



Mummy, Mummy, how can you make a silk road out of a sow's ear?

Not now, dear. Mummy's very busy rewriting all of her documents, now that her students are on exam leave. It's fair enough: after all, as the Deputy Head helpfully explained only this morning, we're definitely due an Ofsted inspection at some time within the next five years so it's only right to be ready. Mummy had hoped that she might spend this time writing some new lessons, or indeed going home at a reasonable hour – but what does she know?

Mummy, you never listen to me. You just talk all the time. I'm sure you talk for far more than the 30% of the time that you're supposed to.

I think you've been reading Peter Frankopan's 2015 book *The Silk Roads: a new history of the world* (London: Bloomsbury). It's intended as a corrective to the western-focused histories of the world which have tended to trace human civilisation in terms of Egypt, Greece, Rome, all the way through the British Empire to modern American hegemony. Frankopan seeks to correct this. He describes his experiences as a teenager discovering the societies of central Asia, and his feeling that the dominant historiographical traditions of western Europe have 'suffocated' attempts to tell the stories of the cities and states strung out between Constantinople and China which form the various east-west routes for trade and cultural exchange. Frankopan argues that, as the political focus shifts back towards China and takes the historiographical focus with it – perhaps he's thinking of Ian Morris (2010), *Why the West Rules – For Now: the patterns of history and what they reveal about the future* (London: Profile Books) – we should, as historians, spend more time looking at the bit in between East and West, which he calls the 'world's central nervous system.' This is all in his preface, by the way, which is a really interesting essay on the factors which determine the history we, as a society and as individuals, choose to study.

Mummy, is Daddy a determiner of what we study?

Actually, darling, I've always seen him as more of a subordinated relative. Anyway, Frankopan's book is really very good and provides an interesting context to the history you probably already know. My calling it 'context' of course proves Frankopan's point, for it isn't really contextual history – it's the history of half a continent. But Mummy's a historian in the western tradition, teaching people in the western world. Frankopan describes his teenage self becoming uneasy at the vast parts of the world 'passed over in silence' during his history lessons. Even in teaching our own historical context, we haven't enough time. Mummy's uneasy that she doesn't have the curriculum time to teach the reign of King John as part of the story of democracy AND the clash between the monarchy and the Church AND as an interesting interpretations study. She's not sure she's even supposed to teach about King John any more. With all the competing demands on our curriculum – suggestions or impositions from the Government, the availability of resources, our own expertise, and even if we're being radical the needs of our students – how *should* we choose the actual content we're going to deliver? And when we've decided, how much of it should be directly or indirectly about *our* national/continental/cultural story? Is there any content so important that it shouldn't be left out? Nobody, I think, would argue that every schoolchild should learn about the history of medieval Persia (for which Frankopan provides excellent resources) but it would be odd, wouldn't it, if children learning history in England never studied anything about Henry VIII, or children across Europe didn't study the Second World War? And yet we could all easily construct a programme of study without them, from which our students emerged as excellent historians. So where's the line? Should there be compulsory content? Are there historical things that 'everyone' should know? There now, you've got me going and it's time for bed. Run along now...

Mummy, I've made a list of 50 things every British schoolchild should know about history, and another list of all the books that they should read. Could you have a look at them for me please?