I have always struggled to find what I think is the ‘perfect path’ through Key Stage 4. If I’m honest, I’m not sure there is such a thing. There have been times when I think I’ve sorted it – but then school timetabling changes, exam paper updates or the introduction of Controlled Assessment means our department has to re-think what we do.

Having just changed the route our department takes once again, I thought I’d share how we currently do KS4, the topics we cover, when we do our Controlled Assessment, and how we arrived at these decisions.

**What course?**

GCSE History at our school is, thankfully, very popular, and we’ve worked very hard during KS3 to make it that way. Currently, in Years 10 and 11, we have over 210 GCSE students. Our school hasn’t gone down the route of making History (or Geography) compulsory in preparation for the EBacc, so History is still in the ‘option pot’ with subjects such as Art, Food Technology, Media Studies, and R.S. We do OCR’s GCSE History B: Modern World, with a Controlled Assessment task on the Depth Study of Germany 1919–1939, and then the USA 1919–1941 Depth Study. We have trialled different topics (one year we did the Russia 1905–1941 Depth Study) and tried other exam boards, but found the questions slightly more complex, and our results ended up slightly lower. Now I know that ‘trialling different topics’ isn’t a particularly scientific way of going about trying something different, but no matter how much we discuss it and look through other specifications, we think that the students we teach are best suited to OCR GCSE History B: Modern World. In fact, our students complete detailed History surveys each year as part of our school’s ‘Department Self-Review’ policy, and we go so far as to present other syllabus choices (e.g. Schools History Project) for the students to discuss, but the topics never really ‘get them biting’. So it has been OCR History B Modern World for a while now and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Put simply, the students seem to enjoy the topics, and the staff enjoys teaching it.
What topics, and when?

For many years, when students came into Year 10, we would start on our Paper One topics straight away - so the Interwar Years for us meant the Treaty of Versailles, followed by the League of Nations in the 1920s. This took us up to Christmas, and with a sprinkling of short quizzes, longer 'exam condition' tests and mock papers, by the end of the Autumn Term we had a pretty good idea of the sort of grades some of our students might achieve, and the sort of intervention strategies that might be needed to get certain students ‘back on track’. In the Spring Term, we would jump over the Atlantic Ocean and begin our Depth Study on USA 1919–1941. We choose to do America here, right after we’ve just done the work of the League of Nations in the 1920s, because I strongly believe that it’s impossible to teach the breakdown in international relations (the next Interwar Years topic) properly without first studying the causes and consequences of the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression. And students love the USA 1919–1941 Depth Study! Indeed, it’s one of those Depth Studies that today’s students can absolutely relate to -- after all, the American 1920s and ‘30s include the rise of consumerism, mass production, immigration, movies, music, motor cars, sports stars, the birth of celebrity, race relations, gangsters, boom and bust politics ... the list goes on! I use my GCSE History: The USA 1919–1941 textbook for this topic, as well as a DVD of History Channel’s excellent America: The Story of the US TV series, BBC’s American Voices series and the feature films Seabiscuit and Cinderella Man (why not?).

Then, in the Summer Term we would go back over to Europe and look at the breakdown in international relations and the build up to the outbreak of World War Two. Like I said earlier, I think that it is really important to look at the causes of the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression as part of the USA Depth Study before you look at its impact in Europe. As the German troops marched across the Polish border, our Year 10s went on their Summer break, having covered all their topics on Paper One.

When students came back in Year 11, we started our Depth Study in Germany 1918–1945 in preparation for the Controlled Assessment. I used my GCSE History: Germany 1918–1945 Depth Study textbook here. By the time new year came, we had covered all the Paper One topics, completed the Controlled Assessment and were ready for the Paper Two topics. We then spent the Spring Term with Liberal Reformers, Suffragists, Suffragettes and Home Fronters during World War One in preparation for the Paper Two Exam on Early Twentieth Century British Society. We would then re-cover the Paper One topics in preparation for the June exam.

All changed?

However, you may have noticed that a lot of this has been written in past tense, mainly because the detail above is how we used to do it. This year, for the first time, we’ve changed the course line up a little bit. Instead of completing our Controlled Assessment on Germany 1918–1945 at the beginning of Year 11, we’ve brought it forward to the start of Year 10 – so Controlled Assessment is the first topic they do when they begin their GCSEs. We’ve made this minor change for two reasons:

- Firstly, our Year 9 scheme is full of Nazi Germany topics, so beginning their Year 10 studies with this seems logical as it’s still fresh in their minds.
- Secondly, starting their GCSE studies with Controlled Assessment gives students an immediate focus at a time when they seem very willing to work and getting a full list of Controlled Assessment marks is much more likely at the start of Year 10, than it is halfway through Year 11 when all other subjects are working on Controlled Assessment too.

Here and now

So, as it currently stands we do our Controlled Assessment in the Autumn Term of Year 10. We then spend the rest of Year 10 (January–July) on Paper One topics – Treaty of Versailles, League of Nations and the USA Depth Study. Then when students come back in September (their Year 11) they build up to World War Two until December. We ‘early entry’ some students for the January exam. Then by February we’re onto Paper Two topics (Liberal Reforms, Votes for Women, Britain’s Home Front 1914–1918) and then it’s revision time for our Paper One ‘retakes’ and Paper Two exam skills.

Well, that’s how it currently works at my school... next year will be a different year though!

Best wishes,