person – transmits itself to your class. If you're playing a royal role, make sure you walk more upright, more regally. If you're a 1381 rebel, you're probably angry and have advanced osteo-arthritis from toiling in the fields but also worried about how things may turn out.

Don't worry about short silences. It may take a few moments for someone to ask the first question but don't rush into filling the silence. If necessary, pick out someone who you can be confident will ask a question (see notes on preparation below). Once the first question is underway you're off – and you can't control the order of questions or debate. The exhilarating thing is that there's no sequence to your script – you have to improvise in role. You don't need RADA training – just a touch of self-belief – but then most teachers have a touch (at least) of the actor in them). And remember there are good Shakespearean precedents for men playing women and women playing men!

Period music helps to create a sense of difference and using a different room can help too in suspending disbelief – the change of room says 'this is different'. I dressed up the first time I was King John to boost my confidence but discovered it adds to the fun and that sense of creating a special session that students remember. A simple crown or gown is generally enough however. My one problem with using costume was with some colleagues who interpreted the use of costume as meaning the session was 'just a bit of fun.' Their own unwillingness to experiment with teaching methods meant they wouldn't take on board the idea that hot-seating had a valid purpose in helping students learn more effectively and they hid behind jokes about my liking for costume.

Using props helps in a variety of ways. A chess board helped John seem clever as I moved the odd piece in a thoughtful way plus it allowed me a breathing space when about to smile. I could turn away from the class to the chess board, recompose myself and start again. Holding a rolled-up scroll (old lining paper tied with ribbon to make it look official) has a very practical value – I scribbled reminders of points I wanted to include on the visible part of the scroll. Props can also be highly memorable – a medieval physician tasting urine from a flask will live in students' memories, even if it is only apple juice.

Setting Up and Debriefing

The time you spend setting up the activity and then debriefing students afterwards is as crucial as the hot-seating itself. Effective setting up is obviously important in order to maximise what students learn but also vital for your confidence in the hot-seat – playing a role can feel risky so you need to feel you've done everything possible to create the circumstances for the activity to work.

Important parts of setting up:

- Write your rough script. Be very clear which points you want to get across and which questions you expect to be asked. Think about particular words and phrases you could use, particularly be very clear about your opening sentences as they're vital for everyone's confidence. You don't know the order of the questions you'll be asked but then you don't ever know what questions students may ask in 'normal' lessons so this isn't all that different. Trust your knowledge!
- Think about possible problems. What if they don't ask anything? You need to have a ready-made solution such as saying to one of the confident students 'You look an intelligent person. You must have a question for me? What would you like to ask me?' Compliment early questioners on the intelligence of their questions to boost their confidence to ask more.
- Prepare students thoroughly for this task. A hot-seating activity needn't be a complete surprise even if they don't know exactly what's going to happen. Students need to be armed with the questions and evidence to ask questions and, ideally, engage you in argument. Set up very specifically – if Charles I walked into this room, what questions would you ask him? What would you say to him about the way he governed the country? What evidence could you use to show he was a failure as king? If he says x, what would you say in reply?

Debriefing is equally important because you need to underline for students that this has been 'proper', challenging history, not just been fun, and you need to help students identify exactly what they've learned. Without effective debriefing the detail of what they've learned can be lost – it needs to made visible. In planning the debriefing go back to the reasons for setting up the activity and focus clearly on what you want students to learn.

Start with recapping core points – what did x say? what evidence did s/he use? This consolidates the main content discussed. Then move onto your other questions to focus on your core objectives – whether they're about interpretations, significance, the nature of evidence etc. And ask 'how has this lesson changed your mind/altered your ideas about …' so that they reflect on how their ideas have moved on.

And, of course, there's the essential final question – what have you learned from this activity? This is the most important question to ask in every form of teaching – it makes what they've learned explicit and visible to the students themselves and so far more likely to stay in their memory and be re-used.

Planning across the curriculum: 'Do you remember when …?'

Finally, hot-seating can make a great contribution to the coherence of courses, especially at KS3, by making it more likely that students can respond well to 'do you remember when we did …?' questions. Imagine you're investigating Peterloo, the Chartists or the Suffragettes and want to link back to past protests e.g. 1381 or the Pilgrimage of Grace so that students see a continuing story of the fight for human rights rather than a series of individual events done and dusted in Y7 that they never have to return to. Successful linking back is much more likely if students' experiences of those earlier rebels are memorable – 'do you remember when I dressed up as a villein in 1381 and you accused me of treason?' or 'do you remember when I was Henry VIII and you questioned me about why I closed the monasteries?' – this gives you a much higher chance of re-using what pupils learned then and so make comparisons across time about why protests took place, how violent they were and how they were dealt with. This helps lessons become a course, not a series of one-off events, so plan hot-seating across each course, at KS3, GCSE and A level, don't just drop it in at random.

In conclusion

Hot seating is fun; hot-seating in costume is even more fun. But fun is not the aim.

The aim is to help students learn more and to overcome specific problems in understanding a topic or aspect of studying history. That said, it's also a technique that can be good for teachers, maybe showing yourself that you have skills and a creativity that you weren't previously aware of. It may mean challenging your own comfort zone – as it very much did for me – but ultimately this benefits you and it benefits your students.

Some examples of hot-seating on ThinkingHistory

King John in the hot seat

Meet Oswald of Ormskirk, medieval physician

The Great Cheese Mystery – Samuel Pepys

Why did the Romans want an empire: the Paulinus activity

Shall we join the Chartists

The Black Death comes to Allton

Henry VII – The Survival Game

See the activities HERE ...