

Draft guidance on Key Stage 3 ‘interpretations’ prepared originally for QCA/CfBT/HA guidance project on Curriculum 2008

The definition and explanatory note in the new Programme of Study (PoS) leave this Key Concept virtually unchanged from all previous requirements going back to 1991. The new PoS adds clarity, however, by clearly distinguishing the study of subsequent interpretations from the study of contemporary views, and therefore by pinpointing the *additional kinds* of knowledge that a study of interpretations is designed to build.

It is important to note that, as before, the *rest* of the Programme of Study *already* requires students to engage in interpreting the past. Whether students are constructing their own causal arguments, assessing change, reaching a judgement using evidence or analysing diversity in a period, they are always constructing their own interpretations of the past by building and transforming knowledge using one or more of the analytic tools provided by the various second-order concepts. *The specific requirement of the PoS to focus on ‘interpretation’ goes some way beyond this.* It is designed to ensure that students have an entitlement to examine *real* historical interpretations, of *varied* types, created by *others*. It is also designed to examine how others have *constituted or reconstructed the past*, **not** the ‘interpretation’ of contemporary witnesses who were actually within the past events themselves.

This Key Concept is not designed, therefore, to ensure that students carry out interpretations of their own. *That is already assumed by the rest of the PoS.* Rather, it is designed to ensure that during their historical studies, students encounter a range of accounts and representations of the past, including and especially academic works of historical scholarship, that they reflect on *how the process of subsequent historical interpretation happens* and that they examine *the varied opinions or claims, styles or media, that result.*

In order for students to receive their entitlement to this part of the PoS, teachers must ensure that across the Key Stage students encounter many forms and traditions of historical representation and reconstruction, for example:

- scholarly accounts by academic historians arguing a case from evidence;
- accounts or artefacts produced by community groups or heritage organisations for commemorative purposes or as celebrations of experiences shared in collective memory;
- reconstructions of the past for artistic, entertainment, propaganda, education or commercial purposes such as historical novels, films, theme parks or dramatic reconstructions;
- websites, e-discussion or other Internet activity where a wide range of people present particular interpretations of the past or debate contrasting claims;
- popular, journalistic, polemical or political accounts that draw upon or make connection with the past, implicitly or explicitly, in order to make a case or convey a view, whether explicitly or implicitly.

In order to meet the full requirements of the Programme of Study concerning ‘Interpretation’, students should be taught to discern and/or reflect upon:

- the purposes of the interpreter(s);
- the context, origin or setting of the interpretation’s construction;
- the process by which the interpretation was formed and/or presented;
- how the viewpoints, claims or judgements in one interpretation differ from those in another;
- how and why such differences occur;
- how and why contrasting styles and media of interpretation develop;

- the relationship that contrasting claims or styles of interpretation have with evidence;
- the impact of particular interpretations on intended or unintended audiences.

Pupils are likely to develop increasingly sophisticated understanding of how the interpretation process happens if they are helped to think about each different *type* of interpretation in its own terms. For example, the expected relationship between an interpretation and the evidential record will vary according to purpose of the interpretation's purpose and type. One might expect the relationship between an interpretation and the evidential record to be, variously:

- rigorous and explicit in an **academic work assessing the experience of participants in the English Civil War**;
- strong but implicit within a **reconstruction of a Civil War battle or an historical theme park reconstructing mid-seventeenth century life**;
- governing period detail and some reference points in a background narrative framework but blended with purely fictional narrative elements in a **modern novel on the Civil War**.

Each of these types of interpretation deserves study in its own right; each is a different way in which human beings choose to constitute and present the past.

Teachers therefore need to avoid reducing a study of interpretations into a predictable and obvious hierarchy of value - e.g. arriving at the truism that academic interpretations are always more accurate or 'better' than films or novels. Scholarly works and feature films differ in their purposes and mode of construction. **Inappropriate comparisons merely lead pupils to the obvious conclusion that an academic work is more rigorous and historically valid than a film.** Instead, if teachers are to develop the full PoS requirement, they need to give pupils opportunity to consider why and how the particular stance or message of a film has arisen, what the film-producer was trying to achieve and what that film reflects about its own society's priorities and concerns. In other words, the film or novel needs to be examined *constructively*, as an interesting example of real historical interpretation at work, not as something to be 'measured' against a totally different kind of construction for an accuracy that it never purported to achieve.

Comparison of validity may be appropriate but in order to fulfill the full entitlement of 'interpretations' it is important that teachers make sure that pupils do more than mere comparison of two judgements. They must examine the *process of interpretation* as shown in the *particular, real examples*. For example, if students were asked to compare the validity of Christopher Hill or Jane Ohlmeyer's claims concerning the causes of the English Civil War, they would only be entering into the *full* entitlement of this Key Concept (as specified in the PoS) if they also thought about such matters as how each of these two historians use evidence, what methods these historians use, how their styles differ or what influences and trends their historical writing reflects. This is the kind of *additional knowledge* that they stand to gain from this curricular requirement. It is important to keep the real interpretations in view, and to explore or speculate about the construction of those specific interpretations, rather than merely allowing pupils to compare judgements or claims in a way that loses connection with the specific interpretations where such judgements are found. **If pupils are merely asked, 'which one do you agree with?', or 'how accurate is...?' they will usually lose the distinctive demand of 'interpretations' required by the NC PoS**, because (a) they will lose connections *with the interpretations themselves*; (b) they will drift into another kind of activity altogether, one already demanded by the rest of the PoS; (c) they are not required to draw on the further knowledge of the context, construction, purpose or style of the interpretation which is the whole point of this curricular requirement.

Finally, it is important to remember that pupils must gain knowledge of **two periods**: both the period being interpreted *and* the subsequent world of the interpreter him/herself. For example, when examining the Victorian statue of Oliver Cromwell standing outside Parliament, students need

knowledge both of Cromwell *and* of the Victorian period. They need to think about what the *Victorians* might have been saying about Cromwell through this statue and why many Victorians might have held that particular view. In order to fulfil the full PoS requirement concerning Interpretation, pupils must explore what the interpretation reveals about the context, influences upon, ideas and purposes of the subsequent interpretation's authors or creators.

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(for Sue Bennett/ CfBT contract 6 January 2008)