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6 Creative Approaches to Time and Chronology

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A The Concept of Chronology

Developing children's chronological understanding is, rightly, considered very important. But understanding the passing of time is more complex than reciting the names and dates of monarchs. First, this chapter considers innovative and engaging ways of learning about time and sequence, and similarities and differences within and between periods, which encourage us as practitioners to allow the children to build up their own mental maps in active ways. Then it considers, through working with children, how to help them make sense of a time line and to develop children's historical imagination by linking evidence, understanding and imagination to chronological questions.

It is important at this point to begin to understand what we might mean by the concept of chronology; are we thinking purely about time, the passing of time, the way in which events relate to each other and whether we have a vision of the past? Or is it something simpler? Is it a question of whether we have a mental map of the past? Or even more simply is it a question of a child's ability to understand which of the 'Invaders and Settlers' came first, the Romans, the Vikings or the Saxons?

Dawson, (2004 p.1) proposes that; 'Chronology is not simply an ability to place events in order... It is also a sense of scale, a sense of period and a sense of 'the framework of the past'. Whereas Haydn has suggested a four-part classification for teaching and learning about time (labelled T1-T4), summarised as follows:

T1 – Time-dating systems and conventions and vocabulary.

T2 – A framework or map of the past over the time-span laid down in the National Curriculum.

T3 – Knowledge of a number of short-term frameworks e.g. key events and chronology of the Norman Conquest or World War Two.

T4 – Deep Time: an understanding of the true scale of the past from the formation of the earth onwards.”

(Haydn cited in Dawson, 2004 p. 2)

Chronology is of course all of the above, because it represents the passing of time and our conception of the passing of time. Therefore, in conceiving this chapter I am aware of all aspects of chronology from the simple order of events to, to borrow a phrase from Douglas Adams (1988), ‘the interconnectedness of all things’ or in other words how the past has unfolded to make the present.

As an historian I fear being asked about the past because I don’t fully understand it and the more I know about the past the more I understand that I know hardly anything. The past is simply too complex, it is after-all the history of everything that has happened in the whole world and so, therefore, when I teach about the past it is about allowing students and pupils to make their own connections with the past and then begin to order those connections.

C What the students found out

Having interviewed both staff and children the student group reflected on what they had learned, drawn from their reading, in particular Hoodless (2010) and Cooper (2007) and formulated the following proposals:

- Place a topic or enquiry in its wider historical framework before and after it has been studied.

- Have a permanent timeline in classrooms.
- Keep a whole school timeline – perhaps in the hall. This could be referred to in assemblies, prior to topic or following topic, and children could have the opportunity to feed back their topic ‘expertise’ to the whole school during assembly time.

Learning dates

- Children could memorise a small number of key dates, which they can use as markers for reference.
- We should be careful not to put children off history by overloading them with fact learning.

Pupils making their own timelines

- Children watch videos/film relating to the period and reference what they have watched on the timeline.
- Children place photographs of work they have done, visits they have made, costume events and feasts on the timeline.
- Children create ICT fact books and presentations and reference them on the timeline.
- Indicate links to other online resources. Note the BBC Interactive Timeline.
- Children create personal timelines of their life or another person chosen by them.
- Add photographs of object they have seen from the periods.
- Find significant documents and sources relating to each period and add them to the timeline.
- Creating a timeline through the use of a ‘circular booklet, three-dimensional line, or as a vertical or horizontal two-dimensional wall display’ (Foreman et al. 2007 p.156).

Use class timeline as a reminder of key dates

Be aware that time has been measured differently in the past

- Where do the names of our days and months come from?
 - January – Janus the god of the beginning and the end.
 - July – named after Julius Caesar.
 - August – named after Augustus Caesar.
 - September – the seventh month (it became the ninth because of the two Caesars).
 - October – the eighth month.
 - November – the ninth month.
 - December – the tenth month.
- Historical versions (Aztec calendars/sun dials/movement of the planets or stars/obelisks/Stonehenge etc).
- Versions of measuring time that developed historically but that are still important today (farming calendar/the seasons).

Sequencing activities

- Ordering and dating photographs, buildings, paintings and artefacts such as irons or clothing using skills such as observation, enquiry and deduction.
- Ordering/sorting/sequencing assorted evidence to build a story.

Writing

- Writing biographies (perhaps famous people in history). Children could then select key paragraph headings, which can be developed as labels for a timeline- this could be developed into a class ‘sorting’ exercise to order their famous people chronologically.

- Writing up an historical (or real time) event into a story. This will require chronological and subject knowledge as well as sequencing skills. Can they turn Tacitus' account of Boudicca into a story?

For younger children:

- Writing events they have experienced as a story. This will require chronological knowledge and understanding, and a certain amount of sequencing:

Mathematical ability is crucial for understanding and interpreting historical data such as timelines, census returns, statistics, Roman numerals etc.

- For using timelines effectively – applying scales and numbers is an excellent task and remember that we can list time in different ways – both in years ago and by date.

Using positive and negative numbers

- For using the CE/AD/BC/BCE scale on timelines.

(Further ideas can be found in Cooper (2007pp. 94-96) Chronology and Literacy connections) and in Cooper (2012 pp. 41-52).

- In terms of thinking once again about the case of the bomber on the hill there are several ways in which we might classify its position in history. The first is in terms of its place in a longitudinal history; that is as part of the timeline of events which have happened to our country – in very much the same way as we might measure our history by Kings and Queens. Thus it would sit nicely on one of those long paper lines where we can measure (by the use of dates) the order of events. By doing this it would allow us to see (if we didn't know already) that the 22nd October 1944 was getting towards the end of WWII. The other ways are in terms of events, WWII, or period, the 20th century, or even by place; the history of Britain. But there is also the idea of learning by

concept or using ideas or an engagement we have about a period of time. As a young boy I found the idea of WWII fascinating and I probably knew quite a lot about the aircraft of the period (to the extent that, as my boys and I were watching a programme on the Arctic, I excitedly identified that the seaplane they were using was a De Haviland Beaver), but as so often happens, by the time I got into the sixth form and later to university I found that the idea of knowing such things was no longer cool. I asked male colleagues of the same age if they had a similar experience and readily found two who had been 'into' the tanks of the period. It is not hard to find examples of children who are similarly engaged. During her research Rachel Angus was interviewing a group of Y5 children, to find out what they knew about castles, when she came across 'William' who knew about the Middle Ages without having been taught about it in school and from memory he told her the following about the Viking invasions and 'King Arthur' and gave them dates between 500 and 800.

- Kings Alfred, Harold and William and about the Bayeux tapestry.
- Richard the Lionheart who was killed in 1199.
- The Battle of Agincourt and the Hundred Years War.
- What the symbol of two fingers meant and how it related to the English longbow.

consider what may lie at the root of this enthusiasm and exploiting its potential to inspire others.

I was talking to my 5 year old nephew Aidan about his Playmobil castle and knights when I was surprised to find that he had a good deal of knowledge and conceptual understanding on the subject of castles. Children are gaining this interest through play, Dixon and Day (2004), through story, Farmer and Heeley (2004) and through film, games and toys. Enthusiastic children do not leave it at that. They want more, more toys, more books, more visits to castles, more films and more games and this leads not only to an increase in their subject knowledge but also in their ability to make connections and inferences between the subject areas.

Throughout this chapter I have alluded to subject knowledge and we must recognise it is this element which lies at the heart of chronological understanding, because without the imaginative tools to engage with the story of the past any timeline is meaningless.

A What is significant to record and investigate?

B The Bombing of the Twin Towers or World War 11?

A group of Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students, (Moore and Ashcroft 2010) once told me with some confidence that 9/11 was the most important event in World history. This led me to create a lecture on World War II in which we handled a deactivated 1942 machinegun and then looked at the shocking 60 plus million lives, which were lost country by country – ending of course with the USSR. We also considered some of the subsequent effects of the conflict by looking at the Iron Curtain, nuclear proliferation, the establishment of the state of Israel and the formation of the National Health Service in Britain. Many of the students, subsequently, considered that WWII was the biggest event in history, but was it?

B Invention of Writing?

At the end of the first lecture one of the PGCE students asked me how important I thought the invention of writing had been. He was right of course, because without a huge range of developments in human technology and thought nobody would have been able to make a Halifax bomber, gas chambers, machineguns, let alone the atom bomb.