

Disappointments and Frustrations

Things That Got Away From Me

Looking back over my times with SHP and my freelance work, one theme that stands out is the struggle to focus on broader issues in history teaching when there was a surfeit of immediate issues to tackle, particularly revisions of the National Curriculum and exam specifications. It was the dominance of immediate needs that explains why I now look back with some frustration and disappointment, very aware of the things I never spent enough time on.

Over the years I've built up a long list of topics for which I've wanted to create resources on ThinkingHistory. Some got written, many didn't. Alongside the topics (events, people etc) there was also a list of issues that I swore to myself I would tackle just as soon as the current textbook was finished or the upcoming series of CPD workshops was over. Sadly for my own sense of satisfaction, immediate needs kept cropping up so I never did spend enough time on those issues. I did write a little about them, chiefly in articles on this website or within the framework of my discussions of teaching medieval history, but never enough to feel I'd got on top of them.

So what are these disappointment and frustrations? Here's a quick discussion, a very personal list. It's definitely NOT a list of the 6 top issues that ought to be engaging history teachers and it's equally definitely not a review of the literature on each topic – I've never been any good at reading 'the literature'. It's just the issues I wish I'd spent more time on in order to satisfy my own interest.

a) Chronological understanding, outlines, big pictures and even periodisation

In 1989 I ran a workshop on developing chronological understanding at the very first SHP conference. If memory serves it was a simple session, focussing on sequencing and duration activities, a useful start but no more. Since then I've had phases of rethinking the issues, notably when working on resources for the 2008 version of the National Curriculum. What we tried to do then was help students build their knowledge of core themes across KS3 (such as changing standards of living), revisiting outlines in each year of KS3. However, as ever, I didn't stick with developing the idea for long enough – new GCSE Medicine books were needed yesterday – and those ideas stayed semi-complete. More recent work on medieval history however convinced me that the only route to developing effective chronological understanding is to move away from KS3 courses largely based around enquiries or topics in depth to one where different kinds of overview

provide the core, fitting fewer depth enquiries in between. This might even include discussing periodisation with students i.e. how we break up periods into chunks and whether it could be done differently. In January 2022 I'm due to run another workshop at an SHP Conference – maybe this is the chance I've been waiting for to put in some more work?

Core article on planning teaching of the Middle Ages at KS3

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/MedievalLivesCore.pdf

Article on building periodisation into KS3 planning

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Periodisation.html

b) Why do we have to do history, sir?

As I explained in another of these essays, it was the question 'why do we have to do history?' that sparked my enthusiasm for the SCHP project. I was inspired by SCHP's aim of helping students see how they could use their knowledge of the past and their understanding of how history is studied to understand and interpret their own world. As I also explained in that essay, I don't think that SHP ever succeeded in that aim or at least nowhere near as much as I hoped back in the 70s. I don't think many students knew why they were doing such a varied course, what the individual purposes of the Development Study, Modern World study, History Around Us and Depth study were. A more up-to-date thought is to wonder whether current GCSE students know why some of their courses are studies in depth, another is a thematic unit and there's also something on the historic environment tucked in there – do they understand and can they explain the reasons for this variety of approach?

However the idea of SCHP's grand aim has remained with me and while this paragraph repeats what's in that other essay it's important enough for me to include it in this list. I wish I'd done more to use ThinkingHistory to provide discussions and teaching ideas/resources which demonstrate how topics and historical methodology can link to the 21stC equivalent of adolescent needs i.e. giving teachers the ideas through which students could understand the value of studying the past.

I also wish I'd done more to discuss how to help students understand the historical process in the round – too often the nature of assessment leads to them getting bogged down in the individual 2nd order concepts and not understand the overall process. I did start but ...

Article discussing ‘What do we want students to learn about the process of ‘doing history’?’

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/DoingHistory.html

Resources which explain and demonstrate how to help students develop enquiry skills

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/index.htm

Discussions of aims for teaching about the Middle Ages

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/WhyTeachMedieval.html

c) Students’ preconceptions and misconceptions

I’ve come to think of identifying students’ preconceptions as one of the bedrocks of effective teaching, possibly the single thing that would do most to improve learning. Years ago I was involved at SHP with work on students’ preconceptions about how we use evidence, analyse causation etc but at the time I never tried to apply the idea to the content that students study. However recent work with Jason Todd of Oxford University on students’ preconceptions about the Middle Ages has shown how important this is. Initial research suggested that over 90% of students see the people of the Middle Ages as less intelligent than ourselves – this idea must therefore be made explicit with students and in teaching in order for them to confront this idea. How can they study the people effectively if they look down on them as inferior beings? Starting units by identifying preconceptions and planning around those ideas isn’t time-consuming but is necessary – and applies at all levels. A level students need teaching how to think about their own ideas as part of the process of learning to study independently. But I’ve not got very far – stuck in the Middle Ages as usual!

Article on why identifying preconceptions is so important

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Assumptions.html

Textbook material for use with students to diagnose their ideas about the Middle Ages

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section1.html

d) Understanding people as human beings

This was an idea I came to very late, so much so that I wonder if it's an old person's preoccupation! It developed through researching the lives of my grandfathers and of members of families who lived near me in the fifteenth century. I wondered how they looked back on the trajectories of their lives, when were the moments of optimism and pessimism, of happiness and sadness and found myself thinking 'Do students in school ever stop long enough to study the whole life of a person or do they just catch glimpses of people as they race through time?' And if they did study a whole life what might they learn that they could relate to themselves e.g. what makes people happy or satisfied, what mattered to them? After all, history is about people – so do we study human nature enough?

I'm now wondering what kinds of resources are needed and how to set up an activity. A living graph activity based on an account of a whole life – not a graph of success or failure but based on feelings, a sense of satisfaction with their life? Margaret Paston or Anne Herbert would be possibilities or Margaret's sons John II and John III or Richard Redmayn from just up the road at Harewood – Richard's dates are c1355 to 1426. Or William Marshal or Eleanor de Montfort (d1275) or ...

What do students learn about people and the experience of living?

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/LearningAboutPeople.html

e) Developing the ability to study independently

This is the ultimate Catch 22 in teaching – we really want to help students develop the ability to study independently but it's risky – it can take time and does it get the best grades? I remember how hard I found it to adapt to working independently at university and so it's always felt a really important idea to me. Back in the 70s, when there wasn't so much pressure on results, I did develop an approach at A level which moved in this direction but at that time my ideas were still very basic – nowadays I'd build in understanding of the process of enquiry as the core, something I was able to build to some extent into my first National Curriculum series for OUP in 1990-91 and more fully into an A level book on The Wars of the Roses and in other work. By this I don't mean coming up with a good enquiry question but helping students see the whole process of question, hypothesis/preconceptions, research, re-think hypothesis and so on. But I don't feel I've done this as consistently as I'd like – grrrr.

Ideas for developing independent learning

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueIndependentLearning.html

and

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/Independent16to21.html

An article for KS2 but relevant for all ages and a good historical story too.

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ResourceBase/downloads/PH70Enquiry.pdf

My version of flipped learning from the 1970s

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/FlippedLearning.html

f) What's really worth teaching about ...?

I've always wanted to write more discussions about what we want students to learn about particular topics – what's most important to ask and learn about the Norman Conquest, the Civil War etc etc. (This desire is usually inspired by reading a new book though not always – my most recent reading was Katherine Harvey's book 'Fires of Lust: Sex in the Middle Ages' which is unlikely to be of much use with Y7). I managed to write some brief discussions as exemplified below but not enough. For example, I think there's something to be written challenging the idea that there was a 'Renaissance' and that shoehorning it into the curriculum distorts students' understanding of the Middle Ages. And plenty more!

Short discussions on teaching about 1381, about the Civil War and about the Industrial Revolution

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/indexKS3.html

Loads of things about teaching about the Middle Ages!

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/index.htm

And finally ...

That's a disappointingly long list of disappointments to look back on but, typing this, I wonder if, even now, this essay is by way of being a kick up the backside to myself to say 'there's still time'.

Maybe I ought to add 'so far' to the end of the essay title.