Making History Meaningful

Our school’s History department gives out a questionnaire at the end of each year. In amongst the obvious questions about topics covered, homework tasks, types of assessment and teaching methods, we also asked students who have said they’ve enjoyed their History lessons to tell us why! And we asked them to pinpoint what it was that they enjoyed about particular topics or projects. The feedback makes for fascinating reading… and is like a ‘how to’ guide to make History lessons relevant to today’s students.

I am going to share some comments from this year’s students (Years 7–11) and explain what our department has done (or needs to do a little more of) that might have prompted these responses:

‘I thought I knew all about Titanic, so learning new things about how my area links to the Titanic’s story was brilliant.’ (Kimberley, Year 9)

The Titanic topic we cover in Year 9 has always been popular – but it’s a story everyone seems to already know! Last year the topic took on new life after the Channel 4 series ‘Titanic: The Mission’ was aired. In a nutshell, the five-part series followed four engineers as they attempted to rebuild sections of the ship using methods and tools from the early twentieth century. And one of the episodes featured the making of the ship’s anchor at Hingley’s ironworks in Netherton, West Midlands… and about twenty per cent of my school’s intake is from Netherton! Jackpot!

I think the message here is obvious. If students are to relate to the things we teach them, try to exploit the local angle wherever possible. Whether it’s looking at your local castle when studying the Norman Invasion, or taking names from your local war memorial and plotting where those people lived on a map after searching the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, trying to ‘make it local’ will definitely help students feel and see that the things they know about in their area actually ‘fit in’ with the nation’s history!

And I realize that I am particularly lucky in Dudley in relation to ‘making it local’. I can actually see Dudley Castle from my classroom window, the Titanic’s anchor and chain were made down the road and the Gunpowder Plotters (minus Guy Fawkes) had their big shoot-out on 8 November 1605 about two miles down the road at Holbeache House (which still stands). But the whole of Britain is rich with these sorts of ‘local angles’ to our ‘big stories’… so let’s exploit them!

‘I like the way they [History lessons] make me get stuff. Like now I know how the Union Flag became a Union Flag and why there are three lions and loads of Tudor roses on the England footy shirt.’ (Luke, Year 7)

I think Luke is trying to say his History lessons have helped him to understand more about his world. And I highly recommend doing this… wherever, and whenever, possible! Whether you use the (supposed) origins of the V sign insult when teaching about the Hundred Years War or relate the current world economic downturn to the downward spiral of prosperity after the Wall Street Crash, I think it’s ever more important to identify things in today’s world (like the V sign) and use our History lesson to show how they originated – or look for things in the past that we can draw parallels with today! I recently attended the SHP conference in Leeds and went to a brilliant session led by Richard McFahn and Neil Bates that drew parallels between the recent debate in British politics over drinking and licensing laws and the very same debate in the eighteenth century – a debate
that led Hogarth to show his support for tightening laws on the consumption of gin by issuing his iconic print, *Gin Lane*. It was clear that Richard and Neil were saying the same as Luke in my Year 7 class – students will enjoy History if they can see how it relates to the word they live in.

‘The British Empire work was the most interesting. I’ve never done stuff in school on India and Pakistan so it was good to do some different topics.’ (Misbah, Year 8)

I think the importance of covering a wider range of topics needs little explanation. Clearly we need a diverse range of topics to engage our diverse audience! Nearly 40 per cent of the students in my classroom have Indian, Pakistani or Afro-Caribbean roots – so it’s important that our schemes of work reflect their heritage. And we’re not ignoring British history by focusing on other places – the fact that 40 per cent of the students in my classroom have parents and grandparents born overseas but whose children and grandchildren are now in British schools IS British History! And I think it’s vital to keep reviewing the ‘heritage’ balance in our classrooms. More students are enrolling at my school from the Far East and from Eastern Europe… so my next challenge is to make their History lessons relevant to them too…

‘The lessons aren’t the same all the time. I like not knowing what I’m going to do when I get there, or what I’m going to see, or who I’m going to work with.’ (Momodou, Year 10)

I think Humanities teachers are lucky in some ways. After all, not all subjects have the chance to include a movie clip, a debate, a role play and the start of a research project IN THE SAME LESSON! And our subject lends itself to the hi-tech world we live in too – whether it’s getting the students to create podcasts that go onto the school’s History portal (something which went down very well this year) or getting three History teachers to set up Twitter accounts – one in the name of King Harold, another for Hardrada and a third for Duke William – and getting each of them to ‘tweet’ during September and October of the new term next year in an attempt to make the battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings a little easier to follow for your new Year 7 students!

The topics we can choose to cover in our History lessons give us every opportunity to use every trick in the book – TV clips, movies, role plays, debates, podcasts, research projects, student presentations, and so much more – to enthuse the students we teach. And they lap it all up if it’s done properly!

‘I like thinking hard about things and working things out for myself. We don’t get asked our opinion in many lessons but in History we always do.’ (Jordan, Year 11)

Jordan, a student in my Year 11 GCSE top set, wrote this in response to the ‘Why have/haven’t you enjoyed History this year?’ part of the questionnaire. I think her answer speaks volumes about how important it is to make sure History lessons challenge students to question, investigate, hypothesize and review. In a recent Year 11 lesson (which included part of the ‘Votes for Women’ topic we were covering) I observed my colleague looking at Emily Davison, the suffragette, who died at the 1913 Derby. The ‘hook question’ asked the students to decide whether Emily Davison deliberately killed herself to become a suffragette martyr… or whether it was just an attempted protest that went horribly wrong. The teacher began with the famous clip of the incident and gradually revealed a variety of well selected resources about Davison, including eye-witness accounts, her prison record, excerpts from books, police reports and the thoughts of Emily Davison herself. As each resource was revealed the groups were asked to assess its usefulness and surmise whether Davison meant to kill herself or not. The teacher made challenging suggestions that encouraged the students to develop their points of view, which led to a productive, purposeful buzz in the room.*

Jordan, who was part of this group, almost certainly had to think hard about things and work things out for herself… and she was asked her opinion time and time again.

To conclude then, it seems more important than ever to make our History lessons meaningful to all our students. Put simply, if students see no relevance in what we teach them, they just won’t choose it and they will miss out on a subject we know is fantastic. The things I have outlined here are strategies our department has worked hard on –

- Making History about the local environment
- Making History about the world our students live in
- Making History inclusive
- Making History part of the hi-tech world
- Making History challenging

And it seems to be working: we currently have over 200 students that have chosen GCSE History as an option in Years 10 and 11… and our numbers are looking good for Year 9 going into KS4 too!

Best wishes,

[Signature]

*This lesson used a Historical Enquiry taken from Technology, War and Identities: A World Study After 1900, on ‘The Emily Davison mystery’.*