HELPING HISTORY STUDENTS COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY:

DEVELOPING A 'CAN DO' MENTALITY

PART 3:

The Language Task – Helping students with 'how to' communicate

Contents

Part 3:

a) Introduction

In Part 1 of this series on how to help students communicate effectively in History we highlighted 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.' As history teachers, the process of diagnosing problems in learning is fundamental to successful teaching and learning with students of all ages. We need to diagnose the aspects of each topic that students may struggle to understand and use that diagnosis in planning lessons and activities. However, it is just as important to identify students' problems with communication and then develop strategies to help them communicate more effectively. Part 3 therefore focusses on 'the language task' and helping students with how to communicate their ideas in a sophisticated and coherent way.

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. Making effective communication visible helps students build confidence in their ability to improve their learning – that they 'can do' history better. 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. This applies to students of all ages, at primary schools, from KS3 to A level (and even to undergraduates). While the strategies below are illustrated by examples from particular age phases they can be adapted to work with all age-groups.

b) Helping students see what a good piece of writing looks like

Models of Excellence

We are born with the gift of our genes but our success is also determined by motivation, purposeful practice and successful learning strategies (Syed, 2010). The most important assessment that goes on in a school isn't done to students but goes on inside students. As Berger (2003) states, 'Every student walks around with a picture of what is acceptable, what is good enough. Each time he works on something he looks at it and assesses it. Is this good enough? Do I feel comfortable handing this in? Does it meet my standards?' The challenge for us as history teachers is to 'get inside students' heads' and turn up that internal controller that regulates quality and effort.'

So how do we develop a culture of excellence? The key is to show students what 'excellence' looks like. Give them a vision to aspire to.

- Model high quality note-taking and effective revision strategies by displaying the work of former history students.

- Develop a gallery of great writing and walk around the display with students discussing and annotating the key features that make the work so effective and so powerful.

In both cases above, good modelling must include a commentary where the teacher breaks down complex processes into simple steps, providing time to check understanding and making sure students have opportunities to ask questions.

The example below models specific techniques for writing historical explanations. The example is taken from a recent textbook produced by Hodder Education ('Engaging with AQA History – Germany 1890-1945) but the techniques are clearly transferable to other content areas.

MODELS OF EXCELLENCE

The explanation makes it clear which factor was most important by using phrases such as 'the key', 'mainly down to' and 'crucial role'.

The explanation recognises that a range of factors played a role in the rise of the Nazis.

Explanation 1

The success of the Nazi Party was mainly down to Hitler's strong leadership and charismatic personality. Without him, the Nazi Party would have struggled to make an impact.

The SA also played a crucial role. Would Hitler have looked so powerful without such a large, uniformed, disciplined group behind him?

Nazi Party propaganda was also very effective. Unlike the Communists and other extreme groups, the Nazis appealed to a wide range of different groups of people.

Explanation 2

The Nazis were well organised, and they did have very effective propaganda, but this was also true in 1928, when they got only 3 per cent of the vote. The main reason why the Nazis became popular was because of the impact of the Depression. Without the economic problems caused by the Depression, Nazi promises and Hitler's leadership would not have appealed to the German people.

Comparisons are made to other time periods and other groups to support the argument.

Rhetorical questions and phrases such as 'without X, Y would not have been possible' are used to emphasise the importance of a particular factor.

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No amount of words can convey what one good model can show. It provides a picture of what quality writing looks like. It is not enough simply to give students a checklist. A list of ingredients of great writing is an importance initial step but, as Berger (2003) reminds us, it doesn't leave a picture, a vision, and an inspiration.

Writing shapes

Students need to be able to 'see' the shape of an effective answer. The shape can change depending on the command words within the question and the conceptual focus of the question.

For example, 'significance' questions require students to have a sense of 'the before' and 'the after' – it is hard to prove an event, individual or discovery was significant without knowing what the situation was like before it. When exploring 'the after', students should consider short and long-term impact. The shape of the answer is therefore very different to the 'evaluation question' shown in the diagram below – which requires the student to weigh the importance of two factors that caused problems for the Weimar Republic.
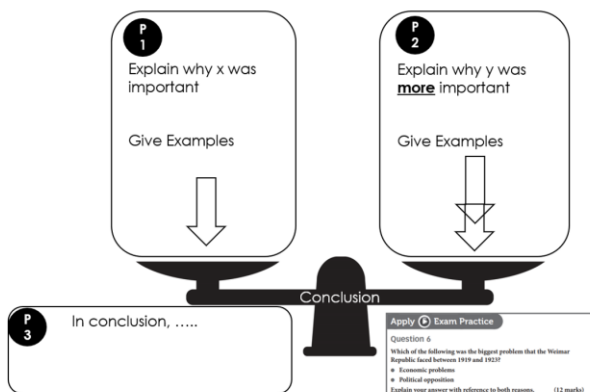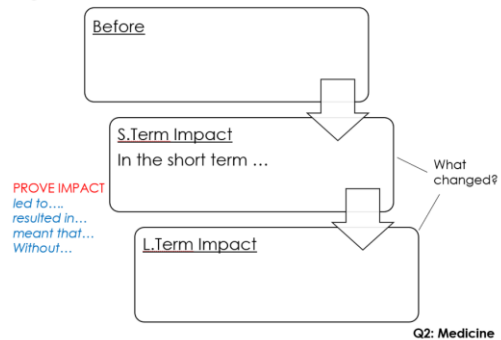
At GCSE, I always warn students of 'iceberg questions' such as the one below. Students need to weigh the causal factor that they can 'see above the water' in the question against other factors that cannot be seen, in order to produce an effective answer to this type of question.

To reinforce this, encourage students to write or at the very least plan within the question shapes. The key principle is 'success before struggle', aim to provide lots of support at the start of teaching a class and then gradually remove the scaffolding over time.

Walking or Physical Essays

Stage 1: helping students see the overall shape of an essay. One problem we've encountered, even with undergraduates, is that some students struggle with essay writing because they cannot see in their minds the overall shape of what's required. The biggest giveaway is a piece of writing that contains a lot of very short 'paragraphs', often just 3 or 4 lines each, which don't relate to the question or a developing argument. With such students it's no use simply commenting on their knowledge and understanding of the history as the problem is caused by not having in their minds a visual picture of what an essay should look like and what its component parts are. It's a visual problem and therefore a visual solution is required so that they understand the pattern of an essay – what a paragraph consists of and how each paragraph links back to the title.

One obvious visual aid is to draw an essay as a model – creating a series of rectangles on your board, each rectangle consisting of a short opening section (the 'big point' which links back to the question, providing an element of the answer) and the longer section that follows, the small points providing evidence to support the initial point. This needn't include any content or detail initially – it's the visual pattern that's important for changing some students' perception of how an essay is constructed. Alternatively – and more memorable and so having more impact for some students – is to create a physical essay. You could use

duplo and lego bricks to construct paragraphs – maybe duplo for that initial sentence, lego for the supporting evidence – or use different colours of bricks for the two components. Then tie that initial duplo sentence back to the question with string to make a solid connection. A second approach is to use the students themselves instead of duplo – a group of students for each paragraph with one identified as the initial sentence/s linking to the question, the other students as the supporting evidence.

From the physical plan it's then a small step to introducing content to exemplify the nature of those introductory sentences and how they relate to the question and then how the rest of the paragraph supports those introductory sentences – which brings us to Stage 2.

For further exemplification of this approach see

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/PhysicalEssays.html

Stage 2: Walking essays are also very powerful in helping students see how an argument takes shape. Imagine the class are exploring the reasons why the Third Crusade failed to recapture Jerusalem.

Step 1: As a class decide on the 'big points' that explain the outcome. Identify four main causes (disagreements amongst the Crusaders, poor tactics, the strength of opposition, the logistical problems). Put a pair of students in charge of each big point. They form a paragraph gate and have to decide which little points that they will allow to pass through into their paragraph.

Step 2: Assign information or evidence cards to the rest of the class (this could be the narrative chopped up into segments or statements generated by the students). These students become the 'little points' and have to decide which paragraph they belong to. They walk towards the entrance to the paragraph where they think they belong and have to persuade the gate keepers to allow them in.

Step 3: Once the sorting into paragraphs has finished, the students within the paragraph decide on the most appropriate order of the 'little points' within the paragraph, whilst the gate keepers decide on an effective opening sentence to the paragraph.

Step 4: Once this is finished the group decide on an appropriate 'mini-conclusion' for their paragraph where they reach a judgement on how important the 'big point' was as a cause of the failure to recapture Jerusalem.

This activity helps to make the thought processes behind the construction of an essay visible to the students. Students who understand many of the key historical issues can be held back because of a lack of systematic and explicit guidance when it comes to expressing themselves in written form.

c) Talk for writing strategies

'Talk for writing' strategies are also tremendously helpful. When a student makes a statement or answers a question, we need to prompt them to speak like a historian. This means not only using subject-specific key words but also using language in a way that a historian would. Modelling the process and encouraging

students to re-phrase their arguments using academic language is crucial. High quality talk should lead to high quality writing.

Thinking – Talking – Writing Mats

I have developed mats like the one below to support students when they think, talk or write about history. These are laminated and used by the students in most lessons. The key tips box in the top left of mat provides a useful checklist of things that students should check before they hand in their work.

The three boxes down the right-hand side help students find the right language to express their ideas – prioritising factors, proving impact and supporting key points. There is also a box that contains question prompts to help students analyse and evaluate historical interpretations.

Finally, at the bottom of the mat are the key subject specific key words for the year. Students are expected to learn these words and use them with precision. Retrieval practice games and quizzes (see ideas below) mean that these words are constantly revisited and made a fuss of.

These mats can be taken home by the students to help with homework tasks. They help to show parents what we are looking for in an effective piece of extended writing. We usually place the argument bridge on the reverse of the Thinking-Talking-Writing Mat, to remind students of the 'big picture' of argument construction. The example below was produced for Year 7 but similar mats have been produced for Years 8 and 9, as well as for the 4 units of the GCSE course we follow.

For Argument Bridges see Section 2 page 3 of this material here

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/downloads/CommunicatePart2.pdf

Key tips for getting better at History:

Sp: Are key words spelt correctly and used in the right context?
C: Are capitals used for places, names and at the start of sentences?
P: Is there accurate use of punctuation? Are some sentences too long?
P: Have apostrophes been used accurately? For example: Elizabeth's
QF: Are all sections relevant to the question? Do the opening and concluding sentences link to the question?
//: Have you planned your answer using paragraphs?

Prioritise … vary your language to show importance
… was the fundamental/ essential/ key/ crucial reason why …
… was an important reason why …
… was an important contributory factor in …
… acted as a catalyst because …
… was a turning point because…

Evaluating … interpretations
WHAT is the message/argument?
HOW is this constructed?
HOW does this match what you already know? Does it challenge/support your understanding of …
WHO produced this interpretation?
WHEN was this produced?
WHERE was this produced?
WHY was this produced?

Thinking, Talking, Writing History

Year 7

Prove … impact using causal connectives
This led to … resulted in…
This meant that …
This enabled … to …
This provided an opportunity for …
This laid the platform for …
Without this … would not have been able to …

Precision … use subject specific vocabulary

Jesuits	Peasants	Monasteries	The Royal Court
Puritanism	Merchants	Workhouses	Ministers
Catholicism	Gentry	The Poor Law	Patronage
Protestantism	Barons	Poverty	Privy Council
Excommunication	Yeomen	Privateers	Parliament
Pogroms	Lords	Vagabonds	Monarchy
Anti-Semitism	Feudal System	Scutage (Tax)	Sheriff
Crusade	Homage	Explorers	Charter
Purgatory	Knights	Chroniclers	Regent
Indulgence	Vassal	Revolt	Protector

Support … your argument using a range of examples
For example, …
This can be seen when …
This is clearly shown by …
This is supported by …
This is proven by …
Moreover, … shows that …

d) The importance of re-drafting and feedback

It is important to establish the rule of self-assessment before teacher assessment of written work. Building in self or peer assessment and a little more time for redrafting or checking makes it more likely that it is the student's best piece of work – and therefore plays an important part in turning up that internal control we mentioned earlier that enhances students' sense of what constitutes good work.

'Speed-date peer assessment' is a very effective strategy. In this activity students move round the class and meet with 5 or 6 other students. Each 'date' is short (two minutes) and has a different focus (taken from the co-constructed success criteria). The focus for the dialogue about the work needs to be very specific, for example evaluating the effectiveness of key signpost sentences at the start of a paragraph or the clarity and power of the conclusion.

Feedback must also be seen as a two-way process; pupils must be encouraged to feedback to the teacher so that a dialogue begins about the learning process. Pupils should feel that they can let their teacher know what they are struggling with and where they need support. As Hattie (2012) argues, the best way to raise attainment is to improve the level of interaction between pupils and their teachers. This can inform teacher planning and provide a focus for marking.

Learning is primarily a social activity and as history teachers we need to pay attention to the way that students describe and interpret learning. We must make a greater effort to begin to understand learning experiences from the unique perspectives of students, teachers can learn so much about their effect on student learning by listening to students. Teachers need to identify the main conceptual and communication stumbling blocks within history – converting these into explicit teaching opportunities to lift pupils higher and push out the boundaries of pupil progress.

e) Developing a subject specific vocabulary

Students also need to build up a rich subject specific vocabulary. Encouraging students to keep a glossary in the back of their book is only a first step. It's far better for pupils to write a definition of the word, add a visual image or reminder cue and then demonstrate that they can use the word in context. Departments need to decide what are the key 'game-changing' words and phrases that help pupils to read, write and speak like a historian. Teachers need to make a fuss of these words and phrases, regularly help students practice using them in the right context. Simply having them on display in every classroom is not enough. Note – by subject-specific vocabulary we mean not just words and phrases related to topics and 'content' but conceptual, methodological and communications vocabulary as shown on the Writing Mat in section (c) above.

Key Word Games

Key words should be given to pupils to learn as homework with follow up quizzes or key word games in lessons. Below are 10 examples of key word games that can be used to add variety to the process of establishing a rich, subject specific vocabulary.

1. **Bingo –** Place 9, 16 or 25 words into a Bingo grid – pupils define the word (first to a line … first to a full house)

2. **Shootout** – pupils stand back to back – teacher reads out a definition – pupils 'shoot' their opponent with the correct key word

3. **Taboo** – pupils have to explain as many key words to their team in a minute without mentioning the word or (to make it more difficult) certain 'taboo' words

4. **Twenty Questions** – pupil sits with their back to the board – the key word is displayed – they have to guess the word using questions only – their team can answer their questions using 'yes' or 'no' only

5. **Pictionary** – pupil as drawer – team have to guess as many key words from their visual representation of the key word in one minute

6. **Charades** – 2 pupils to act out key words to their team – team guesses as many as possible in one minute

7. **Just a minute** – word selected by the teacher – pupil has to talk without pause or repetition about this word for a minute

8. **Last person standing** – one pupil stands up to represent their team – they sit down if they fail to give a definition of a key word. If they can use the key word in context, they get a pass in the next round. They also sit down if they spend too long answering (3 second rule) or repeat an answer (this forces them to listen to other answers!).

9. **Opposite of,** or **Example of …** teacher reads out a key word, students score 1 point for their team for giving either an example of the key word, with a bonus point if they can also 'give the opposite' of the key word

10. **Odd one out** (read out three key words – pupils explain which one is the odd one out)

Interactive glossaries and key word bingo

Glossaries should not just sit at the back of a textbook or a student booklet and be left for students to occassionally look at when they need to spell a key word correctly. Students need to regularly engage with the key words in a glossary. The examples below are taken from textbooks that I have recently produced for Hodder Education's 'Engaging with AQA GCSE History' series. The aim is to encourage students to regularly 'interact' with glossaries by setting challenging activities and key word games that go well beyond simply spelling the word correctly or learning definitions.

KEY WORD BINGO

Make a large copy of the bingo card. Make yours A4 with plenty of space to write in each box.

a   For each key word on the first two rows, try to write a definition of the word **from memory**, without looking anything up. Then check with the glossary on pages 00–00.

b   For words on the third row, give as many examples as you can.

c   For words on the fourth row, give the opposite to the word.

Weimar key words bingo

Monarch	Republic	Reichstag	Constitution
Prussia	Junker	Weltpolitik	Reparations
Putsch	Kaiser	Chancellor	Reform
Democracy	Communism	Right-wing	Bauhaus

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CONCLUSIONS: HELPING HISTORY STUDENTS COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Summarising Sections 1 to 3

It is important that we identify the areas that students are struggling with. Assessment can be used diagnostically to determine these areas however we can also ask the students. Two-way feedback is important; as John Hattie recognises, student to teacher feedback is just as important as teacher to student feedback. Once these areas have been identified, we then need to help students develop strategies that overcome their barriers to learning. This could be memory aids to help with the recall of key areas of content, argument bridges to help them identify and construct historical arguments or writing shapes/mats to help them organise and communicate their ideas.

At the same time, in order to reduce the cognitive load on our students, we need to identify the key 'takeaways' of our history curriculum. This includes the substantive knowledge that students need to succeed (first order concepts, key events and individuals) as well as the disciplinary knowledge that enables them to think and write like a historian. This means that within our planning we need to think carefully about the following key questions:

- Why are we doing this (relevance)?

- What misconceptions might students bring to this topic? Do we need to challenge some myths here?

- What do we want students to 'takeaway' from this historical enquiry (sequence of lessons)?

- How will we help students with how to remember these 'key takeaways'?

- How will we check understanding?

- When will we revisit this? How can we make meaningful links to this when teaching subsequent topics?

For a more detailed discussion of the nature and use of takeaways at KS3 (though as ever the ideas are transferable) see

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/Takeaways.html