

Planning Principles for Teaching Depth and Period Studies

Introduction

The use of 'Period' and 'Depth' in the title above may imply that this article is solely about GCSE but it is just as applicable to A level courses which focus on the history of one place at one time in history, whether it's a period of twenty years or a hundred.

This discussion follows the others in this Raising Attainment section of the site in focussing on how to help students learn effectively from three perspectives:

1. developing their own explicit understanding of how to learn effectively
2. how understanding how to learn contributes to achieving higher exam grades
3. how this understanding contributes to their long-term development as students of history from KS3 to GCSE to A level and, perhaps, at degree level.

Therefore we need to encourage students to reflect on the process of learning if they are to realise their potential as learners and realise their abilities. This means explicitly asking and answering the fundamental questions 'How will we investigate this topic/answer this enquiry question?' and, later, 'How did we get here?' As Geoff Barton has written 'Great teaching is often a matter of taking the implicit and making it explicit to our pupils'.

This also requires being honest about learning being difficult, identifying likely difficulties so that students are aware of them and creating the challenge of understanding difficult ideas. Students need to understand that:

- Some difficulties during learning help to make the learning stronger and better remembered. When learning is easy, it is often superficial and soon forgotten.
- You learn better when you wrestle with new problems before being shown the solution.
- Setbacks are often what provide the essential information needed to adjust strategies to achieve mastery.
- Side-stepping difficulty leads to poorer exam results and long-term achievement.

Explicit identification of difficulties they have overcome increases students' confidence - and the most effective learning develops when students are confident that they understand how to learn.

Right, now for the planning principles!

1. Build courses around overall enquiry questions

While most teachers use enquiries to organize specification content and so avoid their courses descending into 'one damn thing after another' there's a danger that 'one damn enquiry after another' isn't a great deal better. Students benefit from having courses which are centred round an umbrella enquiry question which gives students a 'takeaway' understanding of the whole period and not only of the individual topics and people within it.

In our recent GCSE series we adopted this approach for the British Depth studies by building each of them around an investigation of the reputation of a key individual or individuals – of William I, Kings Richard and John, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The overall enquiries differed slightly in their wordings but were variants on 'How should X be remembered?' or 'What reputation does Y deserve?' Another variation is 'How should we think of the Norman Conquest?' although we felt that there was more intrinsic interest for students in focussing on individuals.

These enquiries do not dominate every aspect of the course but provide a light-touch continuity, holding the whole course together. The overall enquiry fits into the course structure as follows:

- a) it is set up in one or two initial lessons that introduce students to the question and to criteria for assessing a reputation. Then students are asked to generate a hypothesis using what they already know (boosting confidence when they discover they do have existing knowledge to build on) and an overview of the course content which picks out key events.
- b) by revisiting the enquiry as each major section of the course is completed. For example, a course on Henry VIII could ask students to select which events or policies support or challenge the statement that Henry was a great king whose glorious successes improved the lives of his people. This could be done for events up to 1529 and then up to 1540 and again in 1547.

Importantly this also requires students to revisit and revise content at regular intervals, helping to embed their knowledge far more firmly than if they leave such revision until after the course is complete. For more on this see our section on Visible Learning:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/AttainmentVisible6.html>

c) as a brief conclusion to the whole study, giving it an overall coherence and again allowing content to be revisited and aiding recall/memory. At this stage students could engage with historians' verdicts if they have not done so earlier and achieve a sense of satisfaction at having emerged with a clear, albeit complex, answer.

Such an approach does not depend on 'interpretations' being an assessment objective for the unit (see point 2 below). In fact in the Depth Studies identified above do not have 'interpretations' as an AO but this light-touch thread on interpretations provides variety amidst what could be a too-constant diet of cause and consequence etc. In addition it creates opportunities for debates about the individuals in which students have to use their knowledge as evidence and clarify their arguments before starting writing tasks. Finally it keeps ideas about interpretations in students' minds, supporting work on this concept in other parts of the course.

If you adopt an overall enquiry based on interpretations it's important to think about what kinds of interpretations –contemporary to the period, modern popular views or those of historians - you introduce at what stage of the course. It may be most useful to start with popular interpretation. Film works well here, for example for work on Richard I the film 'Robin Hood Prince of Thieves' can be used to explore the 'heroic' portrayal of Richard I, then contrasted this with the more negative portrayal of Richard at the start of Ridley Scott's 'Robin Hood' (2010). This works very well in class as pupils can see instantly that two contrasting interpretations of Richard exist today and this helps to set up the differences that modern historians have over Richard's interpretation. Contemporary views could then be introduced and finally perhaps the views of historians. Jumping straight in with historians can put some pupils off but this will depend on the topic and the length and complexity of the material.

Interpretations enquiries are obviously not the only means of creating an overall enquiry which holds a course together. Other possibilities are questions about significance, for example which monarch, event, development etc was most significant between 1485 and 1603? While the answer is

of interest the real value lies in the debates and arguments cementing knowledge of the course content and in helping students feel comfortable with handling criteria for significance.

Another approach, perhaps at A level, is to explore a paradox at the heart of the period that may confuse students' understanding. For example, in a recent book on The Wars of the Roses I set up the question 'If loyalty was important to people and they did not want civil war then why did war keep breaking out in the later 15th century?' I don't think I ended up answering it very well in the book conclusion (I think the answer lies in the competing loyalties – to country, king, lord, family – that individuals had to try to juggle) but it did help prevent the topic becoming just one damn king, battle etc.

For examples, see the Resource File, Pages 1-4

2. Don't be afraid to build in work on concepts other than AOs specified for the course.

Everyone necessarily focusses their work in examination units on the specified assessment objectives but if you are new to planning and teaching exam courses you may feel hesitant about going beyond those AOs. However there is no reason to accept such a limitation. As described above, overall enquiry questions can help students whichever concepts they focus on. In addition looking at a wider range of concepts than specified AOs keeps them in students' minds and helps them understand them more fully.

Perhaps most significantly it is always important to include in units work on evidence, whether or not evaluation of sources is assessed in the unit. This is because the nature of the evidence has an impact on our ability to explain the causes and consequences of events, the motives of individuals or why interpretations differ. A good example is any unit studying the Norman Conquest. While AOs may not include work on the sources it is vital that students appreciate the limitations of the evidence in order to understand why explanations of why, for example, William was successful at Hastings, are necessarily hypothetical. This need not involve detailed exploration of what sources say about each aspect of the battle but can, as the attached example shows (**Resource File, Page 5**), focus on the more general problems likely to arise from the sources from the period.

3. Use individuals' stories as hooks and to put them at the heart of the enquiry

Planning is always best done backwards. Always start by identifying the desired outcomes of courses, beginning with the specification and the subject knowledge, skills and understanding the

students need to display at the end of the course. However, that does not mean that the first lesson should start with a photocopy of the specification and an exam board mark scheme! Enthusiasm and curiosity are essential for success so it is crucial to create opportunities for that enthusiasm and curiosity to spark into life. Instead of just launching students into ‘the specification’, first build a sense of engagement by starting every exam unit with a historical puzzle, an in-depth story that hooks students’ attention and fires their passion for the topic.

The stories of individuals often provide excellent hooks. For example, an exam unit on the struggle for Civil Rights for black Americans might start with the story of Jesse Owens and the prejudice and discrimination he faced growing up in the United States. His grandparents had been slaves and his parents were sharecroppers. Jesse returned from the infamous 1936 Olympics in Germany as the greatest athlete in the world yet found that the colour of his skin meant that he could not ride in the front of a bus or live where he wanted. An opening exploration of the life of an individual such as Jesse Owens, Billie Holiday or Paul Robeson can build strong contextual knowledge, introduce students to key themes such as segregation and entrenched attitudes and enable the ‘big picture’ of the course to emerge from one person’s story.

The stories of individuals can continue to be used as the hooks for sections of courses as well as for introducing a whole course. This is especially important if a section of a course seems dominated by legislation, policies or the consequences of a big event such as the English Reformation or the Norman Conquest. History is fundamentally about people but there are times when that can be easy to forget! The attached examples (**Resource File, Pages 6&7**), demonstrate the use of individuals to introduce what might otherwise be dry subjects.

A second hook is to use brief fictional accounts which introduce situations to be studied. These can introduce and sum up dilemmas and competing pressures and grab students’ attention simply because it is not the approach they are expecting. The attached example from my Tudor Century A level book from 1993 also leads into the introduction of an overall enquiry for a study of the 16th century, providing further exemplification of Principle 1 above.

See Resource File, Page 8

A third type of hook is to make links to the students’ local area. A unit on the First World War could begin with a focus on the local war memorial as such memorials demonstrate that the First World War had a significant impact at local as well as national and global levels. Local buildings

of various degrees of grandeur could be used in the same way and do not need to be visited to fulfil this role – who lived at X? what kind of person might have lived at Y? What impact did it have on the local community? What does this building tell us about ...?

War memorials and buildings are examples of the potential of objects and images as hooks, at the same time using those visual images to build a sense of period and help students visualise the people and world they are studying. Such objects raise a host of questions for students to discuss and suggest answers to – what kind of person owned, used or held this? what skills were needed to create it? What does it tell us about life at the time etc etc.

See Resource File, Page 9

4. Identify and teach for students' misconceptions about the period

This is a basic principle of all history teaching but can never be emphasised enough, especially if you are teaching a new topic and are building up your own knowledge of what happened when and why within the period. Students' misconceptions about a period can seriously undermine their ability to understand the events and explain why they happened. Therefore these misconceptions need identifying, bringing out in the light and discussion.

One example is that students beginning to study the Norman Conquest or the reigns of Richard and John are likely to have the idea that in those periods there was such a person as 'the rightful heir', akin to the Prince of Wales today. This affects the way they interpret and explain succession disputes because there was no 'rightful heir' in these periods. In the same topics students may also have misleading ideas about national identities and assume that countries have been unchanging entities across time. Similarly students may assume that the only motive for medieval lords was personal gain/ ambition or may underestimate the importance of religion in determining actions in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The natural solution is to address such issues when they first arise within a course but this may be too late as students may then be preoccupied getting to grips with names and events. Therefore there is an advantage in choosing one or two important misconceptions and introducing them to students before you get into the real story of the period so there are fewer distractions.

Similarly, students too often draw conclusions based on present day values when thinking about questions such as 'What did people at the time believe/look for in a good leader?' Again it's

important to be very explicit about the contemporary context and make sure students have a clear sense of how past views differed from those today. When teaching Richard I Dale deliberately built in a lesson about constructing the criteria by which Richard would be judged. We explored the duties and responsibilities of a medieval monarch, then compared what was expected of a leader in medieval times to what is expected of a leader today, thus dealing with any misconceptions. It also gave us clear criteria by which to judge Richard – criteria we could refer back to during the rest of the depth study.

And if you've not taught a period before you can still prepare by thinking about what's surprised you when reading in preparation, by asking colleagues or even by using your intuition!

Key Stage 3 watch – should such potential misunderstandings be targeted in KS3 planning and teaching?

See Resource File, Page 10

5. Boost students' confidence by identifying and building on their existing knowledge

GCSE or A level course usually feel like fresh starts – it's implied by empty folders or books, textbooks that are new to them, new examinations. This context means that it is all too easy for students to assume they are starting the course without any knowledge that will be useful to them – an assumption that can undermine students' confidence.

Therefore boost students' confidence by taking every opportunity to identify and use students' existing knowledge which could be:

- a) content knowledge about the events and people of the period
- b) understanding of the ideas or thinking during the period
- c) understanding of how to tackle causal questions or handle sources or work on other concepts.

And don't be put off by a lack of immediate recall or contributions – students may need mental prodding but if you have prepared effectively at KS3 much of the material you're after will be there.

Of course it's easier to get answers to that important question 'Do you remember when we did ... ?' if the activities used at KS3 have been distinctively memorable.

See Resource File, Page 11

6. Create activities to help students identify and remember Who's Who

One of the fastest ways to lose confidence when studying a period in depth is to feel uncertain about 'who's who'. Feeling that you don't know why x is important or who's on whose side niggles away at students' confidence, undermining other efforts to learn. Therefore getting a rapid grip on Who's Who is vital for students, whether it's at A level or in one of the new GCSE Depth and Period studies.

The attached textbook page (**See Resource File, Page 12**) provides an activity designed to help students overcome this problem. It's the layout of individuals that's important, grouping people by role (councillors in one group, seafarers in another, Catholic plotters in a third, near to the Pope and Philip II of Spain) and all revolving around the central character of Queen Elizabeth I. Similar layouts work for any topic.

Alternatively this link takes you to an activity which transfers the layout of this page into the classroom, creating a human diagram in which each student play the part of the individuals.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhoIsWho.html>

Family trees can also be a stumbling block for students – it is helpful to turn a tree drawn on a page into a human tree with students taking the roles. The physicality of this helps both understanding and memory. In addition create family trees at specific dates (good for revision too) by asking:

What would the Angevin family have looked like in ... 1173, 1182, 1189, 1200?

or

What would Henry VIII's family tree look like in 1529, 1534, 1537 etc?

And take photographs of the resulting trees for students to annotate for revision.

7. Keep activities involving and lively to enhance memory and understanding

Specifications are crammed full of content, creating considerable pressure on ‘coverage’ within teaching time. The temptation is to cut activities which seem to take up more time than apparently necessary. However the real question is not ‘how much time does this activity take?’ but ‘how effective will it be in enhancing knowledge, understanding and memory?’

Decision-making activities provide a good example of activities that appear ‘cut-able’ but which actually play an important role in improving students’ attainment. One of the arguments in ‘*Make it Stick*’ is that when students attempt to answer a question or solve a problem before being told what actually happened this has the effect of making the mind more receptive to new learning. By puzzling over the choices facing a historical individual, students are far more likely to learn and remember the solution than if their teacher explained the decision just the once. The more students wrestle with decisions beforehand, classroom learning is stronger when they go on to find out what choice really was made. As the attached examples explain (**See Resource File, Pages 13&14**), the value of the activity lies in

- a) discussing the pros and cons of each choice within a decision, not in getting the ‘right answer’
- b) identifying what the students do not understand when they make a different choice from the historical individual.

It is particularly worth thinking about using decision-making activities when students face what appears to be a particularly turgid topic! Thomas Cromwell’s governmental reforms may be one such topic that we hope to have made more accessible, understandable and memorable – we set up a decision-making activity as the first layer of the topic within the context of investigating the extent to which Cromwell was able to make royal government more effective.

In addition a brief discussion and examples of decision-making activities can be found here:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityModel/ActModDecisions.html>

For an A level activity which provides a model for other topics:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/HenryVIIISurvivalGame.html>

It is vital that new information is presented to students in an engaging and meaningful way. Decision-making is just one example of activities that successfully enhance knowledge, understanding and memory and so help students do well in exams. Our own work and that of Ian Luff has also shown how carefully structured role plays and active demonstrations can help students build clear understanding of ‘difficult’ areas of a course. Many GCSE and A level students can overcome initial learning obstacles much more quickly through this type of activity, enabling them to read more keenly and independently and with a greater sense of understanding in follow-up work. If you are really engaged, thinking hard about options and motives, then your ability to remember is much enhanced. It is therefore essential to treat a structured role-play as a central learning activity with precise objectives and helping students understand complex situations, choices and aspects of a period – it is not a bolted-on extra or mid-unit treat.

For a more complete discussion of these issues see our article, originally published in *Teaching History*, on teaching the ‘Je sui le roi’ activity at KS3.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/ThinkingfromtheInside.pdf>

However an activity by itself will lose impact if not followed by thorough debriefing and immediate reflection – another point that cannot be made strongly enough. Debriefing is vital in moving students on from a feeling of being ‘in the past’ to reflecting ‘on the past’, reflections enhanced by their experience of ‘thinking from the inside’ about a historical situation. Follow-up work will benefit both from the excitement and the clarity of thinking generated by the activity. Moreover, students tend to remember anything with a strong emotion attached – ‘emotion’ does not mean that the classroom is full of students in floods of tears but that they have been fully engaged with a historical situation, thinking hard about their choices and understanding why certain choices were made.

In addition, these activities substantially and directly improve pupils’ writing and their ability to recall information. This is why there should be a strong focus on speaking and listening during the phase when students are constructing arguments. Alexander has shown how talk is important in building children’s powers to think and reason and Barton argues that ‘Students – especially boys – improve their writing skills when allowed brief spoken opportunities to discuss what they will write’.

Debates and discussions help to generate ideas and construct arguments that may otherwise have remained incomplete. Such tasks help students shape their learning and understanding in a low-risk activity, whilst at the same time keeping them involved and motivated. As Didau in *The Secret of Literacy* points out ‘We can only write what we can say. We can only say what we think. It’s impossible to verbalise anything which you are unable to formulate inside your head. But, if we can say it, we can write it.’

8. Help students see the overview in depth studies as well as themes

Overviews are often associated with Thematic studies because of the obvious necessity of seeing the big picture of long spans of time. However it is just as important for students to gain an overview of a shorter period being studied in depth – therefore do not leave them to do this implicitly as the course progresses but create activities in the first lessons of a new exam unit that enable students to build their own overview of the key themes, events and individuals.

One reason establishing a durable, robust overview at the outset is important is to give students the confidence that they have an overall sense of events and the issues they are going to study. If we think about this as learners ourselves most of us read more positively and effectively when we already know something about a topic in comparison with a topic that’s new to us. That functions at all levels of knowledge – which makes the early acquisition of an outline vital for providing a context for the next stages of learning about a period and its events.

In addition, without a clear overview there’s nothing to hang further learning on and that creates the ever-present danger of lots of reading and note-taking without any clear sense of direction. That in turn leads to frustration and reduced motivation. Thus the creation of an effective outline means students have established a base level of knowledge which they can then deepen through the course – and which provides context for the new things they learn. That initial outline helps make sense of the details as they come to them.

It is important is that such outlines are more than timelines which tend to be inert lists of events, lacking story and impact. ‘Time-story’ conveys what’s needed more effectively as the construction of a ‘time-story’ requires students to tell a story with an interpretation. This is very similar to the use of living graphs (more enjoyably known as ‘graphs with attitude’) which can be plotted to tell a story with students explaining aloud the story that’s visible on the graph – which is important, both for consolidation and to develop the use of the vocabulary of the topic.

For example, in a depth study on ‘Germany 1919-33’, build an overview of the rise of the Nazi party and compare this to the popularity of the Weimar Republic (**See Resource File, Page 15**). For a study of the Cold War students can plot the key events and develop a hypothesis regarding the times when the Cold War reached its most dangerous points.

For discussion of the creation of overviews or ‘time-stories’ at A level see this article which also contains an example of a visual overview and further thoughts from other teachers.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueTimelinesTimeStory.html>

For explanations of some of the variety of ways living graphs can be used see

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityModel/ActModTimeline.html#graph>

And if you are starting out in teaching and are looking for information on a range of other teaching strategies and what they can be deployed to teach see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityModel/index.htm>

And finally ...

... despite all the references above to educators we haven't been quoting theory at you in the hope that it is useful. The arguments we've referred to support discoveries we had already made ourselves in classroom teaching. It's always fun to reach a conclusion yourself and then find that someone has given it a grand name in a book!