**Don't panic!**

I have to admit that, at first, I had a bit of a panic when I saw the new DfE plan for GCSE history. We knew that change was coming (because things always keep changing), but I just felt that, after the recent Key Stage 3 modifications and the initial uncertainties with the first Key Stage 3 draft, that the new GCSE changes were a change too far. I couldn’t quite get my head around what, exactly, I would be required to teach... and all those differently named ‘studies’ got me thinking that there would surely be a whole lot of new content that I’d need to become familiar with.

**Content change not critical change**

However, now the dust has settled and I’ve had a chance to read (and re-read), and reflect on the new plans, I’m quite optimistic – perhaps even excited – about the changes. True, there will be different content to teach (that can’t be avoided), but the fundamental concepts and processes that we have spent years teaching might form the basis of a ‘British depth study’ or a ‘period study’. And, perhaps most importantly, which of the old, familiar areas will be kept and which ones (now that you’ve spent years building up a set of fabulous resources) will disappear.

I guess we are also all keen to see what a new exam paper might look like – and the balance we’ll need to strike in our schemes of work between teaching ‘new’ content and preparing our students with the skills needed to excel in the exam hall.

Now, this article is not going to enter the debate surrounding this huge GCSE overhaul, but will attempt to relate how the History department in my school is trying to deal with the transition from ‘old’ to ‘new’.

**Retaining the familiar**

I think that the idea of new content worries some teachers. Or just frustrates them! The fact that some of us have spent years working out innovative, quirky and clever ways to teach some of the more difficult content and concepts means that any talk of new topics might send shivers down our spines. But how much ‘new’ content will there really be? There is little doubt in my mind that some of the old, familiar topics and studies will still be in the new specifications written by the exam boards, so lots of our resources will still be relevant. And most of those techniques we use to drive home the particularly difficult subject matter will be transferable to the new content.

Rest assured, publishers like OUP will be working hard to ensure that they release textbooks, schemes, worksheets, interactive resources, assessments and monitoring packages that will help whatever route you decide to take through these new courses.

**What next?**

As a department, my colleagues and I will now spend some time working to ensure that our Key Stage 3 scheme of work includes as many opportunities as we can that will allow students to demonstrate some of those key skills and concepts that we know most form the basis of the new GCSE specifications. And in fact, the DfE’s subject content guidance gives clear pointers as to what is required from examination boards in developing the new specifications. For example, we know there’ll be lots of British history (as well as World History) and we’ll be required to cover these topics in both short and long term time-scales. As a result, my department’s Key Stage 3 schemes of work will reflect what we think might be coming in the new specifications: lots of those familiar ‘big’ topics (Middle Ages, Elizabethan era, crime and punishment, British Empire, World War I, and so on) that will be pitched in such a way as to help the students develop their skills as well as their knowledge and understanding.

Best wishes

Aaron Wiliex

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**Audit your Key Stage 3 scheme**

With the aim of GCSE being the natural development of the good work we’ve done during Key Stage 3, it stands to reason that it’s essential that a History department’s Key Stage 3 scheme must include a basic grounding of all of the skills and concepts used in Key Stage 4. With this in mind, I think it’s vital that any department audits the skills and concepts that run through their Key Stage 3 scheme. Just as important is the progression of those skills and concepts. For example, are there some of the lessons you teach which focus on cause and consequence in Years 8 or 9 more advanced than the ones you teach in Year 7? Are the students required to handle more complex and sophisticated sources in Year 8 than they were when you first taught them in Year 7?

In the recently published series I’ve written, KS3 History, we went to great lengths to ensure that these skills and processes were audited thoroughly. We tried to ensure that the students were required to do more progressively complex tasks and higher-order thinking challenges in relation to these skills and concepts as the books ‘moved’ through the key stage.

Indeed, in my department at school, we’ve worked hard to include these more challenging tasks, sources and investigations as we move through Year 7 into Year 8 and then into Year 9. The final book in our KS3 History series – Technology, War and Independence – takes that a stage further by including assessment tasks that focus on some of the same skills that the new History GCSE has said it will focus on. For example, the first ‘Assessing your Learning’ spread entitled ‘Were the lions really led by donkeys?’ gets students to understand and use critically and constructively a range of contemporary source material (including written historical sources whose precise provenance is given) to frame their own valid historical questions and to make their own valid historical claims (DfE History GCSE Subject Content, April 2014, p. 6). Indeed, the textbook itself actually pinpoints specific spreads where students are given the opportunity to work at a higher level in preparation for their GCSE studies.

In my view, any rigorous Key Stage 3 scheme will already be developing some of the skills and highlighting the key concepts that will be in any of the new specifications developed by the exam boards. And so we come onto ‘new content!’...