

New, Novice or Nervous?



The *quick* guide to the 'no-quick-fix'

This page is for those **new** to the published writings of history teachers. Every problem you wrestle with, other teachers have wrestled with too. Quick fixes don't exist. But if you discover others' writing, you'll soon find – and want to join – something better: an international conversation in which others have explored, debated and tackled *your* problems. *This edition's NNN problem is:*

Constructing narrative

Narrative is shedding its status as the 'underrated skill', re-emerging as a requirement of the new GCSE in England.¹ As Counsell has argued, constructing a narrative is 'no easy option', however, and asking students to 'Write an account...' lacks the comfortable familiarity of 'Explain why...' or 'How far...'.² Fortunately, many teachers have already taken up Lang's challenge to give the construction of historical narrative a place in school history. Their published work provides both inspiration and practical examples, as these starting points in *Teaching History* show.

What do you do?

Lang (2003) TH 110 made the case for the construction, as opposed to the repetition, of narrative as a 'high-order skill'. He argued that this process of construction is closely linked to the process of research and the acquisition of knowledge, and unpicked examples of carefully constructed historical narratives to show how argument and evidence are interwoven into their fabric. **Byrom (1998) TH 91** offered a practical example of this, showing how students could be supported in weaving together source material into a narrative, even – or especially – when accounts are conflicting.

Gadd (2009) TH 136 took up Lang's idea of narrative as a challenging and worthwhile outcome. Recognising the difficulty students face in making sense of the 'big story', she developed an enquiry designed to help them construct their own narrative overviews from a number of in-depth episodes or 'small stories'. In her analysis of students' narratives Gadd noted both the diverse structures adopted and how small stories surfaced within them.

Brooker (2009) TH 136 was also

interested in big synoptic stories, and suggested a sequence of activities through which students made thematic connections between discrete elements of substantive knowledge.

Kemp (2011) TH 145 shared Gadd's concern with the place of smaller stories in bigger narratives and created a 'narrative pack' to help his students to include incidental details and quotations to substantiate their narratives and fill the gaps in the reader's knowledge. Kemp also identified the stylistic challenge his students faced in writing narrative. He drew on the work of **Ward (2006) TH 124** to create activities to help his students use adjectives and adverbs to 'enliven' their narratives.

In **Mandler, Lang and Vallance (2011) TH 145**, Vallance argues that the construction of narrative can instil in students 'a critical awareness of how history is made'. Several authors have suggested ways to use historians' narratives in the classroom as models for students' own writing. **Worth (2014) TH 156** used extracts from two historians of the Crusades

to make a link with her Year 7 students between the language of the historian and the argument conveyed in the narrative. She explores how narrative can be used to convey argument, explaining why as well as how, but uncovers a tension between the use of language to communicate with the reader, and the need to remain faithful to the evidential record. She set her students the challenge of writing a narrative of the Crusades which brought to life the characters of Richard and Saladin without straying from a secure evidential base. Her findings also illuminate the structural challenge, since Worth notes that the richest narratives were those where students did not limit themselves to a straightforward chronological 'one thing after another' account.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Lang, S. (2003) 'Narrative: the underrated skill' in *Teaching History*, 110, *Communicating History Edition*, pp. 8-17; Department for Education (2014) *History GCSE subject content* retrieved from www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/310549/history_GCSE_formatted.pdf
- ² Counsell, C. (2003) Editorial in *Teaching History*, 110, *Communicating History Edition*, p. 2.