

Teaching about different interpretations of history

How can we help pupils to *get better* at characterising and deconstructing interpretations?

What kinds of knowledge and what kinds of thinking are likely to lead to *progress*?

Teach them to look for message.

Teach them to discern and describe atmosphere or mood.

Teach them to infer the intended audience, to suggest the likely impact.

Teach them to speculate about how the interpretation was constructed.

Teach them to speculate about why the interpretation was constructed.

Teach them to spot explicit or implicit (or absent) relationship with any evidence.

Teach them to locate, visualise and reproduce the pattern or 'shape' of an argument or message.

Teach them to ask and answer questions about typicality. Give them the knowledge that they need to ask and answer questions about typicality:

Did everyone write history like this in the 1960s?

How shocking would Film X have been when it first came out?

Teach them to ask and answer questions about shifting and changing interpretations. Give them the knowledge that they need to do this. This usefully doubles up as secure reinforcement of chronologically-arranged knowledge because the following are impossible with knowledge of basic frameworks of time, period and chronology:

Why did people *stop* being nasty about Cicero?

Why did the Victorians have such a dim view of Elizabeth I?

How early in the twentieth century could that film of Michael Collins been made?

Why did people *stop* thinking that Wilberforce was responsible for ending the slave trade?

When and why did a new view of King John emerge?

Why have native American peoples only appeared in British textbooks since the 1970s?

Why have people *carried on* being fascinated by Cromwell?

Teach them to bring to history lessons their own questions about the interpretations they see and hear around them every day:

- nostalgic advertising
- politicians' putting a spin on the past and using it to support their message

- Feature films (*Braveheart, The Patriot, Gladiator, Zulu, Hotel Rwanda, 12 Years a Slave*)
- TV comedy (*Blackadder, Dad's Army*).
- TV reconstructions and documentaries (*Time Team; The Normans*)
- websites that celebrate or commemorate past events or promote a particular view of the past

Teach them to choose their own words for the 'argument that is hidden' when does argument (overt, explicit) become propaganda (subtle, selective, manipulative, uneven in choice of facts...).

We can do all this by:

- keeping the focus on why, how, where and for whom the interpretation was constructed; getting them to speculate about these things first in order to create readiness for new knowledge, enthusiasm for that new knowledge and a disposition to ask the best questions about the knowledge they need;
- keeping the thrust of the enquiry lesson sequence on what the interpretation(s) tell us about the interpreter(s) and the influences, constraints or motives that led to it;
- making the interpretation itself the puzzle: how did it arise, how might it have been created and why does it matter? (rather than how good/right is it?)
- helping pupils to evaluate the interpretation on its own terms - if it is a novel, what was it for? if it is a museum, what is it for? what was this work of art (or this educational initiative or this reconstruction of a medieval banquet) *designed to achieve*?
- requiring pupils to make connections between new knowledge and old (How does this modern view of Henry IV or Henry V compare with Shakespeare's? How does this 20th century interpretation of Elizabeth I compare with the 19th century one? How does Morrill's interpretation of Cromwell compare with Hill's?)
- using McAleavy's five questions ... and the 2004 updated versions of them or your own updated versions of them (so that pupils get used to recurring questions we can ask of most interpretations);
- devising and repeating departmental techniques across the Key Stage (e.g. types of diagram, sorting, linking and connecting activities, ways of attacking a text with interpretations in mind, giving them a 'listening agenda' or a 'watching agenda' to help them to concentrate, helping them to use their word-level and sentence-level knowledge (i.e. formal grammar) to describe features of a text, to gain an analytical vocabulary for talking about the text etc);
- modelling the thinking involved in reflecting on an interpretation;
- giving pupils time to own new knowledge by talking about it, processing it, discussing it, asking questions;
- enabling pupils to read extended texts rather than gobbets, so that they have a chance to grasp the argument, message or narrative as a whole; finding creative strategies to ensure that *all* pupils access those texts, rather than dumbing them down;

- clarifying the teaching focus so pupils can see wood for the trees (so that they can **SEE** shape of the historian's text, the recurring devices of the film, the visual effects of the National Trust materials; so that they can **HEAR** the colour of the text, the texture of the novel; so that they can **FEEL** the vigorous, emotive or manipulative language of the historian, the evocative language of the TV presenter, the hidden message of the museum, the urgency of the political speech, the rationale behind the website);
- using their suggestions, responding to their interest, cultivating their energy as soon as they start to talk, discuss, argue about the messages or intent of an interpretation.
- showing them real historians and introducing them to real scholarly debates as often as possible: read Richard Cunningham on this (see *TH 102*), get pictures of historians, remind them that real people are debating historical issues all the time.

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