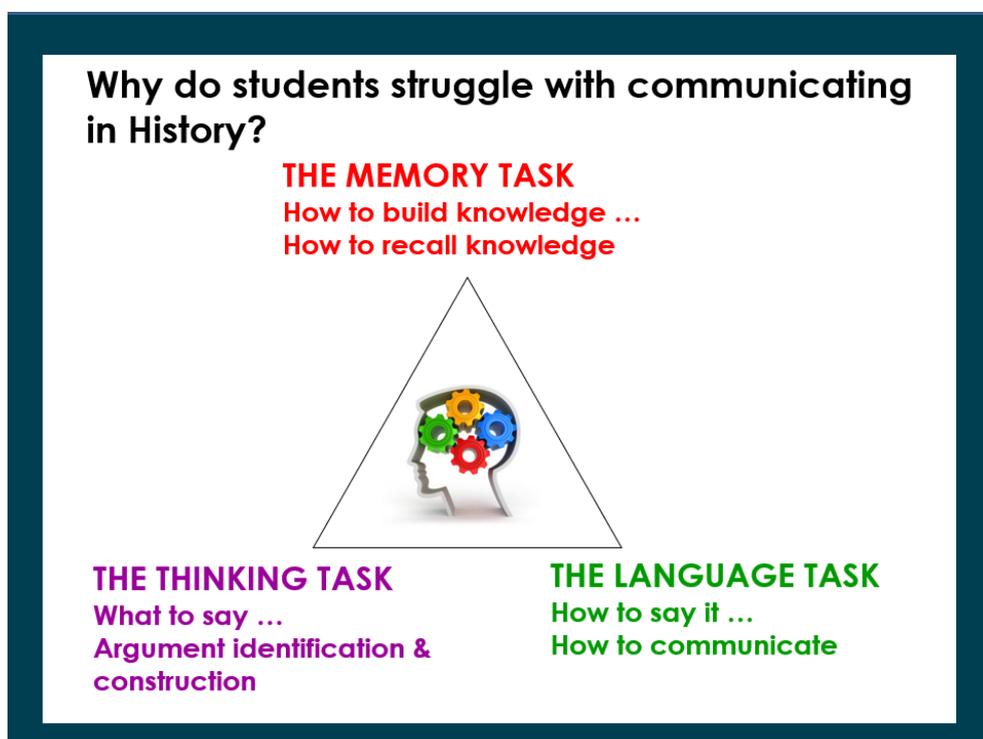


HELPING HISTORY STUDENTS COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY: DEVELOPING A 'CAN DO' MENTALITY

Introduction

Diagnosing why students struggle with communication and the role of Visible Learning

The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology, 2006) highlights how communicating in history, whether through speech or through writing, is at once a thinking task and a language task. 'On the one hand, there is the problem of what to say. On the other hand, there is the different problem of how to say it.' In addition, experience shows that students are also grappling with a third task – a memory task. This multi-tasking can place significant emotional and cognitive demands on our students, whether they are talking or writing about history. We have summarised this key issue in the diagram below.



The diagram above can be used as a diagnostic tool to reflect on why a student or a group of students in your class may be struggling to communicate their knowledge and understandings effectively. As history teachers, the process of diagnosing problems in learning is fundamental to successful teaching and learning with students of all ages. For example, we need to diagnose the aspects of each topic that students may struggle to understand and use that diagnosis in planning lessons and activities. We also diagnose their misconceptions about a topic or period of history and about how we study history – e.g. the ideas they already have about concepts such as evidence – and again use those diagnoses in planning lessons and activities. It is just as important to identify students' problems with communication and then develop strategies to help them communicate more effectively.

This package therefore discusses problems and strategies associated with three aspects of communication:

1. Carrying out historical research to build their knowledge – the Memory Task
2. Constructing arguments – the Thinking Task
3. Communicating their ideas – the Language Task

Building a ‘can do’ mentality – the role of Visible Learning

A significant thread in this guidance is the importance of making ‘how to learn effectively’ explicit for students so that they realise they are not only learning about history but about how to study history more effectively. This helps students build confidence in their ability to improve their learning – that they ‘can do’ history better. To achieve this it’s important that individual students:

- see learning problems as being common to many students, not as evidence of their individual lack of ability
- realise specific problems are being targeted by the strategies described here
- over time appreciate that they can re-use the strategies you have introduced when studying new topics or periods of history.

These ideas are strongly influenced by the work of John Hattie who argues that ‘Observations of classrooms typically show that there is little direct instruction in ‘how to learn’, or the development and use of learning strategies.’ This is an important omission because, while students must have a deep foundation of subject knowledge, they also need to learn to take control of their own learning – their ability to employ effective and flexible strategies that help them reason, memorize and problem-solve is crucial if they want to achieve success in history. Providing students with these learning strategies in the context of studying history is far more effective than through ‘learning to learn’ programs that are not embedded in the context of a subject.

Students who struggle are most in need of these strategies to help them learn effectively. Teachers cannot assume that students have appropriate strategies for resolving their problems so we need to help pupils see what good learning looks like. We therefore believe that ‘visible learning’ is crucial – taking what is so often implicit and making it explicit to our pupils. It means identifying the areas where pupils struggle and converting these into explicit teaching opportunities to lift pupils higher and push back the boundaries of pupil progress.

For a range of other strategies based on the Visible Learning see the following sections of the Raising Attainment section of this website:

<http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/AttainmentStartingPoints.html>

<http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/AttainmentVisible.html>

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(Revised 19.04.21)

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