

Raising Attainment Through Visible Learning

Introduction

Students of all ages develop their historical knowledge and understanding most effectively and then perform better in examinations if teachers build their courses around the problems students have year-in, year-out – notably how to carry out historical research, construct arguments and communicate their ideas. At exam level, specifications and content may change but the underlying problems students face in carrying out research, constructing arguments and communicating their ideas do not. Learning is best conceived as a process and we need to support students through that process by making it visible if we are to fully realise the potential of our students as learners.

The articles in this section explain and exemplify how we can implement these principles through the planning of the history curriculum in general and individual courses and in teaching students in the classroom. The articles have been written by Dale Banham and myself and are largely based on Dale's work with his students, as head of department and latterly as Deputy Head with responsibility for teaching and learning. Dale also spent several years as Humanities adviser for Suffolk and has extensive experience of running CPD courses around the country.

The specific issues discussed in this Raising Attainment section are also closely linked to the broader ideas about developing independent learning through use and understanding of Enquiry – for these broader ideas see the Enquiry and Independent Learning section of this website:

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

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1. Starting Points for Improving Learning

Whenever there is curriculum change or pressure to improve performance it may be tempting to look for short-term, ‘quick fix’ solutions to raising attainment. However, as we design schemes of work it is always important to reflect on what really makes a difference to how students perform at GCSE, A level or KS3. Our starting points should be three invaluable sources of information:

- Research findings into the most effective ways to raise levels of attainment
- The key messages coming from within the history teaching community
- The students we have in front of us: What do they struggle with and so need help with? How do they describe and interpret learning and how to improve their learning?

Consistent and important messages have emerged from research into what raises attainment in schools. John Hattie’s influential book *Visible Learning* (2009) and the Sutton Educational Trust’s *Teaching and Learning Toolkit* (2014) highlight the importance of high expectations, meta-cognition, and feedback. In addition, invaluable work has been done within the history teaching community, stressing, for example, the importance of planning within the framework of a meaningful and rigorous historical enquiry, highlighting how carefully crafted teacher explanations can help our students understand tricky areas of content and reminding us why it is so crucial to teach students explicitly how to write in an analytical and discursive style.

Thirdly we need to focus, in John Hattie’s words, ‘on seeing learning through the eyes of the students, appreciating their fits and starts in learning, and their often non-linear progression to the goals’. Expert subject knowledge is highly desirable for teachers but it can make it difficult to put ourselves in the position of someone who has not yet grasped a difficult concept. It is therefore crucial that departments develop pedagogical content knowledge – an understanding of the mistakes and misconceptions students are likely to make in their history lessons. Students perform better in examinations if teachers build their course structure around the problems students have in learning. Specifications and content may change but the underlying problems students face when they carry out historical research, construct arguments and communicate their ideas do not.

In addition we need to pay attention to the ways that students describe and interpret learning in order to understand learning experiences from the unique perspectives of students, ‘teachers can learn so much about their effect on student learning by listening to students thinking aloud’ (John Hattie). Concentration on the key learning problems identified at the end of the previous paragraph

saves time in the long run. With explicit and carefully planned teaching, students can transfer the skills and understanding developed during one unit to subsequent units (even though they will have different historical content), thereby accelerating the speed at which other topics can be taught. Teachers need to isolate the conceptual and communication stumbling blocks within history – converting these into explicit teaching opportunities to lift students' attainment.

Within history departments we therefore need to reflect and discuss the questions that really matter:

- How can we build intrinsic motivation and growth mindsets in our history students?
- How can we encourage pupils to reflect at a deep level and think about how they learn?
How can we help pupils see what good learning looks like?
- How can we build in regular opportunities for pupils to review, revise and build knowledge?
- How do we get pupils to take greater responsibility for their learning? How can we place a greater emphasis on pupils responding to feedback? How do we use pupil feedback to inform planning?

Finally we should remember that teaching is about building relationships. Student attainment is partly determined by the teacher's relationship with students and that teacher's ability to shape a culture of effective learning within the classroom. It is what goes on in the classroom that makes the real difference. We need to create an atmosphere of trust – a climate in which it is ok to make mistakes – and a climate in which students are engaged in the process of learning. Within the history classroom success should not be measured by out-performing your peers but about improving yourself as a learner and achieving personal bests. There are no short-term fixes for raising attainment but the good news is that the key principles come at no cost and do not require endless hours of teacher time preparing resources or marking books. The benefits are real and long lasting.

As Ron Berger says, 'Inspiration in teaching goes both ways: Good teachers both inspire students and are inspired by students'.