

Developing independent learning amongst A level students and undergraduates

I wrote this article around 2014 and then forgot about it until 2020. Sadly I remember almost nothing about writing it. The text and footnotes (which I rarely use) suggest the article was requested by a higher education website and that the prime audience was university teachers – I ran CPD sessions on teaching in HE around that time. Having re-read the article I've included it on Thinking History as it may be of use to secondary teachers but experienced teachers please note that it was written for teachers in universities and this explains some of the statements you will find obvious. One change I have made is to ditch the formality of referring to the authors of articles by surnames only – something which jars even more when I know the people concerned and which I've always hated because it reminds me of the 7 years at grammar school when no-one used my first name.

Teaching is a problem-solving activity. As teachers, regardless of the age of our students, a central part of our task is to identify what it is about a topic or aspect of historical method that students struggle to understand and then structure courses and individual classes to help students overcome those problems. Helping students overcome problems in this way is deeply rewarding, not just because the individual student has moved forward but because it's brought together the two halves of the process of history teaching – our love and knowledge of our subject and our understanding of how students learn. Each of these halves is equally important in the craft of teaching history.ⁱ

This article addresses a common problem amongst students – how to study independently and with confidence. Independent learning is in many ways the Holy Grail for teachers at A level and at university. Our aim is that at some stage along this educational continuum students will take their L plates off, confident in their ability to research new topics for themselves and reach conclusions whilst aware of the degree of certainty of those conclusions. Certainly they should have demonstrated this ability by the time they gain their degree, most obviously when undertaking their dissertation but at A level they should also have shown evidence of the ability to plan and carry out their own research in coursework units aimed at developing independence.

There is an extensive literature on the development of independent learning for history students, both at university level and at A levelⁱⁱ and there are also good studies on work with GCSE students aged 14-16 and with 11-13 year olds.ⁱⁱⁱ Although these latter studies are obviously for a much

younger age-range than university students they do have considerable value for university teachers as they are concerned predominantly with the principles of effective learning and teaching.

This article is not, however, a review of the literature. That would deprive readers of the opportunity to undertake their own independent study of the material! Instead it's a report on two of the many strategies that can help students develop the ability to study new historical topics and questions independently and with confidence. These strategies have been used with A level and undergraduates, many of the latter had weak A level results or were adult returners to education.

A model for independent enquiry

The first of these strategies provides students with a broad understanding of how to approach the study of a new topic. This involved providing students with a model of how to go about this task and herein there may seem to be a paradox – that we are teaching students how to be independent! However the alternative is that we leave them to sort it out for themselves – something that the most able have always done but that a great many others struggle to achieve. Their tendency (expressed very broadly) is to read and make notes without any clear sense of direction and this lack of clarity undermines confidence, motivation and interest, often eventually leading to rushed and poorly-directed written work.

A criticism that could be levelled at the strategy of providing a model is that it could prove to be restrictive or to limit initiative but experience suggests that the model actually creates the confidence for students to develop their own variations on these strategies. As Dale Banham and Russell Hall have written in introducing their own developmental work with A level students 'It was no good bemoaning the lack of independence of our students; we had to do something about it!'^{iv}

So, let us imagine a student, whether at A level or university, starting work on a new topic. The model that I have provided for students is as follows:

1. Create an introductory layer of knowledge – establish the main events and issues and, if possible and relevant, any differences in argument amongst historians. [The teacher's role in this and the other stages is discussed below.]
2. If students haven't been given a question in advance, they should outline a series of questions they want to answer about this topic, then choose one to guide them through further study.

3. Next they use their introductory reading or introductory classes to create an initial hypothesis in answer to their question.
4. Continue reading to a clear plan, identifying and prioritising texts which need to be read, and making notes which relate to their hypothesis, either in support or challenging it.
5. After a set amount of time or reading they revisit their hypothesis and draft a more developed answer to the question.
6. If there's the opportunity, time and need continue, repeating stages 4 and 5.^v

There is nothing novel about this model except perhaps its explicit use with students both at A level and at university. In practice I found using the model with students had several benefits:

- It provides a clear structure and so a sense of purpose and direction, interleaving reading, reflection and writing.
- It reassures students that it is acceptable to know little or nothing at the outset, that uncertainty is a natural and accepted part of studying history, especially when getting to grips with a new topic.
- It provides a positive model for 'changing your mind', otherwise known as 'developing your hypothesis'. Re-thinking is a positive part of the process, not a weakness.
- It gives students the chance to talk explicitly about the process of learning. Many studies have shown the importance of metacognition, the process by which an individual reflects on and understands how he or she learns. This process makes it much easier for a student to transfer effective methods of study forward from one topic to another.
- It helps students become more confidence – they have a sense of direction when starting and pursuing a new topic and a clear path to follow. They're much less likely to fall into the trap of simply reading as much as they can and hoping an answer emerges somehow (which tended to be my 'method' at university!)

- Teachers have a model they can discuss with whole classes as well as individuals which may save time but, more importantly, opens up with students the essential topic of how to go about studying effectively.
- The model can be used to encourage collaborative learning with students developing the ability to work together to discuss issues and challenge ideas constructively. Our examination system, fundamentally focussed on assessing an individual's work, implicitly undervalues and works against collaborative study whereas this model can encourage discussion at several stages e.g. creating questions, formulating hypotheses, reflecting on initial hypotheses and critical reading of an individual's writing.

A textbook example of modelling independent enquiry

It's also important that such a model is not seen as just an individual teacher's eccentricity but that it (or something similar) is validated by, for example, appearing in textbooks. The textbook page below shows how the model has been used for A level students.^{vi} The aim of this page is to introduce the idea of creating an initial hypothesis in answer to a question from a limited amount of information and then setting students off on further reading to test and develop that hypothesis. It is preceded by two pages introducing the events of Cade's rebellion in 1450 and within this are brief references to possible causes of the outbreak, chiefly the defeat of English forces in France, taxation and the role of the King's advisers. During the chapter further diagrams prompt students to think how that hypothesis might be developed, modelling the process of enquiry for students while giving them the detailed evidence they need. The modelling is detailed so that students, as well as developing understanding of the topic, have full opportunity to understand and reflect on the process of enquiry. Without such modelling some, maybe many, students will concentrate only on the subject-matter and ignore the process. A Y12 student provided this unsought feedback on the process:

'By filling in the table as you read it means that you don't forget any of the factors, which is possible if you just read it, and it makes it easier to make comparisons between them; as to how certain a motive it is. By using this structure it means you can answer the enquiry focus of the chapter.'^{vii}

From: *'The Wars of the Roses'* by Ian Dawson

Hodder Education 2012

■ Enquiry Focus: Why was London full of rebels in 1450?

How to plan your way through this enquiry

- 1 Begin by looking carefully at the question. The key word is 'Why?' which means your answer must identify the causes of this rebellion. It will also do one or more of the following:
 - explain links between the causes
 - identify any causes that are more important than others
 - distinguish between the event that triggered the rebellion and the longer term causes behind it.

Identifying these aspects of causation helps you answer the precise question and stops you writing a description of what happened during Cade's rebellion.

- 2 Now that you have focused on the question you can read pages 21–26, but there's a wrong way and a right way to do this reading!

The wrong way is to start reading and taking notes, pushing the question to the back of your mind. The danger here is that you'll make lots of notes but they probably won't be directed at the question.

The right way is, before reading, to think about the kind of answer that fits the question. You've already read pages 18–19 so what did those pages tell you about why London was full of rebels? For example:

It says on page 18 that the French were close to retaking English lands in France.

The chronicle says the Duke of Suffolk and others had sold the English lands to France.

The rebels blamed the King's closest advisers, the 'untrue counsel'. They executed Lord Saye. Suffolk had already been murdered.

So, stopping and thinking reveals that you already have information that helps create a tentative answer to the question.

Putting together an initial, tentative answer is called 'creating a hypothesis'. For example, a simple hypothesis is:

London was full of rebels because of anger at the loss of lands in France. They blamed the Duke of Suffolk and the rest of the King's advisers for the problems.



- △ This shows the hypothesis in the form of a diagram

The hypothesis gives you a target to have in mind as you read and take notes. As you read, keep thinking. Is new information providing evidence to:

- show that the causes in this hypothesis do explain the rebels' anger
- show that other causes need to be added to the hypothesis
- suggest that some of the hypothesis is wrong and needs changing or taking out
- explain how causes were linked or which causes were most important?

- 3 Decide now what your hypothesis is. It must explain why London was full of rebels. You may find other information on pages 18–19 to build your hypothesis. Write as detailed an explanation as you can, thinking about the aspects of causation listed higher up the page. Later in the enquiry more blue boxes will prompt you to revise your hypothesis.

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Aspects of the teacher's role in developing students' independence

In order for students to put this model into practice with increasing autonomy, time is needed when it is introduced (at whatever stage of education) for teacher-student discussion of the nature of this process and for thorough reflection by students on how their own learning is progressing. Students need to develop the ability to describe explicitly how they go about the process of historical study. As Dale Banham and Russell Hall argue, 'learning is primarily a social activity and ... teachers need to pay more attention to the way students describe and interpret learning. This meant beginning to understand learning experiences from the unique perspectives of the students.'^{viii} Dale and Russell have made extensive use of the work of Ron Berger and also of John Hattie's analysis of a wide range of educational research which identifies the teaching 'interventions' that make the greatest difference to students' attainment. John Hattie particularly highlights the importance of the process of reflection on how learning is taking place and the quality of feedback and discussion on that feedback.^{ix} Importantly this need for discussion and reflection may worry some teachers because it suggests that they have less time to 'deliver' content, something historians struggle to accept because our love of our material means we want to introduce as much of it as possible to students ourselves. However it's important to think long-term – ground will be made up, both in the classroom, by students on their own because their own reading and note-taking becomes much more effective and because written work is revised and polished effectively, using feedback to consolidate learning.

Now to sum up some of the key aspects of the teacher's role in developing students' independence - experience shows that the teacher's role can involve any or all of these areas of discussion:

1. The teacher can help students identify what they know and understand already. Students can find studying history a frustrating business. Just as they develop understanding and familiarity with a topic they move on to a new topic, encountering different names and events so that students may feel they keep starting again with a blank sheet of paper. One aspect of the teacher's role is to help them realise that they are bringing useful knowledge and understandings from past studies, not just in terms of understanding of historical methodology but in terms of the kinds of answers they can suggest to questions.

To take one example, what might students bring to a study of why Stalin was successful in becoming leader of Russia in the 1920s even though they have not studied Russian history before? The teacher can start students on the road to building a hypothesis by pushing students to think back

to other topics when individuals achieved power. Firstly identify such leaders and occasions, then think about whether they succeeded through force, propaganda, election, a deal over power with others, the promise of 'succession' from the previous leader? Which of these might have been most likely to apply in 1920s Russia? Such a process uses time that might feel better spent on getting started on the 'proper material' but is time very well used, both in starting students thinking about the possible nature of their answers and also giving them confidence that past studies continue to be useful. This latter point is important in increasing students' own sense of the value of their studies, seeing an A level course or degree as a whole course of study, not just as a series of separate modules.

2. Some students need help in distinguishing between maintaining an overview of the 'answer' and making detailed notes which record evidence which supports the developing hypothesis and which challenges that hypothesis. Weaker students tend to focus solely on making lots of notes but lose the overall pattern of their enquiry. One way to help students is to provide them with a variety of different ways of keeping the overview in sight. This may be done by revising the hypothesis in extended prose at set intervals of time or it may be done diagrammatically. As an example of the latter, the broad pattern of an answer to 'How far ...?' style questions can be recorded on a continuum line. For example, students investigating the impact of an event such as the Norman Conquest can maintain an overview by recording where various aspects of society (e.g. administration, the church, royal power, agriculture) might be placed on a change/continuity continuum line while using detailed notes to justify the placement of each item, why it can be difficult to decide an exact placement, why the placement might vary across time within the period studied or why historians disagree about a placement. The visual aspects of such methods of keeping track of a developing hypothesis are considerable – students can see the overview much faster than if they have to read through a paragraph of text and some will understand more from a diagram than from continuous text.

3. The teacher's role in introducing and creating enthusiasm for a topic is vital. Creating enthusiasm amongst A level and university students may not seem necessary as they have chosen to study history and usually bring their own eagerness to a new topic – but everyone has their off-days when outside events may intrude on motivation. University students, like any other age-group, work all the better for being enthused by their teacher. In addition, an involving, enjoyable beginning to a unit of work is vital for encouraging effective, confident reading amongst weaker students whose 'learning problem' is that they struggle to find their way into reading when faced by a thicket of

new names, events and places. Teaching strategies can be devised to overcome this problem and make these students more confident readers of new material.

4. It's also vital for the teacher to explain their rationale behind this way of working. Just as students of all ages have preconceptions about historical topics they have preconceptions about the 'right' way to be taught at A level and university. The danger is that any approach which doesn't fit that preconception is therefore undervalued and even dismissed – and students do far too often assume that the teacher's role is to tell them what happened in the past, not challenge them with uncertainties or, in this case, discuss how to learn more effectively. Therefore explain why you are teaching in a particular style today or tackling the developing issues about independent learning today – I emphasise 'today' so that students realise every lesson approach or topic won't be the same. Again there's a paradox here but quite an enjoyable one – learning to study independently is the product of teamwork between students and teachers.

An exemplar strategy for helping students read more confidently

One such strategy that I have used regularly is structured role-play, developed particularly while teaching a final year degree Special Subject on The Wars of the Roses.^x These role-plays were used to introduce each section of the course (every 5 or 6 weeks) and involved students taking the parts of named individuals and making decisions as I posed questions and dilemmas to them. In almost every case the 'action' took place with the room set out as a map, either representing the geography of places or groupings of allies. These role-plays were very closely structured with the focus on thinking through the possible courses of action and why an individual might have chosen one action instead of another. The major benefits of using this kind of activity proved to be that they:

- provide an effective introduction to people, names, a sequence of events and places
- develop students' understanding of the motives and attitudes of people in the past
- help students develop an understanding of the complexity of past situations and prompts them to ask far more questions than elicited by more traditional methods
- stimulate effective reading of textbooks and journal articles because students have developed an introductory familiarity with the material

- require a lot more concentration than lectures – at any moment a student might be put on the spot to make a crucial decision! With no prior reading expected, students concentrated on thinking not on recall. In Special Subject classes these role-plays often lasted for two hours because of the depth of discussion. It's worth emphasising that the level of detail can be varied according to need.
- bring out why sources might have gaps or be subjective and why interpretations differ

One other often neglected value of these activities is enjoyment. Enjoyment leads to more effective learning because it creates more intense concentration. Enjoyment also enhances students' ability to remember what they've studied – I had many examples of students retaining details of activities for several years after taking part, both of their own roles and those of other students.

Such activities, while only involving small numbers of students directly, can be used in large lecture rooms in front of large numbers of students. Again experience shows that concentration is heightened, especially when it is clear that anyone in the room can be asked a question, not just those taking part at the front.

An example of a script for such a role-play is attached as Appendix 1.xi This was used at the beginning of a sequence of classes on Edward IV's return to win the crown in 1471, part of a third year degree Special Subject. The starting point in constructing this activity was identifying the problems students had had with this topic in the past. The first of these, reflected in the extract in Appendix 1, stemmed from assuming that Burgundy supported Edward because of a family marriage alliance. Therefore the activity was constructed to identify the Duke of Burgundy's reaction to Edward's arrival in exile and why the Duke's attitude changed as events, dictated by others, unfolded.

Structured role-play is not the only kind of teaching method that can be used to introduce a new topic at A level or degree level in order to set students on the path to more independent learning. Examples include hot-seating the teacher in role as an historical character, creating continuum or washing lines, living graphs and decision-making activities. To some these may appear to be inappropriate for A level or degree students but again experience shows them to be highly motivating, provided their objectives are fully and carefully explained to avoid students assuming they are simply 'fun'. Each of these methods imparts a considerable amount of information and

opens up the potential for discussion on the nature of sources and historiographical debates as well as being an excellent way of prompting students to ask questions and formulate hypotheses.

To take just one strategy, hot seating usually involves the teacher playing the part of a historical character and being questioned by students. This may involve playing a named individual (e.g. King John, Queen Elizabeth I) or someone anonymous (e.g. a 1381 rebel or a survivor of Peterloo). I first took on the role of King John with second year undergraduates beginning a historiography course. I wanted a strategy that immediately helped them see why historians reach different conclusions about John and playing John allowed students to appreciate that it was possible to emphasise different aspects of his work and character, from hard-working administrator to distrustful, weak, conniving, even paranoid character seeing treachery round every corner. My thirty minutes in role prompted a lot of questions from students, followed by hypotheses about why historians might have created a variety of interpretations of John and a race to get the books out of the library because students wanted to find out how my interpretation related to the work of historians.

Hot-seating can therefore be used to achieve many different purposes, such as:

1. Understanding different interpretations - role-play Elizabeth I to draw out her strengths and weaknesses as queen. You don't have to be female – students are amazingly willing to 'suspend disbelief' – and you don't need costume although it is amazing how just a crown makes a difference.
2. Discussing significance - as Napoleon respond to questions on your achievements and their significance
3. Analysing motivations and attitudes – students quiz Wellington on his attitudes to political reform
4. Developing a sense of period - ask Lady Agnes Luttrell about life in the 1300s
5. Understanding evidence – students grill William of Poitiers about the value of his chronicle for the events of the Norman Conquest

In addition, not only is the activity good for group dynamics and student confidence but it shows that the teacher is prepared to take risks to provide a stimulating lesson, something that students respond well to.

Conclusions

In conclusion it is worth emphasising the arguments at the heart of this article:

1. Teaching is far more effective when it is based on an understanding of how students learn and why they find learning about a particular topic difficult. Classes and activities need to be structured around learning problems as much as around the content being covered.
2. Students need to develop an explicit understanding of how to go about learning effectively. They need to be able to describe how to begin work on a new topic and how to proceed to their conclusions
3. For this understanding to develop it is vital to create time within courses for analysis and reflection on how to learn. This may be at the expense of omitting some content but the long-term benefits are very worthwhile.
4. The use of the teaching and learning activities described above benefit everyone. My experience has shown these methods turning potential failures into successes at both A level and at university because they lead students into to greater depth of study, give them more confidence in reading and because they link the two necessary halves of successful teaching – the teacher's depth of knowledge and understanding of learning.

Appendix 1

Extract from a structured role-play on Edward IV's return to England in 1471

Setting up – the room is set up as a map with England, Burgundy and France identified. Students are chosen to play the roles of individuals – Edward IV, Charles, Duke of Burgundy, Louis, King of France, Henry VI, Margaret of Anjou, Edward of Lancaster, earl of Warwick. Others can be added according to numbers of students and the detail you want to cover. They wear sugar-paper tabards with their names on and are positioned on the map in their positions in late 1470. i.e. Warwick and Henry VI in London, Margaret and Prince Edward still in France, Charles of Burgundy and Edward IV in Netherlands but with a space between the two of them.

What follows is my rough ‘script’ - questions I’d ask and lines of discussion with individuals and the class as a whole. The ‘script’ however is only a basis for development as this kind of activity has to be flexible so you can respond to students’ replies and ideas, teasing out possibilities and offering options. One of the most fruitful moments in learning happens when a student gives a ‘wrong’ answer, choosing a course of action other than that followed by the person whose role they are taking. This leads into discussion of what it is the student has misunderstood or hasn’t known about the situation. After such a discussion we need to steer events back to what happened in reality.

Begin with a brief recap using individuals:

- Warwick had attempted to win control of England 69-70 – but had then fled to France
- King Louis had brought Warwick and Margaret together despite their past hatred
- Warwick returned in September 1470, coinciding with a northern rising – Edward fled to Netherlands early October when he realised he had little support.

ASK Warwick – what now? Can you be king? NO. What’s the option? Make Henry king.

Crown Henry – recap his weaknesses and health

- Warwick - Any weaknesses in your situation?

[Warwick’s ally Margaret and Prince Edward in France – suggests suspicion – are you happy with that? Build in problems arising from return of Lancastrian lords, land ownership.

ASK Edward – now you're in exile in Bruges what do you want/need?

[tease out initial focus on basics - shelter, food, money, clothing – provided by housed by Louis de Gruythusse, former Burgundian ambassador]

Longer term – why do you hope Duke Charles will help you?

[marriage link through Edward's sister, Margaret]

ASK Charles – what's your reaction to Edward's arrival?

[Student assume Edward is welcomed – they are unlikely to predict that Charles refused to meet Edward – Charles reportedly wished Edward had never come, maybe wished him dead.]

Open up to group - How can we explain Charles's attitude? – Think about Charles' priority as rule of Burgundy – i.e. protecting Burgundy from French aggression.

So what does Charles need from England – aid v France. Will you negotiate with Warwick, now ruling England?

[Charles did try to negotiate with Warwick.]

Key point - Therefore Charles clearly putting Burgundy's need before that of brother-in-law Edward. Surprising?

ASK Warwick – will you give Charles help v France? NO – two reasons – French aid for yourself and Burgundy sheltering Edward even if giving him no positive aid.

ASK France – how have events in England helped you in aim of winning control of Burgundy?

1. Now no Edward to help Burgundy by invading France or sending troops
2. Warwick grateful to Louis –hoping to gain territory if France takes Burgundy.

Therefore Burgundy is more vulnerable now Edward's been deposed.

So – December 1470 – **ask Louis** – what next? Will you attack Burgundy?

[France declared war on Burgundy]

Ask Charles – reaction? You need help – where from? Not from England while Warwick's in control – so what's needed? If only Edward was still king ... maybe ...

ASK Edward – would you give Burgundy military help v France if you were able to get crown back swiftly? Yes!

MOVE Edward next to Charles.

Charles and Edward met on 2 January for first time since Ed arrived in Netherlands 3 months earlier – length of time shows Charles's caution and that his support for Edward not at all automatic.

Agreement – Charles gave Edward £20,000, ships and facilities to fit out invasion force.

Review so far – why has Charles helped Edward?

The above is an extract from this activity. It continues through Edward's return to the battle of Tewkesbury and the murder of Henry VI. Within the Special Subject course it was then followed by detailed study of the primary source material relevant to these events.

END

ⁱ For a good example of teaching as problem solving see K. Richards, 'Year 13 plan a historians' dinner party' in *Teaching History*, 148, September 2012.

ⁱⁱ For independent learning in history degrees see A. Booth, *Teaching History at University*, 2003, especially ch.7. For A level see D. Laffin, *Better Lessons in A level History*, 2009, especially ch.4 and H. Cooper and A. Chapman (eds.), *Constructing History 11-19*, 2009, especially ch.5.

ⁱⁱⁱ For independent learning in history at GCSE see J. Philpott, J. Ahrenfelt and T. Haydn, 'Towards independent learning in history: Year 10' in H. Cooper and A. Chapman (eds.), *Constructing History 11-19*, 2009. The Historical Association's journal *Teaching History* contains a great many valuable articles related to the developing of independence amongst all age groups including 11-13 year olds e.g. the ability to ask questions, challenge generalisations and create hypotheses.

^{iv} See D. Banham and R. Hall, 'Active learning at A level. I forget what I was taught, I only remember what I learned' available at <http://www.schoolhistoryproject.co.uk/active-learning-at-a-level>

^v For further discussion of this process of enquiry see <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/Index.html>

^{vi} This page is from chapter 2 of I. Dawson, *The Wars of the Roses*, 2012, Hodder Education.

^{vii} Feedback provided November 2012 by email.

^{viii} Banham and Hall, see reference 5

^{ix} R. Berger, *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*, 2003. J. Hattie, *Visible Learning*, 2009. Hattie's work relates to schools but is relevant to learning and teaching with all age groups..

^x See for example, 'Not the white tights again!' Role-play in History teaching at degree level', *Teaching History*, 1989 - also available at <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/WhiteTights.pdf> Despite the title of this article I 'dressed up' very rarely and then only with the clearest of educational objectives.

^{xi} For more discussion and examples of this kind of activity see <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk>