

Back to basics:

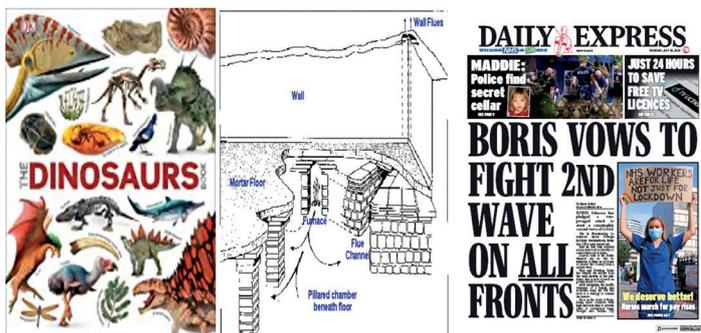
what does a good history lesson look like?

Susie Townsend

The new emphasis from Ofsted on the importance of the foundation subjects has meant a very welcome renewed interest in history and how it is taught. For years the dominance of literacy and numeracy in the curriculum has meant that time for foundation subjects has at best been compressed, and at worst has disappeared from a regular weekly timetable. History has fared better than a number of these subjects to some extent, but often due to the fact that literacy can be taught through history. Cross-curricular approaches can be very exciting and beneficial but the learning objectives are often based on literacy rather than historical learning outcomes. History appears to be being taught but is, in reality, window dressing disguising the fact that the actual learning taking place revolves around progress in literacy.

What is history and why is it important?

Maybe this is a good point to consider what is history and why is it a vital part of a child's education?



With Key Stage 2 classes or with staff you can get them to consider three images – here I have used a diagram to show the Roman hypocaust system, a non-fiction children's book about dinosaurs and a newspaper front page about Covid-19. They can vote about whether they think are all history, one of them history, or two of them history. This creates interesting discussion. Does the fact that the diagram is a modern reconstruction mean it is not history? Is the Covid-19 outbreak too recent to be history? The answer of

course is that dinosaurs are animals and so not history. In the end it should be established that history is about people in the past and that the past can be thousands of years ago or yesterday. The use of quotes about history can widen the debate to encourage people to consider the significance of history. The comments below by Winston Churchill and Michael Crichton are just two examples that can lead to reflection about the controversial nature of history and its importance.

History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.

Winston Churchill

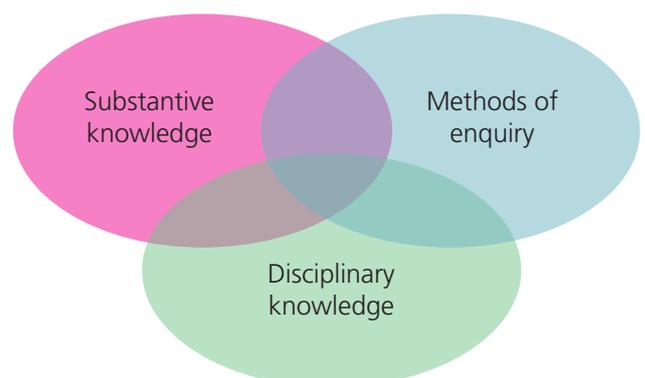
If you don't know history then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree.

Michael Crichton

So what makes a good history lesson?

The diagram below is one way of demonstrating the ingredients of a good history lesson. Three elements are shown here: substantive knowledge, disciplinary knowledge and methods of enquiry. A good lesson is where all three of these elements combine.

The perfect history lesson



Substantive knowledge

This is factual content about people and events. You cannot teach history without historical facts. However, a fact in isolation means very little unless it is put in context. Thus, substantive knowledge is also about how facts are framed chronologically and how facts are linked together and connections made across and within time periods. Substantive knowledge is also about exploring key concepts such as power, empire, democracy and trade. Children will need to understand these concepts if they are to make sense of what they are learning.

Disciplinary knowledge

This is sometimes known as second-order concepts or procedural knowledge. This is how historians debate history. It is therefore a question of considering why something happens (causation) why it might be important (significance) and how it can be viewed in different ways (interpretation). It is also about understanding continuity and change and giving children a sense of period so that they can have some understanding of what life was like at a different period of time.

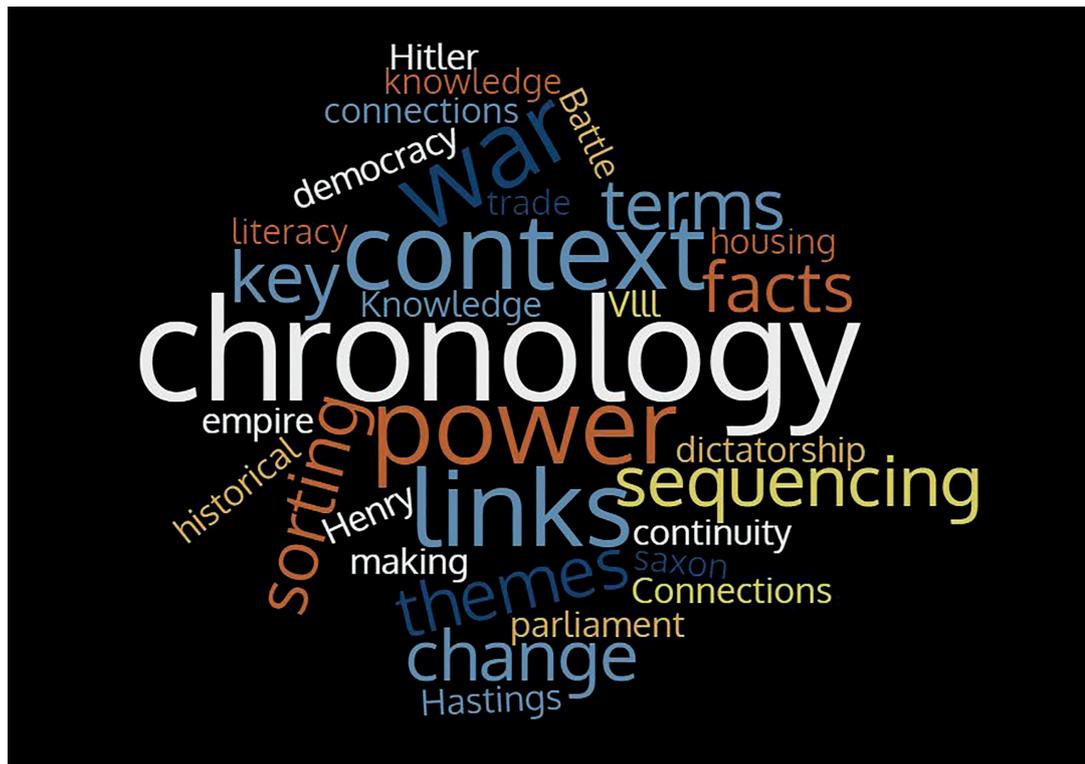
Methods of enquiry

This third circle is about how children will investigate history and communicate it. A good history lesson should be framed around a key question for the children to investigate and they should have opportunities to ask questions about sources that they use and draw conclusions from the evidence. They should be able to use a variety of ways of communicating their responses.

What next?

Once the key ingredients of the lesson are decided upon in this way, you can then consider exciting and engaging activities for the children to do which enable them to develop an understanding of each of the three elements. As always you need to consider how you are going to support and challenge each child. **Above all else, your pupils should come away from their history lesson curious, motivated and keen to know more.**

If the schemes of work are planned well and each lesson supports and extends the next then the children will be able to make progress in their understanding of history. The curriculum itself is therefore the model for progression.



As can be seen history is a subject for debate and controversy. A fact is not always a fact; it depends upon the sources selected to come to a conclusion and the way in which they are interpreted. A history lesson should not just be about the narrative, although subject knowledge is, of course, an essential ingredient. It is also about how you make sense of the knowledge and link the ideas together to draw conclusions, make judgements and interpret the past. You cannot make a Victoria Sandwich cake without sugar, eggs and self-raising flour but if you do not bind these ingredients together correctly the result will not always be edible or you will get a very different cake (as I always find to my cost!) Likewise with history – there is no history without historical fact but to make sense of these facts there needs to be understanding about the context, significance, causality and the way in which the topic being taught fits into the timeline of history. And it is possible to have very different views of history (or cakes!) depending upon the selection of the sources used to gain historical knowledge and the interpretation of the information.

References

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