

Living Graphs

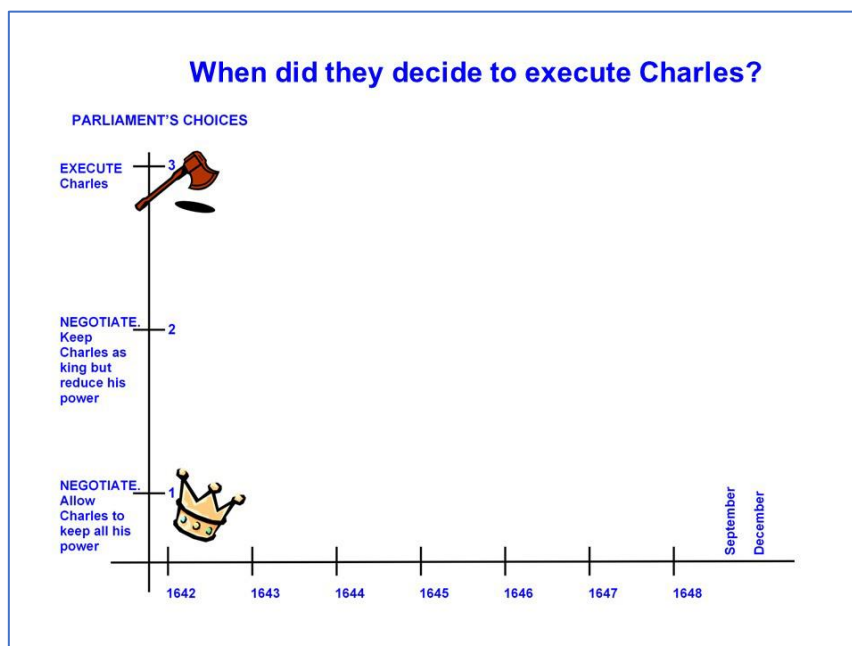
Starting with an explanation ...

A living graph combines a timeline as the horizontal axis and an extent (e.g. success to failure), emotion, attitude or debate as the vertical axis.

The outline below shows these two kinds of axis as they are at the beginning of a living graph activity – the graph has yet to be built up. The topic is the Civil War in the 1640s and the activity is designed to overcome the common misunderstanding that Parliament intended to execute Charles from the beginning of the war. It's easy for students to assume that that was the intention all along because that is what happened in the end.

So it's important that the 'empty graph' is exactly that – empty to begin with.

What brings it alive is the addition of students or objects to form the line of the graph. Students are given information cards which explain Parliament's attitude to negotiation or execution at eight points on the timeline axis. Students then have to decide where each card (represented by a student or object) goes on the vertical axis – the resulting graph shows clearly that Parliament only reached the decision to execute Charles very late in the 1640s.



Making living graphs physical

There are several ways to create a living graph – plotting it on paper, on your whiteboard or other devices but there are real benefits in creating a living graph physically, plotting the graph by asking students to take their places on a graph mapped out on the classroom floor or to place objects on the graph on the floor. Such physical methods give a visual clarity that is missing in a one-dimensional method. Once that physical graph is created you can, of course, transfer it to paper or board, perhaps by photographing it.

While building living graphs requires some movement around the room for students it only involves a small number of students and, as teacher, you are always in control of movement.

Using living graphs to target students' misunderstandings and problems

As the example above suggests, it's important to think about how a living graph can help students overcome misunderstandings – it's not just a case of picking a content topic. Here are some examples, a very small sample from all the possibilities. Living Graphs work with all ages, being just as useful with A level and university students as with younger pupils.

1. Tackling assumptions about inevitability

In addition to the Civil War activity above, you can use living graphs for challenging students' assumptions about inevitability for a range of topics. For example, you can use a living graph to chart the reactions of a Saxon housecarl or Norman knight in September/October 1066, including during the events of the battle itself (maybe ask half the class to take one role, the other half the other role). Similarly chart the optimism/pessimism of a German or English soldier from late 1917 to November 1918 in order to gain a stronger understanding of the patterns of events.

A living graph can also demonstrate how unlikely a king Henry VII was – use the vertical axis to chart how strong his hopes of the crown were from 1471 to 1485. The graph clearly shows that Henry had little or no hope of the crown until very late indeed – perhaps even in the last ten minutes of Bosworth!

In each of the cases above, the completed graph is a stimulus to exploring central questions – what were the turning points, can you explain the changes in the pattern, was the outcome inevitable etc.

2. Changing interpretations

Living graphs are a very effective way of introducing and charting changing interpretations. For example, supply students with a little information and ask them to create a graph showing the changing interpretations of King John, Oliver Cromwell or an individual over time (the vertical axis records whether the reputation was high or low) or use the same approach to chart the changing reputation of a government or policy. Once the graph has been created it provides context for exploring why those reputations have changed over time e.g. because of the attitudes and ideals of people of different periods.

3. Making sense of complex series of events

Some topics are very difficult for students to make sense of because there are so many different aspects to take in – World War Two is a good example because the variety of theatres of war make it difficult to follow the overall pattern of events. Standard timelines don't do much to help because everything stays bunched together along the same line.

A living graph can help greatly in overcoming this kind of problem. For the World War Two activity the horizontal axis covers 1939-1945 and students initially place a series of events on that axis, creating a timeline. These events are colour-coded for three different theatres of war – those involving British forces, those involving Russian forces and the war at sea – the colour-coding is important, providing visual differentiation. Then we move from timeline to living graph by bringing in the vertical access of success to failure and for students to move each of the events to what they decide is the right position on the vertical axis. This then allows them to see the pattern of colours and discuss the nature and reasons for those patterns, to discuss turning points and other issues.

4. Challenging generalisations about the success and failure of an individual, government or policy

Living graphs help break down generalisations about the successes and failures of individuals and governments and helps students develop more nuanced interpretations. For example, you can use the vertical axis to chart the successes and failures of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, showing a clear visual pattern. To make this more complex you can ask students to complete the graph from the standpoint of a particular contemporary observer – Elizabeth herself, someone like William Cecil, Puritan, a Catholic? If you give different groups in the class different perspectives then they will produce different patterns – and bingo, you've created a variety of contemporary views of Elizabeth and helped students develop more complex understandings.

5. Identifying long term patterns to contextualise depth studies

Living graphs are an excellent way of summarising broad patterns of events in outline and thus creating the context for studying one topic in depth. For example, the activity How do you feel about the country's new religion? creates an overview of religious and political changes from 1547 to 1688. It's impossible to study each religious change in depth and if you try it's hard for students to keep an overview in their head so this activity provides that overview, students creating a graph of religious change from one of the three religious perspective.

Even more long-term is The Big Story of Everyday Life which asks students to create summarising changes in standards of living from the 1200s to the 20th century. Yes, it's full of generalisations but you can't create such an overview without generalisations – but once you have it you can test those generalisations in depth studies.

Concluding thoughts on living graphs

I hope the examples above have shown the potential of living graphs for deepening students' knowledge and understanding. Overall the great strength of living graphs is the way they, like many effective techniques, combine

- a) the need for students to pay close attention to historical detail
- b) the need to think deeply in making judgements about where to place information on a graph
- c) a strong 3D dimension – the visual and physical aspects of the graph helping make complexity accessible to students

Examples of living graph activities on ThinkingHistory

For a further discussion of approaches to and value of Living Graphs see the article:

Timelines, Time-Stories and Developing Students' Confidence
at A level and GCSE [HERE ...](#)

Note – various other terms are used for living graphs, such as Lifelines and Living timelines – but they are the same activity.

Examples

Why was it such a surprise to have a Tudor king? (KS3)

Henry VII – the road to the throne (A level)

When did they decide to execute Charles I?

World War Two Living Graph

Germany 1918-1939 – a living timeline

South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s – a living timeline

How do you feel about the country's new religion? An overview of religious and political changes from 1547 to 1688

When did Prime Ministers and Parliament become more powerful than the monarch?

The Big Story of Everyday Life

Germs have feelings too – a lifeline

See the resources on the website [HERE ...](#)