Lost without levels?

In June 2013, the former education secretary Michael Gove announced that National Curriculum levels will not be used in the new curriculum that came into force in September 2014.

The new National Curriculum states that, by the end of Key Stage 3, pupils should be able to ‘identify significant events, make connections, draw contrasts, and analyse trends within periods and over long arcs of time.’ They should be able to ‘understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence’, be equipped to ‘pursue historically valid enquiries’ and gain ‘a historically grounded understanding of abstract terms such as “empire”…’

So, the sorts of skills and concepts that our students are expected to learn has remained, by and large, the same. But the numerical scale against which we rate how well a pupil understands and applies these skills and concepts has been removed! This decision immediately prompted fierce debate, centred on the following question: in the absence of level descriptors, how might we assess pupils’ progress in history?

Just because level descriptors don’t exist, it doesn’t mean that History teachers don’t know how pupils make progress. We know what we want students to be able to do, and we know how to get them there. This article is not going to enter into the debate on the wisdom of the decision to remove labels. Instead my aim is to summarise and comment on some of the ‘ways forward’ that I have encountered, identify a few commonalities amongst them, and suggest ways that OUP might be able to support teachers who are reappraising their department’s approach to assessment.

What next?

There seem to be five common approaches to the question ‘what next?’ in light of the demise of National Curriculum levels.

1. **Keep the old system!**

Schools aren’t banned from using levels, so some schools have chosen to keep the assessment systems they had before. They then just ‘tweak’ the content and focus of schemes, tests and assessment tasks in line with any changes to programmes of study. Does this miss the point though? We’ve been given the chance to be a bit more creative, so keeping a numerical level system (which was criticised for reducing students’ progress and attainment to a simple number) seems like a wasted opportunity. And as for sub-levels… don’t get me started! In my opinion, sub-levels are a confusing waste of time, so any chance not to use them and create something else must be welcomed.

However, it is understandable that some schools might keep a system that, in their opinion, isn’t broken, and wait until the new GCSEs are released to weigh up their impact on Key Stage 3. Which brings me on to…

2. **Use the new GCSE format**

New GCSEs will rate students using a numerical system: 1–9 instead of G–A*. Some schools have decided to go with this approach, making students work and track progress in Key Stage 3 using the new Key Stage 4 numbers. Students in Years 7 and 8, for example, will have work marked using numbers 1 to 9. Obviously there have been concerns expressed over schools using this approach because younger students cannot reasonably be expected to achieve some of the higher numbers until they reach Key Stage 4, so could become a little demotivated to find themselves always getting 1s, 2s and 3s for pieces of work. However, some schools might choose to use the new 1-9 grading system as a way of providing indicators to potential grades – and use comments like ‘…if Sarah continues to work at this level she should be on track for a grade 8…’

3. **Mastery statements/Red, amber, green (or similar)**

Some schools are asking departments to identify the key skills, concepts and areas of knowledge that they wish students to know and achieve (or ‘master’) by the end of a scheme, term, or year. The students will then be assessed in line with their school’s assessment policy. ‘Red’, for example, means that the student has yet to demonstrate this particular skill or area of knowledge, ‘amber’ means that they demonstrate it on occasion, and ‘green’ shows they have confidently demonstrated this skill on several occasions.
This is just one example. Some schools will identify a list of areas of knowledge and mark students as ‘working towards’ or ‘developing’ them, ‘working at’ or ‘attaining’ them, or ‘working beyond’ or ‘exceeding’ them. On a personal note, this is an idea that we’ve been working on in my school – and I feel it’s not only a positive model, but is fairly adaptable and straightforward. However, some might argue that students may ‘stick’ in a ‘red zone’ or remain ‘working towards’ for a substantial amount of time!

The CORE approach

I recently read about an assessment method that focuses on four key points: Competence (knowledge and a student’s ability to apply it), Organisation (skills and preparedness for work), Readiness (attitude to learning, completing of homework) and Engagement (effort and ethos). The system gives students a score from 1 to 5 every half term for each of the CORE components. I quite like this model myself, especially as it focuses not only on what a student can do, but also what they are like as a person – and as a learner. However, from a ‘data perspective’, what are some of the marks out of 5 really telling us about how they will perform at GCSE? Certainly though, I think this is one of the more interesting new models out there and I would love to see how it works in practice!

Bloom’s Taxonomy

Some schools are using Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy to create assessment structures or progress ladders. The Taxonomy includes a list of verbs that can be used as command word language to set levelled questions and objectives. Progress is then ‘tracked’ through the key stage as students (hopefully) become more competent historians who are able to handle more advanced skills and concepts. Again, this is an example of a progressive tracking system, similar to some of the others I’ve described earlier.

What have these assessment systems got in common?

There is clearly no single approach to assessing pupils’ progress in history, or any other subject. It will be largely up to your head teacher and senior leadership team to decide how the school records and reports that progress. However, there are several things that will be common to all systems that any head teacher might adopt; they will want to know where you think that pupil is, what skills, concepts and knowledge they are demonstrating, and whether they are making progress.

For this, teachers will have to use a range of techniques – marking work, questioning pupils, listening to pupils as they talk about their learning in history, discussing and reviewing work with each other and so on – but a teacher will also have to use a range of assessment tasks. Indeed the wide variety of elements involved in making progress in history means that some assessment will need to have a very targeted focus (on key factual knowledge, for example) whilst other tasks might require students to use their knowledge in conjunction with a particular concept or skill that asks them to identify causes and consequences, make use of sources, or extend their writing in the form of an essay, for example. This ‘blended’ approach to assessment – a mixture of factual knowledge tests, extended skills and concept-focused assessment tasks, essay-type tasks and opportunities to self and peer assess – is something we’ve tried hard to develop at Oxford.

We have developed success criteria teacher grids in the Teacher Handbooks and on Kerboodle to help you to understand what outcomes your students will aim for, and to map their progress, whether you want to mark using National Curriculum levels, GCSE grade indicators or performance levels. There are dozens of assessment tasks and opportunities on Kerboodle, including auto-marked end-of-chapter assessments to check knowledge, self and peer-assessment opportunities provided via ‘I can…’ checklists for each chapter, which encourage students to consider how far they and their peers have understood the concepts and developed skills relevant to the chapter, and front-of-class presentations break down and define each part of the task, and help students understand what is expected of them.

There are enough assessment exercises to allow a department to plan some sort of assessment activity monthly, half-termly or termly. Teachers can revisit them in order to demonstrate their students’ developing understanding. For example, there is a simple assessment task which focuses on the way King John has been interpreted over the years (in Invasion, Plague and Murder). This concept is revisited in a variety of ways in the subsequent Student Books, and it forms the focus of a more complex interpretation assessment of Margaret Thatcher in the fourth Key Stage 3 History book, Technology, War and Independence.

What I hope we’ve done at Oxford is to equip teachers with a framework and range of tools, ideas and time-saving resources so that, as you plan for assessment, you won’t be starting from scratch.

Best wishes

Aaron Wilkes

To find out more about how KS3 History by Aaron Wilkes supports assessment please visit www.oxfordschools.co.uk/ks3history.

We’re very interested to hear how your school is tackling assessment – do share your thoughts and experiences with the history team here at Oxford, via laura.syred@oup.com.