Physical Timelines

Who's going to be Anne Boleyn and who'll be Jane Seymour?

Imagine six students, each wearing a tabard with the name of one of Henry VIII's wives. Across the front of your room is a timeline – 1509 on that side of the room, 1547 on the far side.

Now – can the students place themselves in the right sequence on the line – the sequence in which they had the great misfortune to marry Henry VIII? You may need help sorting them out into the correct sequence but when that's done it's time for the really good bit of the activity – ask them to stand on the line at the date when they think they married Henry.

This is the best bit because the pattern that emerges (you really will have to help them with this) shows that Catherine of Aragon is the only queen he's married to in the first 24 years of the reign, the other five wives squeeze into the last 14 years. Creating a physical timeline in this way, sequence first, then duration, has a remarkable impact on understanding – even when I've done it with teachers who aren't wholly familiar with the reign. Students assume Henry's wives were much more evenly spread out across the reign until they do this activity and even knowing the dates in your head or seeing them written down doesn't create the powerful sense that the physical timeline does – of a long marriage followed by a rapid sequence of brief ones.

> (If you want to add more information, give the appropriate wives teddy bears labelled Mary, Elizabeth and Edward – it does help to cement in the memory which queen gave birth to which child).

This activity is also a really good example of an activity that can work with all ages – from KS2 to A level and with adult learners. For more details see Henry VIII – which queen lasted longest?

Note: You can see all the activities mentioned in this document HERE ...

The advantages of physical timelines

It's the process of creating and building the timeline from scratch that's important in stimulating learning, along with the visual and physical picture that's created. Physical timelines have far more impact than do completed, inert one-dimensional timelines in books – they become useful only once you have developed an understanding of the pattern of events they show. In contrast, physical timelines offer students the understanding that comes from physically standing in a timeline, seeing

what other information is in the line and ‘moving about in history’, gaining a sense of how far it was from one date to another by simply walking across the timeline.

Using physical timelines to target students’ misunderstandings and problems

The key, as ever, is to work out what learning problems you’re trying to solve. Here’s are three problems which can be tackled using activities on ThinkingHistory.

1. Students may be struggling with the concept of centuries – just why is 1426 in the 15th century, not the 14th? A physical activity really helps by putting a handful of students into a timeline of centuries – Fred is the first century, Sarah is the second century and so on. Then give them the dates of their centuries and they can see straightaway why the second century dates begin with the number 1.

For full details see ‘Making Sense of BC and AD’

2. Developing a sense of duration takes time for all of us – if we think about our own sense of the passage of time, we know it’s developing all the time but we can still feel we can’t fully grasp the passage of time linked to some events. That said, there are numerous ways of helping to accelerate students’ sense of tackling duration though you can’t expect an instant, huge breakthrough. A sense of duration develops slowly but you can improve students’ understanding in the context of specific topics. For example you can try:

- Using family generations to work back through time
- Comparing the duration of events with students’ own lifetimes
- Use timelines to display comparative lengths of time

Activities that provide ideas are as follows:

Timelines for understanding duration – five examples of different ways of developing a sense of duration

Using family generations to link back to past events

Is Granny really ‘well-old’?

How long were the Romans here for?

3. Students may be struggling to build their big picture of the past – they can’t visualise how periods fit together or the relative duration of those periods. They may also struggle to understand that the same rough period of time is given different names. Creating physical timelines can really help with the sequencing, duration and naming of periods – these activities were created for exactly this purpose:

The Big Human timeline (one of my all-time favourites!)

Wine gums, timelines and really big overviews

Chronological Knowledge and Understanding

Physical timelines also make a major contribution to the development of chronological knowledge and understanding so also see that section of the website.

Note: You can see all the activities mentioned in this document HERE ...