Myths and Monty Python:

using the witch-hunts to introduce students to significance

In this article Kerry Apps introduces students to the significance of the witch-hunts in the modern era, at the time when they occurred, and in the middle of the eighteenth century. She presents her rationale for choosing the witch-hunts as a focus for the study of significance, and shows how her thinking about her teaching has evolved through her evaluation of her students' learning, and her own re-teaching, over time. At the heart of this article is a character-based activity based on a real witch-hunt from 1651 Massachusetts, which brings home to students the nature of accusations of witchcraft during the seventeenth century.

Kerry Apps
Kerry Apps is acting Head of History at St Thomas the Apostle College, (11–18 comprehensive), Peckham.

In 2014 I began my first placement in a department which was fairly new and was looking to re-develop its Key Stage 3 program. Significance was somewhat missing and I was asked to develop a concept-based enquiry upon either the French Revolution or the witch-hunts to fit into our Year 8 curriculum which takes students from the early modern into the modern period. The Charter School, North Dulwich, where this research took place, is a mixed comprehensive in south London with a very talented teaching staff. Students come from a wide range of backgrounds and challenge and stretch is a big focus at the school.

It would seem elementary here to have selected the French Revolution. It is considered a traditionally important topic and intrinsic to the development of modern Europe. In the debates surrounding what constituted significant topics to teach around the time I was looking to enter into teaching (2012–13) the French Revolution would have won. Yet I elected to work on the witch-hunts. First, because it is a topic I am passionate about and second, I felt that studying the significance of the witch-hunts would provide what Robin Whitburn at the IOE likes to call a 'felt difficulty'.[1] A study of the significance French Revolution could easily become a study in *why* it was important.[2] The significance of the witch-hunts is arguably more complex and less obvious allowing for analysis over different eras and scales (local, national and international). Students would really need to consider *what* is significant about it. The scheme of work also by some providence fell in the autumn and linked quite nicely to a prior enquiry upon interpretations of Oliver Cromwell. Students had therefore gained some background knowledge of puritanism and life in the seventeenth century which would come in handy. Through the study of practitioner literature and planning I came to settle on the enquiry question 'What should be remembered about the witch-hunts?' In many ways, attribution of significance shares many characteristics with interpretation and this enquiry question provided scope for students to place their own judgements upon what was significant enough to be remembered in their final pieces.

A model of significance, and a model of progression

In creating my progression model of students' understanding of the significance of the witch-hunts I was influenced by a range of practitioner literature that has begun to expand since Phillips called significance the 'forgotten key element.'[3] It became clear from reading that my students needed to understand that significance is not an enduring characteristic but instead a fluid attribution.[4] This therefore needed to be a part of my progression model. Influenced also by Brown and Woodcock I decided that students ideally should both be able to recognise significance in different eras and at different scales as well as using some criteria to justify their ideas.[5]

Much has been written about the positives and pitfalls of utilising set criteria to help with understanding significance, such a Partington's GREAT and Counsell's 5Rs.[6] While I did not use wholesale a set of criteria imported from another practitioner, I did use some

Figure 1: Progression model for students' learning about the significance of the witch-hunts

Beginning	Students can explain what the witch-hunts were and give some examples of significance. These may be simplistic statements e.g. 'they went on for a long time'.
Improving	Students can use multiple criteria to explain the significance of the witch-hunts using clear examples to back up their ideas.
Mastering	Students can use more than one criterion to explain the significance of the witch-hunts and can analyse how significance changed over time or among different groups.

of the vocabulary of significance highlighted in Counsell's 5Rs to help to frame students' thinking.

Using my own subject knowledge I thought long and hard about what I myself would distil from the witch-hunts as evidence of significance. I elected that it is significant that the witch is still a dominant cultural figure in film, television and literature – without realising students had already internalised a wide range of preconceptions about witches. Therefore they are 'remembered' today. At the time they happened, the hunts affected the lives of the peoples of Europe and America on macro- and micro-scales:

- On a macro-scale the witch-hunts had an impact on popular culture, literature and law making.
- On a micro-scale they affected everyday life through folk belief or the immediate impact of a trial within a community.

Studying the hunts can therefore 'reveal' a lot about seventeenth-century life and attitudes – in particular, the witch-hunts intersect with attitudes to gender, religion and community.

The witch-hunts were also fantastic fodder for the men of the enlightenment. The superstition of witch-hunting was a mirror which men such as Voltaire could hold up to themselves to prove their superior rationality – they were therefore 'remarked upon' after they had ended. I used these criteria to frame my lesson titles and content. To show off the students' knowledge the final product of the scheme of work was to be a letter to the curator at the British Museum arguing why the witch-hunts should be remembered with a major exhibition.

Matthew Bradshaw used the metaphor of a sandwich to describe progression in significance (gain knowledge, apply criteria to judge significance, analyse others' interpretations of significance, create original criteria).[7] Here, I capped students at the 'filling' of the sandwich – applying criteria to judge significance: see Figure 1.

Dealing with misconceptions

Yet, before we could get to significance, we had first to deal with the myriad of misconceptions about witchcraft. Everybody knows something about witches. A student (and a teacher) might arrive at the study of the witch-hunts feeling they already know a great deal. They may have heard of Salem or Pendle or Matthew Hopkins. Yet the witch-hunts are heavily mythologised. Different cultures and eras have viewed witches and the witch-hunts through their own prisms:

- in the seventeenth century witches were a very real diabolical threat to godly society;
- to second-wave feminists the witch-hunts were emblematic of long-term patriarchal oppression;
- in summer 2017 a high-profile women's fashion magazine ran a piece on modern witchcraft, discussing two South London covens and providing tips on how to get that witch aesthetic *just* right as 'coven chic' was the coming trend.

In all these iterations the witch and the witch-hunts become a simplified story used to express a certain narrative – godliness, feminism, modern femininity.

I have found that many students arrive with preconceptions influenced by these tropes and may already have explanations on why the witch-hunts happened – explanations that may be influenced by myth or simplification. Just as Robin Conway wrote in his great piece on prior knowledge, these preconceptions are in very real danger of clouding the information gained in lessons.[8] Kate Hammond's discussion of teaching the significance of the Holocaust was also very useful in the face of these pre-existing ideas. She found that students arrived in her classroom with a 'myriad of little facts' that clouded the bigger picture of the complexity of the significance of the Holocaust.[9]

This is something that I wished to break through in my teaching of the witch-hunts. To do this, therefore, in my first lesson I focused on what students knew and an analysis of where they might have gained their knowledge. Figure 2 shows the learning activities of this lesson, and the rationale behind them, in detail. The gallery walk arising from the starter produced certain key ideas which always come out: witches are old, they are ugly, they ride brooms and cast spells with cauldrons. They were mainly women, they actually did magic and they met in groups at night. They were burnt at the stake. If not challenged, these ideas could create a rather neat but inaccurate explanation of why the witch-hunts happened and their significance – lots of women were doing magic and lots of them were executed. Students could also fall into easy condescension – for someone growing up in the twenty-first century, it would be easy to cast those involved in the hunts as stupid or silly, without an understanding of the sophistication and complexity of early modern ideas surrounding the spirit world and magic.

Figure 2: Lesson One in detail

Task	Rationale
Starter: Students draw an image of a witch before annotating it with anything and everything they might know about witches or witchcraft. Then share the images and then go on a 'gallery walk' analysing the similarities and differences in each other's thinking.	Students' misconceptions/preconceptions highlighted in this activity will be discussed and addressed later in the lesson.
Students are given five minutes to pick out common themes and ideas from their class's pictures of witches on the wall. Students then feed back and their ideas are placed on the board. Teacher-led questioning should get the students to begin to consider where their ideas have come from.	Students understand from each other how witches are remembered today, usually as the stereotypical image of the witch on the broom at Halloween with cauldron and cat. Students also begin to think about where their ideas have come from: Hollywood, fairytales...
Students are given an image of a stereotypical witch from the seventeenth century to contrast their images with. Students are asked to find areas of contrast and similarity. Students then feed back their findings to be added to the board.	Students understand that while the image of the witch in the early modern period was more complex, ideas of old, ugly women with a range of animals around them are inherited from the time.
Myth-busting quiz. Students are asked a series of questions about the myths surrounding the witch hunts and whether they are true. Example questions: 1. Did witches fly on broomsticks? 2. Did witches keep cats? 3. Did witches actually do magic?	The explanations given while marking (e.g. it was not true that all people accused of witches had cats, though it was believed that witches would have an animal familiar which was a spirit) help to highlight the complexity of the witch-hunts versus the simplicity of modern myth.
Students jot down any ideas they already have about the significance of the witch-hunts around a spider diagram that will be added to as the lessons go on.	Students understand they need to use criteria in order to progress in the concept and begin to build a bigger substantive image of the witch-hunts.

The tail end of this lesson was therefore used to pick apart these ideas by introducing the complexity of the significance of the witch-hunts as a buy-in for coming lessons. Students were introduced to the ideas that:

- men, women and children were accused;
- witches were written about in plays, stories and literature;
- guides were written on the importance of discovering witches;
- conservative estimates place the death toll at around 50,000;
- Enlightenment scientists and philosophers continued to write about the witch-hunts as an example of the backwardness of previous generations in the years after the end of the panic.

Complicating thinking about significance

The initial lesson, 'How are witches remembered today?' revolved around the breaking down of preconceptions. This lesson provided a high level of engagement and a great discussion of whether myth-making in history is okay and the importance of the historian's role of attempting to decipher and disseminate the truth. Many students seized on the discussion created in this lesson and began to see in an almost meta- way: the study of the witch hunts is quite a significant exercise in dispelling myth. The direction of future lessons (as revised: see below) can be seen in Figure 3.

The second lesson rested upon gaining a detailed knowledge of the witch-hunts (the base bread of Bradshaw's significance sandwich). Students were provided with an overview of the witch-hunts through a timeline highlighting key events.

Figure 3: Scheme of learning, as revised

Lesson question	Brief description of learning	Tasks relating to significance
How are witches remembered today?	See Figure 2.	
What can belief in witches reveal about life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?	Students investigate further the events and beliefs which fuelled the witch-hunts in the early modern era in an around-the-room activity before using this as a window into early modern life (patriarchal families, fear about single women, disorder, crime etc. …)	Students use the 'revealing' criteria to write about the significance of the witch-hunts in being symptomatic of issues in early modern society. All students will be able to describe the witch-hunts/the sort of people accused.
What can the story of Springfield, Massachusetts reveal about belief in witches?	Students investigate, via role-play, the spread of witchcraft accusations through a real seventeenth-century community. See Figure 4. The case revolves around a male victim and highlights the prevalence of belief and the sheer numbers of accusations that could occur in one community.	Students will use the knowledge gained in this and the previous lesson to write a response outlining why the witch-hunts were significant. All students might describe the amount of accusations and prevalence of belief, while some could be using criteria to explain significance *at the time*.
What can the enlightenment tell us about the significance of the belief in witches?	Students will learn about the rise of scepticism, decline of magic and the enlightenment's use of the witch-hunts as examples of unscientific superstition.	Students consider the significance of beliefs about witchcraft from a different era in their outcome task. Some students will highlight explicitly how and why the thinkers of the enlightenment viewed significance in different ways. All students will use the criteria of resulting in change/resonance.
Was the witch craze significant?	Students are introduced to their final task – writing a letter to the curator of the British Museum to encourage an exhibition about the witch-hunts. Students use ripple graphs to chart significance over time, before beginning to plan their letters.	Reminder of criteria to be used in planning script allows access to improving/mastering levels. Ripple task allows students to include significance over time in final task.
What should we know about the witch craze?	Students have this lesson to write their letters.	Production of final outcome and checking that they have made progress.

Figure 4: Extract from *Malleus Maleficarum*

Malleus Maleficarum

Question VI. Why is it that Women are chiefly addicted to Evil Superstitions?

Let us consider women; and why witchcraft is found more so in fragile females than men. When they have a good spirit they are most virtuous [good]; but when they are governed by an evil spirit, they indulge in the worst possible vices [sins]…

Others have given other reasons for why there are more witches found amongst women than men. The first is they are more credulous [believe things more easily]; and since the aim of the Devil is to stop faith, therefore he attacks them. The second is that women are naturally more impressionable [easy to lead]…

This source is an extract from *Malleus Maleficarum* written by Henrich Hramer in 1486. The title means 'Hammer of Witches' in Latin. The book was meant to help people find and punish witches.

Who does Kramer believe is more likely to be tempted by the Devil and become a witch?

They worked through a sorting task highlighting some of the wide-ranging theories behind their causation and then engaged with Malcolm Gaskill's *Witchfinders*.[10] The introduction to his text on Matthew Hopkins and the East Anglian witch-hunts provides a great overview of the significance of the witch-hunts as he lays out the wider picture before zooming in upon the key figure in one particular case. This provided a good introduction for the students of the different scales of significance we would be looking at (pan-European, local, at the time and after the fact). At this stage many students focused on the impacts of the hunts on the people caught up in accusation and the numbers affected.

Ongoing lessons then looked to complicate this thinking. In our original third lesson students investigated what the witch-hunts can teach us about life in the seventeenth century. Students puzzle through contemporary sources such as depositions and sections of texts such as James I's *Daemonologie* and the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* to understand what insights the witch-hunts can give us into wider life.[11] See Figure 4 for an example. Using scaffolded investigation sheets and teacher questioning, students were able to pick out the intersections of ideas of gender, the importance of religion, the importance of being a 'good' member of your wider community and belief in witches. Students therefore grasped that the witch-hunts can reveal an awful lot to us about early modern life such as patriarchal attitudes towards women and the religion- and spirit-rich world the people of the early modern era inhabited.

Grounding thinking about significance in a single case study

In our original fourth lesson, the third in Figure 3, we zoomed into a personal story investigating the impacts of belief in witches upon a single community. It is perhaps the students' favourite lesson. Springfield, Massachusetts in 1651 was a godly community in turmoil. The witch-hunt that ensued in the town involved fifteen years of rumour, the death of children, the breakdown of a marriage and the continual perceived threat of violence from the local Native American peoples.

Students are told the initial story of Springfield to set the scene before being given a character card describing the life and fears of an actual inhabitant of the community in 1651 (see Figure 5). The fact that the cards were created from my own research from my undergraduate dissertation also provides a nice window into higher study and the historical process. Students read their cards and then get into character. They get to know each other ahead of choosing whom they believe to be the witch in the community.

Students become extremely engaged in the story and hardly ever guess that the witch accused in real life was Hugh Parsons. Students then read the real depositions against Hugh Parsons and begin to feel quite sorry for him. Through their conversations, students realise the depth of belief in witchcraft across the whole of the community from

Figure 5: Character cards from Springfield, Massachusetts, 1651

Reverend Moxon
As the Puritan vicar of Springfield, you are the most important person in the town. You are very highly respected and hold lots of power.

William Pynchon
You are the town elder, the political leader of Springfield. It was you who sorted out the deal to buy the land Springfield stands on from the Native Americans. The townspeople look to you for advice and guidance. You have the largest farm and house in Springfield.

Sarah Edwards
You live in a small plot of land with your husband in a house you inherited from your father when he died. While your husband farms you work keeping cows, trading butter and milk. You often rely on the charity of others, though you do get really angry when other members of the town ask you for some milk for free.

Rice Bedortha
You are extremely religious and happily married to your wife Blanche. You hope that you can raise your new son to be a good Puritan Christian. You are concerned that some people in the town are not religious enough, however, and may bring the temptations of the Devil to the town. The Parsons never seem to come to church.

Hugh Parsons
You are a sawyer (like a carpenter) and brick-maker. Your skills are in high demand and you make a good living. You regularly skip church meetings to work. In 1638 you beat up Reverend Moxon because you felt he was cheating you out of money. You aren't a very good husband and regularly fight with your wife Mary. You like to smoke and spend time with the Native Americans.

Jury
You are part of the jury from Boston. You are a well-respected, religious citizen concerned with a rise of sin in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Walk around and meet the townsfolk of Springfield. Who do you think is most likely to be a witch?

Martha Moxon
You are the teenage daughter of the town's vicar. You are unmarried. Your father's position in the town means you feel you are better than others. You also have a good education, far better than most of the women in the town.

John Pynchon
You are William Pynchon's son, and very much second in command to your father. You are unmarried, but looking for a wife. Because of your father you hold a good position in the town and one of the largest houses and farms.

Thomas Edwards
You are a poor farmer and work hard to bring in enough food from your small plot of land to look after your wife. You worry about whether you would have enough food if you and your wife were to have children. You and your wife are good Puritans. You worry though that some others in the town fail to attend church and don't seem very religious.

Widow Marshfield
You are a single, old widow. Your husband died shortly after the founding of the town. You are relied upon as a midwife during the townswomen's pregnancies and are close to many young women including Blanche Bedortha. You are a good Puritan, though five years ago Mary Parsons accused you of being a witch.

Samuel Parsons
You are Hugh and Mary Parsons's young son. You are five years old. Your mother regularly tells you bedtime stories about witches and the terrible things that happen to sinners. Your father is very strict and you are a little scared of him. Everyone else in the town is too.

Jury
You are part of the jury from Boston. You are a well-respected, religious citizen concerned with a rise of sin in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Walk around and meet the townsfolk of Springfield. Who do you think is most likely to be a witch?

Rebecca Moxon
You are the vicar's youngest daughter. You are eight years old. You are well educated and a good, well-behaved Puritan child.

Jonathan Burt
You are a poor farmer. You make a living growing peas, corn and wheat on a small patch of land and doing odd jobs around the town. You worry constantly about your crops being ruined or the harvest being bad. You are jealous of Hugh Parsons: he earns more money than you.

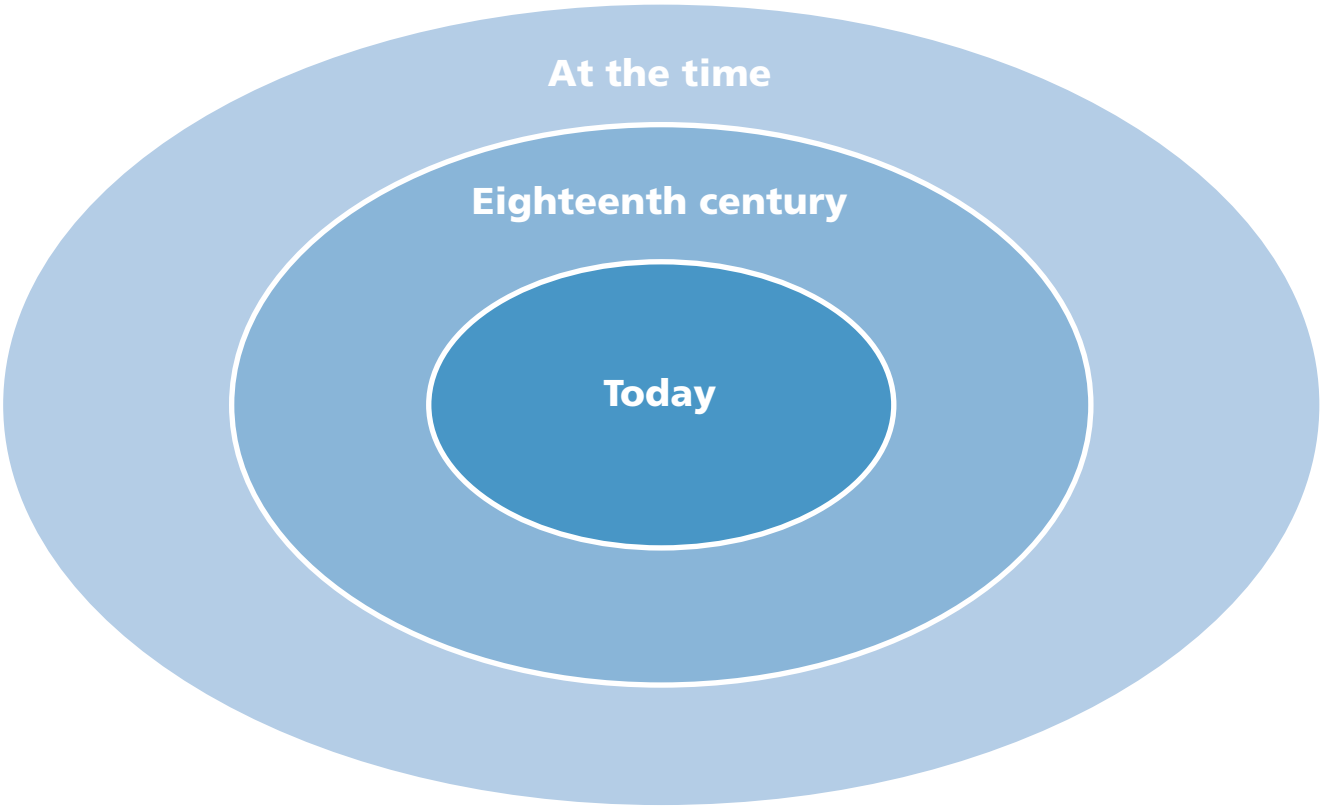
Blanche Bedortha
You are happily married and live in a mid-sized house alongside your husband and young child. You do not get along with the Parsons family. You recently suffered a painful birth and thought you saw strange lights and creatures during the labour. Mary Parsons claimed that your dear friend Widow Marshfield had bewitched you.

Mary Parsons
You are married to Hugh Parsons. You met in Springfield and married quickly. Hugh is not a kind husband and can be violent and aggressive. You fight regularly. Both your sons are often ill. You are fascinated by witchcraft and are concerned that there is evil afoot in the town. You are convinced that Widow Marshfield is an old witch and love to spread gossip.

Joshua Parsons
You are Hugh and Mary Parsons's young son. You are one year old. You love your parents, but your father is often strict and shouts at your mother. You know he has a good job because your mother tells you. You are not very well and have lots of nightmares.

(Make as many 'Jury' cards as you require)

Figure 6: Ripple diagram about significance of the witch-hunts



the Reverend down to farm labourers. They also get to see first-hand how the web of rumour could develop before a formal accusation. Hugh is also a great case in point for not *all* accused witches being women.

Bringing students' thinking together

In our penultimate lesson students then considered the significance of the witch-hunts during the scientific revolution of the late seventeenth century and the enlightenment of the eighteenth. The fabulous but very plainly named eighteenth-century painting *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* provides a fantastic piece of initial stimulus material for an investigation into the era after the witch-hunts. The use of darkness, shadow and light and the full moon in the window led many students to believe that the image must be of some kind of magical ritual. Following discussion of the painting, students learn about the setting up of the Royal Society and the new focus on evidence, ahead of reading sections of Frances Hutchinson's eighteenth-century biography of Matthew Hopkins and Voltaire's damning descriptions of witch-hunters.[12] Students then re-attempted writing a brief explanation of the significance of the witch-hunts which was then marked in advance of the next lesson.

The final lesson tied the learning together and provided thinking time ahead of writing their letters. Students were given time to improve upon their paragraphs before being introduced to their final task. It was explained to the students that there had only been less than a handful of large-scale exhibitions about the witch-hunts, including a short exhibition at the British Museum in September 2014 entitled 'Witches and Wicked Bodies'. The exhibition focused upon early modern images of witches but did little to explain the significance or impacts of belief in witches. Students were therefore given the task of writing a letter to the curator of the British Museum to explain why the witch-hunts should be remembered in a large exhibition. To help structure their thinking students were given an A3 ripple diagram – see Figure 6. They were given fifteen minutes of time to talk with their partner plotting their ideas on the diagram ahead of beginning to plan their letters. They were then given the next lessons to complete them.

Teaching the scheme of work again

I have now taught this scheme of work twice and will be introducing it with slight edits in my new role in a new school. This has allowed me to change the teaching slightly each year.

I wanted students to unpick significance from guided investigation of source material. I have always been very impressed with students' ability to work with only slightly edited original source material and their ability to grasp concepts such as patriarchy. From my 2014 cohort's letters it was clear that all my students had grasped on some level different versions of significance over time, for example a simple assertion that today we remember witches in film whereas in the seventeenth century people were actually affected by cases. Some students also hit the top end of my progression model even coming to their own judgements upon the most important aspect of the witch-hunt's significance in their conclusions.

Initially in my planning I was slightly concerned with the level of content I had packed into the lessons, and what came across in that initial teaching was a lack of specific detail in students' responses. For instance, students might write about witches being written about but then miss out on the chance

to punctuate that idea with *Daemonologie* or the *Malleus Maleficarum*. As such, and as part of a whole department initiative, a mid-point test and revision homework were added to the beginning of the enlightenment lesson. The revised scheme is printed as Figure 3.

I am currently in the midst of developing a new Key Stage 3 course. This scheme of work was originally built for a cohort of Year 8 students who had not encountered significance before. I feel that the idea of getting students to attribute significance criteria to a historical event or person would fit well in Year 7. Taking a spiral approach to teaching I would then like students to revisit significance by analysing historians' attributions of significance in their texts before beginning to develop their own criteria after studying a topic with minimal scaffolding in Year 9. While this works well as initial introduction with GCSE and A-level reform it is essential that our students are confident in unpicking others' judgements of significance as well as creating their own criteria in line with the interpretations questions and coursework at A-level and significance questions at GCSE.

Conclusions

What I have found is that an investigation into the significance of the witch-hunts taught with a focus on source material has had a tripartite effect. First, it allows for discussion of the historical process and gives a window into how historians work (particularly social historians). Second, it has made students conscious of the fact that not everything we hear about history is correct: we should test what we hear with evidence. Third, the topic really does make for a great route into the concept of significance. If you are interested in developing a scheme of work upon the witch-hunts, all of my resources including source material and some lessons can be found on the SHP website.[13]

REFERENCES

1 Robin Whitburn, Institute of Education seminar day about developing Black History in schools, 2014.

2 Hammond, K. (2001) 'From horror to history: teaching pupils to reflect on significance' in *Teaching History, 104, Holocaust Edition*, pp. 15–23.

3 Phillips, R. (2002) 'Significance: the forgotten key element' in *Teaching History, 106, Citizens and Communities Edition*, pp. 14–19.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*; Brown, G. and Woodcock, J. (2009) 'Relevant, rigorous and revisited: using local history to make meaning of historical significance' in *Teaching History, 134, Local Voices Edition*, pp. 4–11.

6 Philips, *op. cit.*; Counsell, C. (2004) 'Looking through a Josephine-Butler-shaped window: focusing pupils' thinking on historical significance' in *Teaching History, 114, Making History Personal Edition,* pp. 30–36.

7 Bradshaw, M. (2006) 'Creating controversy in the classroom: making progress with historical significance' in *Teaching History, 125, Significance Edition*, pp. 18–25.

8 Conway, R. (2006), 'What they think they know: the impact of pupils' preconceptions on their understanding of historical significance' in *Teaching History, 125, Significance Edition*, pp. 9–15.

9 Hammond, *op. cit.*

10 Gaskill, M. (2005) *Witchfinders: a seventeenth-century English tragedy*, London: John Murray.

11 James VI of Scotland (1597) *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into Three Bookes*, Edinburgh: see www.bl.uk/collection-items/king-james-vi-and-is-demonology-1597 (accessed 12-02-2018); Kramer, H. and Sprenger, J. (1487) *Malleus Maleficarum*, Speyer, Germany.

12 Hutchinson, F. (1718) *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft: With Observations Upon Matters of Fact; Tending to Clear the Texts of the Sacred Scriptures, and Confute the Vulgar Errors about That Point*, recent (2013) imprint, Charleston: Nabu Press.

13 www.schoolshistoryproject.co.uk/myths-monty-python-preconceptions-witchcraft/, retrieved 12-02-2018.