

Timelines, Time-Stories and developing confidence at A level

One of the most important – and hardest things – for A level students to do is to develop an overview of the content of a new module. An overview is vital because:

- it creates confidence and confidence is critical in learning effectively – just think of the opposite, how uncertainty niggles and undermines the ability to work effectively.
- it creates a context for the individual topics and questions
- it starts to give a module a unity that can be lost amidst a sequence of individual topics and questions.

How best to help students develop an overview?

One method which is not very effective is to provide a timeline of events for students to look at or copy. The problem with a timeline is that there's no pattern or story in it. It's just a disembodied list of events and that makes the content hard to take in. It's much more helpful to use what's often called a living graph but which may be more usefully called a Time-Story, a two dimensional representation of events.



The Time-Story that's linked in below provides an example – a small part is also shown in the image.

[Wars of the Roses Time-Story](#)

It's a draft from SHP's new A level series, from the book on The Wars of the Roses (take a look even if you don't teach it – it'll make the point better than a topic you are familiar with!). Imagine what this would have looked like as a timeline – a list of kings in sequence showing the length of each reign. The weakness would be that such a timeline contains no story and yet it's the story or pattern

that makes it possible to remember the detail (for all of us bar a few blessed with remarkable memories). A timeline just showing reigns has the added negativity of looking arid and uninteresting and may develop anxiety, not confidence, among students.

So why is the Time-Story more likely to be effective?

The critical feature is the list of qualities of good kingship at the top (and bad kingship at the bottom) – the story is how close English kings came to reaching those qualities after the peak of Henry V. It's the story of slow decline, plummeting as Henry VI reached adulthood and descending to complete failure as civil war broke out. Henry VI was replaced by Edward IV who twice (see second spread of attachment) looked as if he was building royal success, only for problems to start again. The first occasion was Warwick's rebellion, the second Richard III's seizure of the crown. The period ends with the English monarchy again showing many of the signs of failure described along the bottom of the page.

It's the graph that's important. For many the shape of the visual line will be much easier to remember whereas disembodied names by themselves can be tough to take in.

Equally important is the activity that goes with the graph – asking students to retell the story in their own words in a fixed time or word limit. It's the transference of what's on the page into their own words that makes learning really effective – just looking at this and reading the text won't be nearly as effective. I don't expect students to include and remember all the detail that's on these pages by any means but what will be possible will be to tell an outline based on the shape of the graph and then, as their knowledge and confidence develop, they can then begin to add more details to the curves and trends of the graph.

And it will be so much more effective again if they think about how to retell the story as well as what goes in it – props, visuals, a graph of their own – anything that requires thinking about how to tell this story – that's what cements it in the mind. Repetition at monthly intervals will help too.

Do you have time for this kind of initial activity? Given its importance for developing students' confidence can you afford not to do this, whatever the topic?

So in conclusion:

Don't underestimate the importance of confidence for students' learning.

Spend time creating an effective overview – don't race past to get to the 'important' first topic. The overview saves time in the long run.

Value the two-dimensional and visual presentation – it helps students who find text alone difficult. Knowledge and understanding is no less worthwhile for being developed through non-text media.

Experiment to see what kinds of activity work best in helping students understand an overview pattern of events.

Revisit the overview during a module both for consolidation and to give coherence to the module.

Comments

This was originally posted as a blog on www.schoolshistoryproject.org.uk and comments are:

Esther Arnott says:

Ian I love this idea – it's simple and thus genius (ref: paper clips!!). You've turned a timeline into a story and thus you make the history something about discovery, which has to be at the heart of our lessons if students are to engage and enthuse over the past. I too despair about timelines. For a start, it didn't occur to me that in maths students are taught that negative numbers (i.e. before 0, or BC in our discipline) goes below the line... yet we tend to make timelines run from left to right. A discalculated student will be at a loss in our world, especially when we don't even put a minus sign in front of those numbers 'below the line'. Besides the maths issue, I remember clearly when I made my first timeline for myself. I was lost in time in my new A-level course – those who shall not be named will no doubt be pleased to hear that my Henrys were mixed with my Hitlers! I began writing dates down the margin of my note pad and filling in the whats and whys and wherefores. Then I began adding arrows to link things together. Then smiley and happy faces. Slowly, surely, I began to discover the big picture of my A-level course. I could distill change and continuity, cause and consequence, highs and lows. But, my residing memory is 'kapow'! I had discovered something – the time story (which I guess mine was now) helped me to make sense of the past and I was hooked, fascinated and wanting to know more. So thank you for bringing this memory back to me – but more importantly for making the time story open to our A-level students in the new series. I can't wait to see a copy.

Jane Richardson says:

I agree with Esther, Ian- this is a very useful tool – especially at A level when the students are a bit like we are told year 7s are- they go backwards for a bit before going forwards! I think this would

work really well on the coursework my A level students are completing on Ireland 1815-1922. This idea/technique could be used both at the start of the course as an overview and again after they have completed the content before going off to start their coursework tasks. May be at the end of the course the class can come up with their own criteria that would go at the top and bottom of the grid and in this particular case it would be about effective leadership of the Irish nationalists. This would provide the visual reference that so many need to make effective comparisons and these could be extended to look at internal and external factors related to effective leadership such as the policy of governments in the period, attitude of the Catholic Church, ability to mobilise opinion etc.

So thanks Ian for a very useful tool.

Richard Kennett says:

Ian, fab blog post. Story is unbelievably important at A-level. I've recently got my students to make YouTube videos for a half term project summing up everything they have done. Most just did slideshows, but some went the full hog and did a dramatisation. Normally at this point in the year they begin to get overwhelmed by the extent of the story, but this home learning seems to have consolidated everything brilliantly. I think sometimes at A-level we as teachers concentrate too much on analysis but without a firm grasp of narrative this is impossible.

p.s. If you fancy seeing the videos they are either hosted or playlisted from

<http://www.youtube.com/rgshistory>

Ian Dawson says:

Hi Richard, I've just had a quick look – they look as if they've been very effective. Dare I say I like the most recent one best – must be the stirring music! It's very much that 'turn it into your own version' that's vital for learning – which is presumably is why we remember what we've taught much better than what was taught to us!

Hi Esther – my dislike of timelines goes back to the mid-70s when I was a very young teacher. Timelines were very fashionable and i leapt on the bandwagon – but every effort was marred by the constant cry of 'i haven't got a ruler sir'. In loaning them out i think I gave away Wakefield's entire stock of rulers in half a term. And they still had little impact because it was the drawing and counting that got all the attention, not what was on the line.

Hi Jane – one of the important points you've made is being brave enough to do something more than once. I think it's easy to shy away from that for fear of getting the 'we've done this before' but again it's so good for effective learning to repeat a style of activity or the same thing with a little tweak – which is about students doing things better because they know what they're doing and expected to do. Given we keep making history tricky by keeping changing the content so they feel they're always starting again I think repetition of types of activity helps.

Thanks all,

Ian