Revision is for the summer term, right? That’s correct, but not exclusively!

From September 2016, History GCSE will be 100% externally examined with no controlled assessment. The move from modular to linear exams has already happened. This means there is an increased need to ‘make it stick’. Celebrity Historian David Starkey has been quoted as saying ‘memory is mastery’: his contention is that without the ability to retain distinct pieces of information and perceive connections, students simply will not be able to argue and debate. This has always been the case, and factual recall is part of the skillset Historians need. This article provides some guiding principles and strategies to reassure you and your students. The techniques encourage students to anchor existing knowledge and commit details to memory. Now is the time to place more emphasis on this from the outset and throughout the GCSE course. After all, it’s a marathon not a sprint, so there is the need for both stamina building and speed work along the way to ensure success in these ‘strengthened’ assessments.

1. Sticky starts: Activate latent knowledge

Start by checking what students already know and can help each other with. If you don’t routinely check starting points, now is the time to do so! This prevents underestimating students and leads to greater autonomy and quicker progress. Learning is an iterative process and with a greater emphasis on factual recall, students should be encouraged to make links and build on pre-existing knowledge. ‘The most important single factor influencing learning is what the student already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly’ (David Ausubel). Competency is highly motivational so if students have a feeling of already being ‘in the know’, this knowledge can be harnessed and built upon.

Strategy: One way of doing this is to use the ‘walking chocolate bar’ technique. Fold a piece of paper into eight squares and ask students to fill as many squares as they can alone with associated keywords or facts. After three minutes have elapsed, allow students to walk around and share ideas, and turn the sheet over to ideally complete all 16 squares. This allows for collaboration, connection making, and helps inform you about who knows what already so that you can tailor your guidance thereafter.

2. New content: All about outcomes

‘If it’s not predictable, make it post-dictable’: this Americanism courtesy of Chip and Dan Heath has stuck with me. It’s simple, unexpected and concrete. Encourage students to give new material meaning by making a mental model. Allow them to express content somehow in their own way, with their own words and connect it with what they might already know. This elaboration technique requires the teacher to have an outcome in mind.

Strategy: Depending on the context, ask students to produce an outcome with meaning to them, possibly offering choices such as: make a cartoon strip, create a brain box (a cube with details on each of the six faces), design a commemorative plate or postage stamp. Be sure to negotiate or set down conditions in terms of word limits, so there is clarity about the finished product and it contains all the necessary details. Be sure to save good ones: be a curator and then you can WAGOLL (show students What A Good One Looks Like!) in future years.

3. In at the deep end!

When approaching something new and previously unknown, sometimes it is useful to encourage students to ‘have a guess’. It means we encourage them to be more open-minded, with fewer prejudices and assumptions, and so, perhaps more likely to have a go and remember!
Strategy: Ask key enquiry questions ‘cold’; throw students ‘in at the deep end’. What is the worst that can happen? They get a bit stuck and through that struggle, they learn! This is a chance for the sensible use of Sample Assessment Material linked to a ‘silent debate’ whereby the teacher prints a question onto the middle of a piece of A3 and places it in the centre of a group of four students, who then make associations and generate ideas by writing their thoughts on a quarter of the sheet. Then, students switch the sheet around and build up a composite response once consensus has been reached. This technique can serve to demystify and build confidence. After the teaching has taken place, the answers can be revisited and further annotated until a comprehensive and finely-tuned answer is achieved.

4. Helicopter History
Sharing the big picture from the outset is always a good idea. Be sure to involve parents and carers with the plan too by sending home a learning map or advertising it on the school website.

Strategy: Devise a homework activity early on to include family members. An easy one is a ‘teach and transfer’ type of summarising activity where students go home, relay the learning and bring proof back to you that class work has been capitalised upon. This can be very powerful at parents evening!

Another great classroom activity is to play ‘match point’: this is where you (or even ask your students to) create a pack of ideally 60 cards per group. These would be split into four sets of 15 categories based on an issue e.g. pioneers in Medicine Through Time. The aim of the game is to match the cards so that a pioneer matches with a date, relevant picture and keyword rather like a big jigsaw with matches leading to points. This should be played in pairs, or threes during the very first lesson where students may get really stuck (they could use textbooks to assist). This identification of gaps is important for learning, providing you with a picture of what students need to go over in more detail. This activity should be regularly repeated at spaced intervals to encourage recall, build familiarity and make the learning stick. Completing the puzzle against the clock then becomes the challenge!

5. Build testing into the mix
Recent research into how we learn best reveals the importance of check testing. The notion of studying then testing, testing (S,T,T,T) yields impressive research results. ‘We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit’ (Aristotle).

Apps such as Kahoot can help you and your students to create your own multiple choice quizzes. Variety is memorable too, and encourages deeper learning, so the more you can alter the format (i.e. changing the quizmaster, the furniture, the running order etc), the more likely the details are to have associations and so stick in the mind. ‘Practice makes permanent’ (Doug Lemov).

6. Have a word with yourself
Take every opportunity to build autonomy and self-regulation. For lasting learning, students must take control as ‘drivers rather than as passengers’ (Didau).

Strategy: The best students are self-reliant, so from early on encourage students to steer, and to activate self-review and self-management. Seek feedback from students by asking questions like: ‘How could we be more efficient?’, ‘What would be more effective?’, ‘What do you think?’, ‘What could you do?’. Improve SPG by having a punctuation repair kit of stickers which students can issue to each other, so the onus is essentially on them to take care. Aim for a kaien classroom culture, the Japanese idea of continuous improvement. Those incremental changes could make all the difference!

7. Running record
Encourage the distillation of key teaching points as a norm and routine.

Strategy: Consider using www.memiiary.com as a technique to enable students to further customise, sum up and internalise their learning. Memiiary allows students to record five daily details which can be referred to thereafter. You can guide the students as to where to place the emphasis. It’s a great aide-memoir which can be used en masse by the class and/or individually. It’s a kind of online ‘exit pass’. Post-it notes or record cards kept by students can also be helpful. Don’t forget the power of ‘working walls’; which can act as on-going reminders; turning ‘memiiaries’ into wordles for display or revision is another interesting development as well.

Remember, this is about building good habits and routines from the beginning of term.

Every good wish as you embark upon the new academic year!

References and further reading
Didau, David, ‘What if everything you knew about teaching was wrong?’, 2015.
Lockyer, Stephen, 100 ideas for Primary Teachers, 2014.