A non-specialist’s guide to teaching History

By Ellen Longley, AST of History

Mention non-specialists teaching History and you get mixed responses. Very mixed responses. Us historians are a funny bunch. Truly passionate and often extremely protective of our subject, many will tut and shake their heads at the mere thought of a non-specialist teaching our beloved History lessons. Yet I’ve been privileged to work with a number of colleagues over the years who have become excellent History teachers despite it not being the subject in which they trained.

The key is enthusiasm. It may be a cliché, but for good reason: if you genuinely get a buzz out of the subject you teach then so will your students. Even if it isn’t ‘your’ subject. And who could fail to get a buzz out of teaching history? History is about people, which means that it is about power, money, sex and violence. I find it hard to imagine a subject that is more exciting to a teenage mind!

You may or may not share this enthusiasm. It can be daunting to see a new subject on your timetable. Maybe the History you were taught as a student was a dusty set of dates and events which failed to fuel your imagination, but History teaching today is a whole different ball game.

To fire up your enthusiasm you need to start with thinking about why History is important. True, it’s not statutory and may not have the reputation of an academic heavyweight that English and Mathematics enjoy, but History has been a respected academic subject since before many of the eras you’ll be teaching. Option figures remain high in most schools and with the English Baccalaureate becoming more and more significant, History maintains its importance within the curriculum. But are these factors really enough to make you spontaneously combust with excitement at the prospect of teaching your new subject? Probably not! So why is History important? Hywel Roberts asks whether you can list reasons to justify your subject’s place on the timetable (Oops! Helping children learn accidentally, Hywel Roberts, 2012). If not then you need to get thinking. If you’re going to inspire your students you need to be inspired yourself!

One way to consider the relevance of History and to offer some basic History teachers’ survival skills is to bust some common misconceptions about school History:

1 The past is the past. There’s no point studying History because it’s over.

Years ago, when I studied for my PGCE, we spent a whole morning looking at why History should be taught. We were warned that students might fail to see the relevance of a subject that is based exclusively in the past. Funnily enough it’s not a complaint I’ve ever had from a student. Ever.

A good History teacher will be able to find parallels between historical events and current affairs. History can be a safe way of exploring contentious issues. For example, studying slavery, the race riots of the 1960s, or the Holocaust can lead on to exploration of prejudice and racism today. The safety of retrospect allows students to consider the experiences of other cultures with empathy, but without their judgment being clouded with preconceived notions about how topics such as immigration, for example, affect them today. Studying how medieval monarchs controlled their subjects can be considered in parallel with the role of government and the importance of human rights. The themes that can be studied are endless and current events can be used to drive the curriculum that you teach in your classroom. Where else do they learn how government functions, how laws are made, about the basic principles of economics? For some ideas, check out Aaron Wilkes’ student books that explore a number of depth studies such as warfare, terrorism and immigration, with clear links to the world in which we live today.

And then there’s the second order thinking skills. Skills have always played an important part in good History teaching. More on that later...
Whenever I tell people that I teach History I am inevitably met with one of two responses: ‘You must be clever’ (I nod sagely and try to look academic at this point, before usually saying something stupid that immediately contradicts my efforts) or ‘I was never any good at History, it’s just too hard’.

Reports every year conclude that History is one of the hardest GCSEs that students sit. I warn my year nine students about this when they are choosing their options. Yet History remains one of the most popular options in my school. If something is hard then success comes with prestige. So what if History is hard? Is there any shame in that? Shouldn’t we be proud that we teach a subject that stretches students to be the best they can be?

Although I make sure that my students understand that they will be stretched academically in my lessons, I match this with praise that ensures that when they do achieve (in line with their personal target rather than academic prowess) they build self esteem and really value their achievements.

I also hasten to add that I don’t think that History is difficult. But then as a historian maybe I would say that. It all comes back to the fact that History is about people and we can all understand people. Ask your students: ‘How would you feel?’, ‘What would you have done?’. In addition, make the content utterly accessible by humanising the individuals that you teach. Henry VIII wasn’t just some king, he was a womaniser with a penchant for cake. The causes of the First World War were many and complex… or was it down to a load of cousins sat round the dinner table showing off about how much land and how many boats they had? Of course it’s important not to trivialise the greats (and not-so-greats) of our past, but it’s the anecdotes and humour in the situation that make students remember, understand and care.

Making History enjoyable makes it seem easy.

40 years ago history lessons may have been a comprehensive study of events and dates, kings and queens, dust and crumbs, but the approach to school History today is quite different. So different and important, in fact, that it warrants a whole section on skills-based teaching. Again, more on that later...

When asked about his experiences as a teenager being taught History, my husband grunted slightly and made some reference to reading. Lots of reading. There has been a trend in education recently to criticise the use of textbooks, but perhaps unfairly so. There are some fantastic resources available on the market that give students a clear chronological framework, which helps them build a good picture of what past eras ‘looked’ like, whilst also using a thematic approach. Invasion, Plague and Murder by Aaron Wilkes is a particular favourite of my students; just by flicking through the pages you’ll be struck by how far the text-based History books of yester-year have evolved into visual and exciting resources that students really connect with. Check out the football-style commentary of the Battle of Hastings, complete with comic strip-style storytelling. Even my husband would approve!

And learning is no longer confined to textbooks. There are some amazing CD-ROMs on the market, as well as excellent websites, which include games that are great for engaging starters or plenaries. Check out the OUP range (www.oxfordsecondary.co.uk) or visit sites such as www.activehistory.co.uk, where students can customise a ‘teacher’ who is flung from a catapult if they can answer enough questions on a chosen topic. On second thoughts, maybe we shouldn’t be encouraging teacher flinging! I’m also a big fan of the Horrible Histories TV series. Their songs make great starter activities. It’s a good excuse for a bit of silliness that grabs students’ attention and imagination in a way that leaves them wanting to know more about the topic they’re about to study. And I quite enjoy the clips too.

There are also some great tricks of the trade to get students hooked on what could potentially be somewhat dry topics. Instead of teaching ‘The social impact of the Industrial Revolution’ (yawn), try teaching ‘Who was Jack the Ripper?’. Instead of ‘Why were the Liberal Reforms needed?’ (Zzz!), examine the different experiences of the social classes on board the Titanic. Instead of developing the skills to allow students to ‘evaluate critically a range of sources and reach substantiated conclusions independently’ (?!), investigate ‘Who shot JFK’ (complete with a ‘body’ gaffer taped onto the floor and ‘CSI’ tape across the classroom door), or investigate whether or not the moon landing was faked. History, by definition, is HUGE! There’s plenty to pick from, so pick something that will interest your students and something that you know, are excited about teaching and will willingly learn about. Oh, and don’t be scared to admit that you don’t know everything. The tech-savvy teacher can open a search engine in an instant and become co-enquirer discovering further facts. This shows students that it’s alright not to always know the answer and encourages them to investigate further for themselves.
To some extent the content you cover doesn’t matter (so long as it flares the imagination), it’s about the skills that are developed.

Which brings us to the ’more on that later...’ section.

4 More on...key skills

When picking up a new subject one of the biggest challenges is getting to know a whole new National Curriculum and decoding a new batch of NCAT levels. Needless to say you have to be familiar with these documents, however indigestible they may seem. Head over to www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199545/history and get reading!

Once fully devoured and digested, hopefully one of the things that will strike you is how key the development of skills are in the study of History. There are areas of content that are statutory (The Holocaust, slavery and empire), but other than that the content you study is relatively unrestricted. I’m a firm believer that so long as it is exciting, dynamic and engaging, schools should be able to pick and choose the content they deliver to suit the context in which they teach.

What really matters is that students develop the skills that they need to go forward and investigate History (and other subject areas) further.

There are several key skills in History. They are chronological understanding, cultural diversity and praxis, significance, cause and consequence, change and continuity, interpretation, communication, source work and historical enquiry. If you have decent Schemes of Learning to work from they will support your planning to ensure that students develop each of these skills. Your Head of Department will also be able to provide you with assessments for the end of each unit and these should assess skills as well as content. Make sure you’re familiar with each assessment and the skills that it assesses, and also that you progress these skills in a clear and coherent manner within your lessons. A good department will have good schemes of learning that develop skills in a progressional manner and you are well within your rights to insist that you are provided with this.

In your own planning, read the NCAT level descriptions and work out how each skill progresses. I’ve been known to go through each level and colour code the sentences that relate to each skill (but then I’m a bit OCD that way). Or create a ‘ten progressional steps’ for each skill, which can then become your skills objective for each lesson in a unit.

Here’s an example for source work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is a source? What are primary and secondary sources?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Comprehension of content of sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Extracting relevant evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How similar are the sources?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How useful is the source? (Using contextual knowledge to analyse a source.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How reliable is a source?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What is the purpose of a source?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What is the meaning of a source (cartoon)? (Analysing source content using contextual knowledge.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Why are the sources different?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>How far do the sources agree? (Essay/analysis/evaluation.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the NCAT levels still seem a bit confusing, don’t panic! They are confusing. And vague. A simplistic approach that I use for my students is I.D.E.A.:

- **Level 3**: Identify;
- **Level 4**: Describe
- **Level 5**: Explain
- **Level 6**: Analyse

It is somewhat simplistic, but it works!

So, are you feeling ready for your new timetable yet? If you love teaching then I’m sure that in History you will find a wealth of topics to inspire you. Biased as I am, I think that History is easy to teach because it’s so exciting! It lends itself to dramatic activities and with a bit of flair and creativity lessons become really engaging because we are lucky enough to be teaching something that is truly interesting.

If you’re still feeling overwhelmed log on to Twitter and follow some of the truly great History teachers who selflessly share their ideas on a regular basis. If you’re not sure where to start I suggest @russeltarr (creator of activehistory.co.uk) or @HYWEL_ROBERTS (he’s not a History teacher, but is truly inspiring and will widen your repertoire of engaging lessons considerably).

Wherever you find inspiration, remember, History is interesting and exciting! If you need evidence flick through the TV guide to see how many shows are inspired by historical events. And whatever you do, ENJOY!

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