

# move me on

## The problem page for history mentors

This feature of *Teaching History* is designed to build critical, informed debate about the character of teacher training, teacher education and professional development. It is also designed to offer practical help to all involved in training new history teachers. Each issue presents a situation in initial teacher education/training with an emphasis upon a particular history-specific issue.

Mentors or others involved in the training of student history teachers are invited to be the agony aunts.

### This issue's problem:

Jon Donovan is worried about how to deal with his own dyslexia in the classroom as it affects other aspects of his teaching.

Jon Donovan was inspired to apply for teaching because of the example set by his own history teacher who had encouraged and nurtured his interest, despite the significant challenges he faced in the subject as a result of his dyslexia. When Jon was interviewed for the course he talked through the nature of his difficulties, and felt very positive about the kind of role model that he could present, as someone who had had to work very hard to overcome a serious difficulty and yet had proved that it was possible. Now that he has been observing in classrooms and has actually done some teaching (mostly short lesson segments), he is much more nervous and uncertain about what approach to take.

Jon has realised that while he *could* be seen as a role model, he has not yet earned students' respect, and fears that they may lose confidence in him before he has really started. He recognises that new teachers are often viewed with suspicion, especially by those in exam classes who want to feel confident in the person teaching them, and he doesn't want to create doubts and anxieties. He is therefore hoping that he can put off acknowledging the problem until later in his training when he might have gained the students' trust. But that decision makes him anxious about the risks of misspelling words on the whiteboard, which could lead to students copying his errors, or recognising that they're wrong and laughing at him. The alternative, on which he has relied heavily so far, is to prepare all the materials that he intends to use as handouts or PowerPoint slides and avoid writing anything on the whiteboard at all. His mentor is concerned that this will prevent him from engaging effectively with the students' thinking, forcing him to keep moving on to the next prepared slide rather than showing a genuine interest in their ideas by capturing some of their feedback. It would also mean that he could only share prepared models in relation to the tasks that he sets, rather than engaging in live modelling – building an answer together with the class, or encouraging them to critique and improve on examples that he displays, thereby demonstrating the editing process.

Looking ahead a little, Jon is also worried about marking students' work because he may not spot important mistakes, and is becoming anxious about the reading he needs to do to develop his subject knowledge in relation to a GCSE unit on Richard and John. Reading new material still takes him much longer it does for most other teachers.

## Email from Mohammed, the subject lead for history, to Jon's new mentor

I'm not sure if Jon has spoken to you at all, but I thought it worth prompting a conversation as I know he is extremely anxious about assuming more responsibility for whole-class teaching. You may have seen from his background details that he has dyslexia. He was very happy to declare this at interview and to discuss some of the strategies that he had developed to overcome the challenges he faced in history at school and to manage his studies at university. While he seemed very positive at that point, he has become much more anxious as the training programme has got going and he has become aware of the amount of reading he will need to do to boost his subject knowledge. He has also started to worry about how he should manage his difficulties in the classroom. Originally he wanted to be completely open about them with his students, but he now seems to be feeling much more vulnerable. I know he checked and re-checked the two PowerPoints that he prepared for teaching segments last week and that's creating another worry about time demands. I don't think there are easy, immediate solutions, but I think a conversation with him about the current problems he's facing and how to manage them for now, and as he takes on more responsibility, would be really valuable.

## Reply from Jon's mentor, Frederick, to the history subject lead

Thanks for getting in touch, Mohammed – and perfectly timed. I had suggested that Jon could lead the introductory activity for a Year 9 scheme of work on World War II and couldn't understand why he didn't make a note of the questions that the students posed. He had a brilliant idea to use a list of statistics related to military and civilian deaths by country and I couldn't quite understand why an idea that was so well conceived seemed to fizzle out. None of the students' (excellent) suggestions were captured or refined and he seemed to overrule them at the end, by presenting his own questions on the PowerPoint. I'll broach it with him in our next mentor meeting.

## Email from Jon to his former history teacher

Dear Charles (though, you'll always be Mr Wotten, if not 'Sir'!)

Sorry to contact you again so early in my training year, but you did urge me to keep in contact, so I'm taking you at your word! Thanks again for the advice and support you gave me as I was preparing my PGCE application and for all your encouragement. As you know, I thought my experience of battling with dyslexia would make it easier for me to support my own students, but the reality of *starting out* as a teacher has only really just hit me. You said it would be hard work, and I thought that would just be in preparing lessons. I knew there would be some reading about the process of history teaching, but wasn't prepared for the further reading I'll have to do about the history itself. I thought I was up to speed now on the main topics taught at school, but hadn't bargained for the demands of the new GCSEs. I don't think I've studied the medieval period since Year 7 and absolutely all I currently know about Richard and John can be summed up as 'the Crusades' and 'Magna Carta'! I'm worried there will be even more to come for A-level. I managed systems to handle the reading at university, but they depended on giving it sufficient time – and I can't see where that time is going to come from if I'm planning lessons and teaching as well.

But it's managing my dyslexia in the classroom that's my biggest nightmare at the moment. I've had to plan and check my PowerPoints so carefully and I don't want to risk writing in front of the class at this stage. My anxieties mean that my handling of student feedback on the few tasks I've set so far has been really clunky and disjointed. I thought it would be easy just to let the students know that I have dyslexia but the prospect of doing that now seems terrifying. I already feel like a fraud standing at the front of the class and everyone is telling me that I need to set my expectations with more conviction. So I don't want to say anything that makes me look even less credible. You've got a pretty good idea of my abilities – and must have been through something a bit like the nerve-racking state I'm currently in when you started out – so what would you recommend?

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Reply Reply to All Forward

Victoria Crooks is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, where she is the subject lead for the secondary PGCE and PGCE School Direct history programmes.

Jon's anxiety about his dyslexia is having a big impact on his emerging professional identity as a history teacher. His desire to be a competent teacher, and potential role model for students with additional needs, is preventing him from taking necessary risks in the classroom. He is beginning to recognise the additional challenge that his dyslexia poses in terms of classroom teaching – particularly capturing students' ideas – and marking, and in terms of preparing lessons and resources. Additionally, he is feeling overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of historical subject knowledge enhancement that he believes is required of him.

His anxiety is in danger of overshadowing his early teaching experiences, and it will require careful intervention from Frederick to build his confidence and provide structures in which he can experience some real success in the classroom.

**IF I WERE JON'S MENTOR, I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:**

- 1 Listen to Jon's fears and reassure him that his dyslexia could be a real asset** to his classroom practice if he is prepared to be open to developing strategies to address these challenges and take some risks in the classroom. I would ask him to explore his anxiety about being 'caught out' by the students, working through scenarios with him of what might realistically happen and how he could respond in each situation. Mohammed and other colleagues could support him by modelling professional openness about their classroom fears and demonstrating ways of capturing student ideas and adapting to them in 'live' teaching.
- 2 Help Jon to identify 'coping strategies'** for the classroom by taking time to understand how he has managed his dyslexia in his academic studies to date; using a visualiser, for example, rather than a white-board might reduce his anxiety.
- 3 Explore methods of subject knowledge acquisition which will help him use his time effectively:** for example, pointing him towards podcasts or documentaries to help him develop a subject knowledge framework that will guide his reading. Identifying accessible or key texts, such as *King John: treachery, tyranny and the road to Magna Carta* by Marc Morris, and using mentor meetings to discuss his reading, so that he understands the depth of understanding that might be needed to teach each topic, would help him to focus his subject knowledge development.
- 4 Address Jon's workload and make reasonable adjustments** for his dyslexia. He may need a more gradually phased transition to teaching and a reduced timetable to compensate for the additional time it will take him to prepare. Frederick could also reduce Jon's planning load by ensuring that his timetable includes parallel classes. This has the added benefit of encouraging Jon to take risks, knowing that he has the opportunity to reflect and immediately act on feedback. Undertaking joint planning with Jon will help him to think through the rationale for the lesson and the purpose of the feedback phases, so that he can see why taking live feedback might be so important. Ensuring that he has time to focus on rehearsing or preparing those elements of the lesson about which he feels least secure, rather than spending time making all his resources from scratch, is also vital.
- 5 Begin preparing him for future challenges** which may emerge by encouraging him to read about how students can be supported to attempt extended historical writing. Counsell's Historical Association pamphlet on *Analytical and Discursive Writing* would be a great starting point, before leading him into *Teaching History* articles by Banham (TH 92), Harris (TH 102), Laffin (TH 98) and Foster (TH 142). Team-teaching to model some of these approaches, before undertaking joint marking of the students' written responses, would also scaffold Jon's experience of teaching strategies which he may feel are more 'risky' due to his dyslexia.

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Reply Reply to All Forward

Hannah Blyth teaches history at Waingels College (11–18 comprehensive) in Reading, Berkshire and is a mentor in the University of Reading PGCE partnership.

Jon is facing early-stage teaching insecurities which are perfectly normal. Unfortunately, they are becoming conflated with his anxieties about how people perceive his dyslexia. It is encouraging that he is eager to talk about his struggles (as shown by the email to his former teacher and by his PGCE interview), but he needs to share his feelings more effectively with his mentor if he is to receive the most appropriate support. Likewise, his mentor and other members of the department need to make sure that Jon feels completely safe to reveal his anxieties. It is not unusual for trainee teachers to want to be role models from the beginning, but we need to create a culture in which individuals like Jon, who can do so much good for the profession, feel safe and supported in viewing initial teacher training as a long-term – rather than an instant – process, in which they may well encounter setbacks and challenges.

**IF I WERE JON'S MENTOR, I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:**

- 1 Establish early dialogue and communication with Jon and with the university.** Arrange a meeting with Jon to discuss his worries in an open and supportive forum. He needs to know that he can talk to those trusted with supporting his development and that they will work with him to find strategies. Remind him that he should not be ashamed of his dyslexia and praise him for his hard work in dealing with it. Perhaps ask other members of the department to share some of their early career struggles in a humorous way, so that Jon sees how common it is for all new history teachers to have insecurities. This will create an honest and supportive environment where it becomes normal to talk about his dyslexia.
- 2 Encourage Jon both to team-teach and to observe other colleagues.** Trainee teachers are often nervous about writing on the board. Perhaps let the students know that you'll be team-teaching for a few lessons; but allow Jon to do most of the teaching, and essentially just act as his scribe. Jon will feel supported and gain confidence and the students will be none the wiser as he works through his insecurities. As his confidence grows, help Jon to identify key spellings in advance, using a glossary, and ensure that these words are correct when he writes on the board. Many teachers have specific educational needs and yet come to thrive, so arrange for Jon to observe others and discuss with them how they manage their barriers.
- 3 Recommend specific reading and other sorts of interpretations, such as podcasts and documentaries.** Jon cannot let his dyslexia impede his knowledge acquisition and awareness of the big historical debates, but guidance can make the process easier. Introduce him to shorter texts and relevant articles. Push him to take a creative approach: using Radio 4's *In Our Time* on Magna Carta would be a brilliant way to engage with historians' arguments about it.
- 4 Suggest the use of appropriate marking strategies, such as whole-class feedback.** Scaffold Jon's first attempts at marking, in order to relieve some of his fears. Read a sample of answers together and create a feedback sheet which highlights key strengths and identifies the common misconceptions. Together devise a set of targets for development from which the students then select the most appropriate for them. This would limit the amount of writing required and reduce the possibilities of error in commenting on individual work.

## Next issue's problem:

Christine Pizan is struggling to use questioning effectively.

For details of her mentor's problem, email: [martin.hoare@history.org.uk](mailto:martin.hoare@history.org.uk)

Responses are invited from mentors and trainers of trainee history teachers.

Responses for the December edition must be received by 18 October 2019.

Christine and Jon are both fictional characters. Thanks to Katharine Burn,

Department of Education, University of Oxford, for devising the Move Me On problem.