

How to ...

Give yourself the best chance of using these activities effectively

The Nature of the Activities

The key features of the majority of the activities on ThinkingHistory are that they require students to do some, or all, of the following:

- Move physically and constructively e.g. to represent patterns of alliances or the flow of events
- Take part in physical diagrams e.g. timelines, living graphs, washing lines or physical family trees
- “Think from the inside” i.e. think about a past situation from the perspective of an individual or group
- Take decisions from that perspective and relate these decisions to what we know actually happened in the past
- Ask questions of and discuss with the teacher or other students who are in role as a historical character

The discussion that follows identifies the key issues to think about when using activities so that you get the best out of them and, most importantly, so that students learn more effectively.

Enhanced understanding: target learning problems

These activities help students get better at History because of the clarity of explanation and understanding that’s a product of the teaching techniques, because the level of involvement leads to higher concentration levels and because the key to constructing and using these activities successfully is building them around the learning problems that students have with a topic.

Therefore the key is not just to construct an activity on ‘The Civil War’ but on what problems students have in learning about and understanding the Civil War. The activities are therefore not bolted-on extras or end of term treats. They are serious learning activities tackling fundamental problems that students encounter.

Are there age limits to who you use these types of activity with?

*A good teaching method is a good teaching method,
no matter what the age of the students.*

That principle informs the activities on this site, which are as effective at A level and university level as they are in primary and secondary schools. Older students have opted to study history but, if we think back to our own experiences, we know that there were days when we went to classes distracted or in need of motivation and these activities do motivate students on their bad days and help them learn far more than if they are being talked at or asked to read and write individually. Everyone also benefits in the long-run from better group dynamics and constructive talk.

Of course, with older students, you need to increase the quantity of information that students handle according to their abilities, and you can expect more sophisticated responses as students gain experience of these methods, but the principles behind the activities remain the same, no matter what the age or ability of the students.

The major danger with older students is that they feel these activities are beneath them. It is vital, therefore, to explain the objectives and reasons for using a different type of activity. Once they have undertaken these kinds of activities students realise that the demands on thinking and concentration are far greater than in other kinds of lessons and certainly in a formal lecture. These activities are far from being easy options!

In what ways do these activities benefit students?

Here in brief are some important benefits of using the kinds of activities described on this site before I look at some issues in a little more detail:

- Everyone can contribute effectively, regardless of literacy levels, and realise that hard work equals hard thinking, not necessarily lots of writing.
- Follow-up work benefits from both the degree of involvement and the clarity of thinking generated by the activity. Continual references can be made back to pupils' actions and reactions during the activity, using that very powerful question 'Do you remember when ...?' to focus students' thinking.
- Activities can enable students to realise and understand the complexity of a developing situation, not see an event as a single moment in time when simple, unemotional, cut and

dried decisions were made. This helps students to develop more sophisticated explanations.

- Activities can also lead into the vital question of 'how do we know that these recreated attitudes and feelings are accurate?' Empathetic reconstructions must relate to evidence. Therefore an important follow-up activity is to look at the available evidence and ask pupils how certain they can be about the accuracy of their feelings in role – completely certain, fairly or totally uncertain.
- Activities promote more confident and effective reading and more detailed and nuanced writing

Now for a little more on some of those benefits

Improving students' reading

In my experience many of the activities, including structured role-plays and decision-making activities make excellent introductions to new topics because they give students that very important first layer of learning. This is particularly true for older students e.g. at A level who have a complex series of events and people to study. These activities help students take the vital first steps in building their framework of knowledge and conceptual understanding (e.g. of possible explanations) and so prepares them for reading what can otherwise seem intimidating reading they might otherwise bounce off. Their reading is no longer an obstacle course full of completely unfamiliar events and names but something they have already begun to make sense of.

Better written work

The development of constructive talk in these activities supports the arguments advanced by Ian Luff and Rachel Rudham in *Teaching History* that listening and speaking play a vital role in stimulating thinking, turning half-formed ideas into clear arguments and ultimately in promoting more effective writing. Rachel Rudham writes tellingly of pupils previously 'going through the motions of completing a piece of written work without real thought' but then, motivated by carefully structured listening and speaking activities, achieving a depth of thinking that 'greatly enhanced the standard'. In some activities, for example, students have to think about and use language more precisely because words encapsulate attitudes. In debriefing from *Je suis le Roi!* should the English talk about the Normans as their 'lords' or their 'masters'; whether England is 'ruled' or 'occupied'; whether the northerners were 'punished' or 'massacred'?

Understanding human reactions and choices

Many activities reach the parts that more objective and traditional activities can't reach. For example, they can help students understand the undefinable and often un-evidenced elements that play a part in the choices made by people in the past. Why did so many people join the revolt of 1381? Only a role-play is likely to help pupils understand the fear of being left behind alone in the village, the moral pressure to join in with your mates, the adventure of going up to London – all reasons which must have played their part in 1381, just as they did in 1914 and on other occasions when people made individual choices in the midst of group action. This helps understand not only the event itself but can also contribute to wider understanding of human motivation and causation.

Do you remember when?

When planning teaching we need to think about what students will take away from a year or a whole course such as Key Stage 3, not just from an individual lesson. How do all those lessons build together to create a framework of knowledge and understanding? One critical advantage of these activities is that they make an impact on students' consciousness because, for example, they have been placed 'inside' a past situation and have had to think in the role of a historical person. This means they're much more likely to re-use what they've learned from these activities later in their courses. To return to the example of the 1381 Revolt from the previous paragraph, imagine that later at KS3 you're teaching about the Pilgrimage of Grace or Chartism or joining up in 1914 – you are much more likely to get constructive, useful responses when asking 'Do you remember when you were a villager in Kent and had decide if you would join the 1381 revolt – what reasons did you have for joining?' than if students had not been required to think from the inside of that situation. That 'Do you remember when ...?' question is critical for turning a sequence of individual lessons into a course.

Debriefing students after an activity

Debriefing is a critical part of any activity but all too easily rushed if you're short of time. To get the best out of an activity students need to be pushed to be explicit about what they've learned and how their ideas about the topic have changed. It's always important to begin a topic by finding out what students know and think – assuming a blank mind that you can imprint the correct answers onto is all too often a mistake.

Debriefing therefore needs to embrace ‘what have you learned?’ and ‘how has your thinking about x changed?’

The following sequence may help plan your questioning:

1. Use closed questions which allow students to demonstrate knowledge of people and events or other information gained from the activity. These boost self-esteem as students realize how much they can remember. These questions also reinforce the narrative framework.
2. Ask more challenging open questions which deal with motives, explanation, interpretations, consequences, attitudes etc.
3. Ask students to describe aloud what they were thinking and feeling at different stages of the activity. For example, in *Je suis le roi!*, students who played English landowners were able to express how their feelings had changed from insecurity to anger during the activity and reflect on how their inability to understand William (who spoke in French) had affected them.
4. The final questions of all will start out open ended but can be adapted to offer possible options:
 - a. What surprised you about what happened in that activity? How have your ideas about x changed?
 - b. What have you learned today?

Asking these questions can feel difficult, especially if there's silence, but you need to find ways of helping students articulate what they've learned – offer them options based on the ‘takeaways’ that are your objectives for the lesson. If they can't articulate what they've learned then the danger is that the potential learning drifts off into the ether.

Some practicalities when using activities (chiefly for new teachers)

How often should I use these activities?

Individual types of activity need to be repeated so that students get used to what's expected of them. The first time they do a living graph or washing line activity they'll be adjusting to the style of activity as well as the content – next time and the time after that they'll be more confident and better able to focus on the content.

However you don't have to be deeply ambitious every lesson or you'll be exhausted by the end of the first week! A class doesn't need a hyper-active lesson every time – one really good, structured role-play can set up four or five weeks of lessons. Think about the ebb and flow of a course across a term and about the variety of activities students will undertake. Too much variety can be confusing, too little variety reduces the challenge to students. And think about your own energy - playing King John in a hot-seating activity is much more demanding on you than a 'washing line' activity.

Choose students for roles with care

Activities such as structured role-plays and scripted dramas require students to answer questions in role so choosing students for roles is a critical part of planning. However there's a range of issues to consider. If you want to encourage a quiet student to say more then maybe give them a central role in the activity as then they have to take part. You may also want someone who often says a lot to be quieter for once to give others a chance – in which case assign them a quieter role. Fitting students to roles can help individuals build confidence and learn to contribute more orally.

How long do activities take?

Some activities designed for A level will take at least an hour although they can be broken into sections. Others are much shorter. Everything depends on the students and the demands you want to make on them. The length of the activity is less important than the clarity with which the activity targets the problems students have in learning about the topic.

Using another room for major activities

Using a different room creates a sense of occasion and helps the suspension of disbelief that is particularly useful for, say, hot-seating. A hall or gym is also larger and usually without the clutter of desks getting in the way. Period music helps prepare students for something different and creates a sense of period.

When debriefing, you may want to return to the normal classroom. Debriefing moves students on from being 'in the past' to reflecting 'on the past', albeit reflections enhanced by their experience of thinking from the inside of the historical events. This is easier if the debrief takes place back in the normal classroom, rather than the room in which the activity had taken place.

Think twice if you are tempted to take a class outside to make use of more space – this may be a move too far. Most importantly your voice and those of students won't carry anything like as far outside and even a gentle breeze plays havoc with tabards!

Using cuddly toys and other props

Are unusual props (cuddly toys, hairdryers, sugar mice, apple juice masquerading as urine etc etc) too silly to be useful?

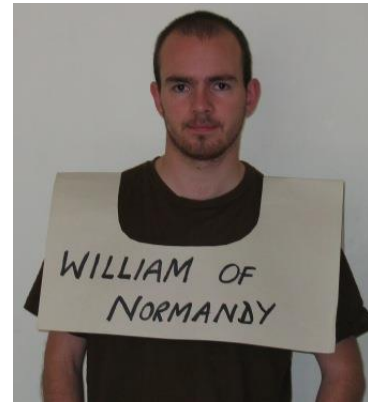
No – provided you explain what they're for and double check understanding of the word 'anachronism' e.g. why a mobile phone was an anachronism during an activity on the Armada.

Remember that students go from one class to another to another and will notice and remember the unusual – making a topic memorable is vital for learning.

What are tabards?

Tabards are used in many activities to identify individuals, factors etc represented by students:

- Take a piece of sugar paper and fold it in half
- Then cut a hole large enough to put your head through along the folded side
- Open it out and it resembles a short poncho!
- Now write the name, factor or whatever on it



Is there time for such activities

Yes, a thousand times, yes! They improve the quality of learning in terms of both knowledge and understanding. This applies at all levels and I'm a passionate advocate of the crucial importance of this style of activity at A level. Why? Because over 30 years' experience of using these activities suggests that they accelerate and deepen learning and motivation, especially in the early stages of a unit of work. This makes these activities essentials, not luxuries.

Your own reflections on an activity

It's always worthwhile – though hard to fit in – to spend time thinking how an activity went. Many activities on the site conclude with questions to aid reflection but below is a list of issues that may also help reflection – not all of them relate to every activity! If, as a new teacher, you get into the habit of reflecting on your teaching and students' learning then this improves your students' performances and results and has another immensely valuable benefit – it keeps you feeling young because you keep developing as a teacher.

1. Organization

- a) How effectively did you use space and movement?
- b) Did you make the right choices about which students played which parts?
- c) Did you learn anything about individual students that would have been harder to learn from more standard activities?
- d) What's the best way of students' recording or consolidating what they have learned?
- e) Are there any ways of streamlining or simplifying the activity?
- f) Did you need to explain to A level students that you were using a different style of activity? If so, how did they respond to your explanation?
- g) Was this the right time of day or week to use this activity? was its effectiveness affected by students' previous lesson?

2. Styles of Activity

- a) How often have you used this kind of activity (e.g. living graph, role-play) before with this class? Did this affect its effectiveness?
- b) Does the frequency of use of a type of activity affect effectiveness and, if so, what impact will this have on your overall course planning?
- c) When else in your course can you use this activity?

3. Enjoyment and Motivation

- a) Did students enjoy the nature of the activity and what impact did this have on their learning?

- b) What was the impact of the activity on motivation to read and effectiveness of reading? [especially A level]
- c) Did this have an impact on the quality of discussion among students? If so, how and why and what can be learned from this?
- d) Did you enjoy the activity yourself? If so, why – or why not?

4. What did they learn? (Concepts and Knowledge)

Note: these questions contain examples and can be adapted to fit any type of activity.

- a) What was the impact of this activity on students' later work on World War Two? Did it improve their confidence and overall understanding?
- b) What was the impact of this activity on understanding of changes and continuities within the period and students' abilities to make comparisons?
- c) What impact has this activity made on chronological understanding? Roughly how often will you repeat this kind of activity during the course?
- d) How did tackling this topic through this physical activity affect students' learning? Was this simply about initial interest or was the resulting knowledge and understanding really deeper? e.g. Did they have a better-developed sense of the possibilities for different interpretations?
- e) What has this told you about how much students have retained and are there any lessons to be learned from this?
- f) What impact did the activity have on specific misunderstandings that happen year after year?

5. Building coherence across KS3 and other courses

- a) When and how will you refer back to this session later in your course? Will this reference back be more effective because of the use of e.g. hot-seating?
- b) How else do you or could you help students to see their KS3 course as a whole course, not a sequence of separate bits of the past?
- c) What impact does this activity have on your planning back across KS3? Does it, for example, identify gaps in the range of people being studied?

d) What have they learned about the Romans other than what a soldier carried and wore?
Can you link this into broader questions about the Roman empire, such as why they won and were able to keep their empire?

e) What did students learn about power and kingship as well as about the specifics of King John's reign?

6. Cross-Curricular and General

a) What have students discovered about how to learn more effectively?

b) How does this activity or approach mesh with students' experiences across the curriculum?

c) Were you able to bring out transferable skills e.g. hypothesising, planning the process of the investigation, working as a team?

Teaching Techniques

In addition to this core article on the key issues that are common to the activities on this site, detailed articles are also available on ThinkingHistory that cover the techniques individually i.e:

- Decision Making activities
- Washing Lines
- Living Graphs
- Physical Timelines
- Structured Role-Plays
- Scripted Dramas
- Hot Seating
- Physical Diagrams: Maps and Family Trees