What do we want students to understand about the process of 'doing history'?

Elements of this article have appeared previously and can be found elsewhere on the site; this is an update (Nov. 2017) on those earlier ideas with additional material, particularly the discussion linked to Diagram 4.

Studying the process of 'doing history' explicitly is essential if students are to understand the nature of the discipline and, as importantly, to study with increasing independence as they mature. The answer to the question in the title may seem obvious – objectives abound in examination courses but therein lies a problem. For years the individual parts of the process (e.g. understandings of the nature of evidence) have been artificially separated for assessment purposes, creating the danger that students do not see the bigger picture of 'doing history'. Can they explain in a few sentences what historians do and, separately, how they themselves progress from knowing little or nothing about, say, the Norman Conquest, to knowing a substantial amount more? Those questions lead to a third – do students need to be clear on the similarities and differences between what they do as they explore a topic and what historians are doing in their work?

This article offers ideas for discussion about the overall shape of what students understand about the process of studying history – the focus is the big picture (not the details) that students build in Key Stage 3 and develop at GCSE and A level as they move towards working independently.

What big picture of 'doing history' do we want students to develop?

I'll begin with my very un-theoretical sense of what happens when students explore a new topic – and what we all do when faced with teaching an unfamiliar topic!

Diagram 1

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As Diagram 1 sets out, we begin with little or no knowledge (a few shards of information or a vague understanding of why the topic was important) and by the end of the study (a few lessons, a term, an A level course, a PhD) we become a great deal more knowledgeable – we hold far more information in our heads and our files and use it to explain what happened and why, the consequences and significance of events, how interpretations of the topic differ and, maybe, the historiography has developed.

That sounds obvious but for students this big picture level may be missing if it's left implicit. If they aren't asked to compare their final answer to a question with their ideas at the beginning (because there's so much to cover in a scheme of work) there's no time to reflect on the achievement of knowing more than at the beginning and on how they moved from knowing a little to knowing a lot.

Now for Diagram 2 which explains what we use when moving from little or no knowledge to more knowledge. We explore our questions using:

- sources from the time or soon afterwards
- historians' writings
- our understanding of concepts which shape questions and structure answers.

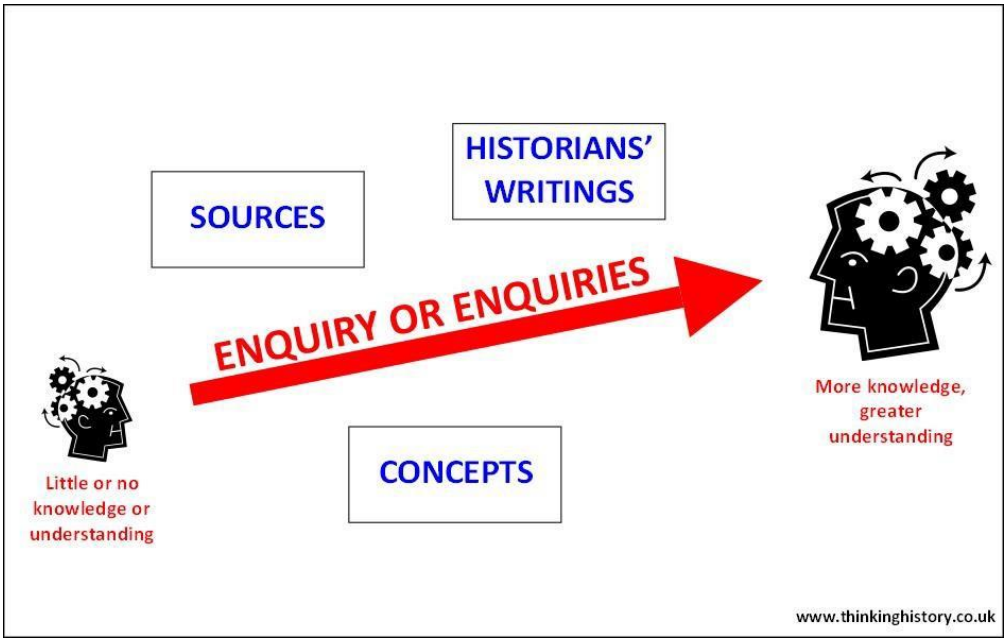

Diagram 2

I could have put more detail in the form of examples into Diagram 2 but that risks the wood being obscured by the trees.

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However, Diagram 3 provides examples and you could add more:

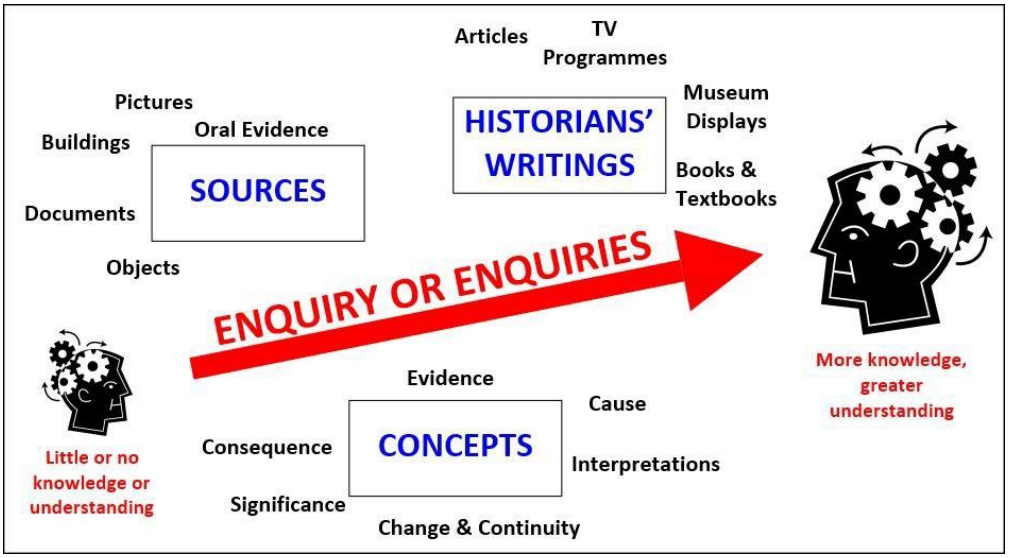

Diagram 3

Before going further it's IMPORTANT to say (hence the capitals) that this is NOT a ROUTE MAP setting out a sequence of activity. It's a RESOURCE MAP showing the resources (sources, writings and concepts) we use on the way from A to B. At different stages of our historical experience we take different routes. As adults we usually start with books by historians but in the classroom, we may ask students to begin with sources.

These diagrams can help students by:

a) defining the historical process simply and making it visual. (Add in displays of books and sources?)
b) making the outcomes of work in history clear i.e. developing greater knowledge and so shows where all that work on, for example, analysing evidence leads!

This latter point underscores the importance of students at all levels being introduced to the work of historians – imagine trying to improve your batting without ever seeing Joe Root in action and analysing his footwork and range of shots. Without meeting the work of historians how can students appreciate, amongst other things, that debates and arguments do take place and that history as a discipline is alive and bubbling, not a done and dusted catalogue on which everyone agrees.

Would embedding this outline into existing work take much time? At intervals it does need time to underline its importance but in between can be reinforced briefly. When students have completed

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work on a topic give them a copy of Diagram 2 (or your own version) and ask them to annotate it to track their work. They could:

- On the left – note what they knew at the beginning (or do this at the outset?)
- In the middle – write out the questions they've investigated and jot down the resources and concepts that have been relevant.
- On the right – summarise what they now know, especially what's changed in their understanding.

Distinguishing between the work of students and the work of historians

One aspect of this discussion that seems important is helping students see the similarities and differences between what they do and what historians do. These two can be spoken of as if identical but they aren't, no least in starting points because historians are, almost always, working in an area they know a great deal about. It's as if both students and historians are on the same athletics track but the students are on the starting line, running a sprint, the historians on the final bend and already well set for the next twenty-six miles.

Table 4 (overleaf) is an attempt to explore the similarities and differences – very much an early draft – but is it important that students are aware of these similarities and differences?

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A Historian's Work	**Starts with**	**Identifies**	**Research**	**Result**	**Communicates**
	Usually has **lots of knowledge** of the topic already and of the sources and what other historians have written about the topic	New questions about the topic A list of sources to explore and books to read	Reads sources and books. Develops hypotheses, suggesting answers to the questions. Works independently but discusses with other historians	**More Knowledge** Has come up with ideas and discoveries which set out new or more developed answers to the questions	To other historians and sometimes to the public In books or articles or TV or radio programmes or blogs
What they have in common	Both use understanding of causation and effects, change and continuity, significance, of sources as evidence, a sense of the period being studied.				
A Student's Work	**Starts with**	**Identifies**	**Research**	**Result**	**Communicates**
	Little or no knowledge of the topic, the sources or what historians have said about it	With teacher – is provided with or identifies questions to ask together with sources and books to help answer the questions	Reads sources and/or books. Develops hypotheses, suggesting answers. Usually works with teacher but gradually learning to study independently	**More Knowledge** Has developed enough knowledge to answer the questions effectively	To teachers and examiners and sometimes to the class In schoolbooks, in files, in oral presentations or in wall displays or recordings.

Table 4

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Questions for discussion about this bigger picture

1. Do students develop a big picture of the process of studying history that makes sense of their individual understandings of evidence, change and continuity etc?

If they don't, how can they gain independence by A level – to do that they need a model of the process to work with.

2. How can we build students' overall sense of 'doing history'?
This requires keeping that bigger picture in view and taking time at the beginning of an enquiry to find out what children know about a topic and what their 'starter answer' to the question might be – if you don't find that out at the beginning how can they measure how far they've come at the end? Realising they've learned a great deal is wonderful for confidence – a key factor in improving performance.

3. Is understanding this bigger picture important for helping students see the value beyond the classroom of what they've learned in History lessons?

It's the process that's so transferable and valuable – enquiry, research, supporting conclusions with evidence, working independently, knowing the degree of certainty of conclusions and communicating them clearly. Research by Terry Haydn and Richard Harris suggested that 'large numbers of [pupils] have a limited grasp of the intended purposes of a historical education.' Is this because students don't see what all the individualized work on sources, significance etc add up to?

4. Should you assess understanding of the whole process?

Assessment would show its importance and ensure it's not sidelined BUT does assessment risk losing flexibility and variety and turn this from a flexible model into a set of flatpack instructions? Maybe it's better not to assess formally than end up with the latter?

Resources linked to this article

Hugh Richards of Huntington School, York, has built on some of the ideas in this article to create a display for his students. Hugh has made the components of the display available via the blog created by the HA's secondary Education committee:

https://onebighistorydepartment.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/the-process-of-history-display/

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For additional article son developing students' ability to learn independently see:

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

For the research by Terry Haydn and Richard Harris see:

Pupil perceptions of history at Key Stage 3: Final Report, October 2005
www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/qcafinalreport.pdf

Factors influencing pupil take-up of History post Key Stage 3, Final Report September 2007
www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/qca3report.pdf

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