

Ordinary pupils, extraordinary results: a structured approach to raising attainment at GCSE

It is a very common complaint that history GCSE is unfairly demanding compared with other subjects. Well, it probably is. But that does not stop history at Robert Clack School from outperforming every other subject except art. Nor is this the story of one of those schools with an unusually large number of very able pupils. At Robert Clack School, fewer than a quarter of the pupils gain five grades A* to C. In history, however, about *half* of the students have been gaining grades A* to C (and this is not because of some sneaky ruse to stop the less able from taking the exam!). Dawes and Towill analyse only one aspect of their strikingly successful practice, but it is one which offers many rich ideas and practical suggestions. Their systematic and structured approach drives hard at those problems which Chris Culpin identified in August ('Still learning how to teach Kimberley', Letters page, *Teaching History*, 92, August 1998). Their teaching is illustrated here through a conceptually sharp revision programme and some imaginative yet rigorous learning activities. No doubt this is not the whole story. Dawes and Towill allude, for example, to the importance of charismatic and enthusiastic teaching and to the vital role of Key Stage 3 in preparing for GCSE. I expect that both of these are critical. Nevertheless, the revision programme and activities presented here are worthy of reflection and discussion by every history department.

Introduction

Within weeks of the election of the Labour government in May 1997, it was clear that the pressure to drive up academic results in schools was to continue. Labour's first White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, published in July 1997, not only endorsed the Conservatives' plans of setting GCSE targets for schools, but argued that teachers should be judged by the performance of their pupils in national examinations.¹ The pressure to raise academic standards, therefore, has already passed from education authorities and headteachers to subject departments and, it would appear, to individual teachers.

Yet despite this clear trend towards making teachers more accountable for the performance of their students, educational literature, particularly at subject level, has tended to concentrate on individual aspects of methodology. For many years, history teachers have been able to benefit from thought-provoking articles

in *Teaching History* and from INSET activities at the Historical Association's conferences and elsewhere, which have improved their ability to teach essential historical skills such as the investigation of cause and consequence, the analysis of evidence and extended writing.² Yet little has been written to show how all of these components can be combined in a meaningful and stimulating way, resulting in general improvements in pupils' historical understanding and performance.

This article seeks to go some way towards redressing the balance. It is rooted in our experience of teaching in a large urban comprehensive, where the challenge is partly to ensure that pupils are sufficiently motivated to want to learn for themselves. For eight years, our history GCSE results have been markedly and consistently higher than those in other academic subjects (only results for art are higher). The former head of history who was responsible for the initial turnaround in the history results has now been appointed headteacher and is raising achievement across the curriculum, but

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pupils in history are still performing better than in other academic subjects. Approximately half the history GCSE pupils have been gaining grades A*-C, compared to a school average of fewer than a quarter gaining five grades A*-C. Terry Haydn has recently examined the factors behind the department's success.³ We would certainly not claim any monopoly of understanding of what raises standards at GCSE, but an outline of the techniques we have adopted may prove useful to other departments.

Providing the framework for GCSE success

There are many factors which contribute to success in GCSE History. A strong focus on evidence-based enquiry and extended writing at Key Stage 3 provides the foundation, and the combination of high expectations, enthusiastic and charismatic teaching, and the use of varied resources and teaching methods all assist pupils in gaining high grades. Yet it is the contention of this department that the sustained interaction of four factors leads to the maximisation of examination success at GCSE (see Figure 1).

The planning and teaching of lessons is of central importance, but in order to decide exactly what to plan and how to teach, regular assessment of pupils is needed. Indeed, in many ways the starting point for the effective teaching of GCSE is with the evaluation of assessment data. Information published by the examination boards (in our case the NEAB) outlines how successful previous pupils have been at the various aspects of the course. Recently our pupils seem to have coped better with the knowledge-based Paper 2 than with the evidence and knowledge-based Paper 1. This

information has been used to develop new teaching methods for Paper 1. These teaching methods can then be evaluated throughout the GCSE course via the monitoring of internal assessment tasks, internal examinations and, during the revision programme, through the analysis of examination-style tests. In order to show more fully the way in which the four factors in Figure 1 have influenced our results at GCSE, it is necessary to look at one part of the examination syllabus – Paper 1 – and at one part of the curriculum – the revision programme.

Evaluation of teaching strategies

The NEAB Modern World History syllabus is divided into two papers. Paper 1 consists of eight units – three on the causes and events of the First World War, three on causes and events of the Second World War and two on the Cold War. Although it is a source-based paper, it is clear from syllabus details and sample mark schemes that a substantial degree of contextual knowledge will be required. Revision of this paper begins at the beginning of the Spring Term of Year 11, shortly after pupils have taken their mock examinations. Data from these examinations, together with feedback from the NEAB, such as their breakdown of pupil performances and Reports on Examinations, is used to ascertain the aspects of the paper with which pupils have difficulty.

We have found that despite rigorous teaching at Key Stage 3 and during Years 10 and 11, pupils frequently encounter significant problems in analysing evidence. They assume that primary evidence is automatically correct, and refuse to subject it to the critical examination it requires. They confuse questions

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Figure 1
Four factors involved in raising attainment at GCSE

concerning reliability of sources with those asking how useful sources are as historical evidence. Where pupils are asked why interpretations of historical events are different, they sometimes respond by explaining how the interpretations are different.⁴ And, most importantly, given the increased status attached to the 'historicity' of sources in the SCAA criteria for GCSE syllabuses, pupils often do not use their own knowledge to explain or evaluate the sources in the examination paper.⁵

Planning and Preparation

With this information in mind, a revision scheme of work is drawn up (see Figure 2).

Every unit of the syllabus and every type of examination question is included, usually several times. Factual recall and 'past paper' tests take place each week.

Figure 2

Revision scheme of work for Paper 1

WEEK BEGINNING	LESSON 1	LESSON 2	LESSON 3
2 FEBRUARY	Unit 1 (Origins of the First World War): 1998 Specimen Paper Question 1: <i>supporting sources</i> <i>reliability</i> <i>explanation</i>	Unit 1 continued.	Unit 1 continued.
9 FEBRUARY	UNITS 1 AND 2 FACTUAL RECALL TEST Unit 2 (The Western Front 1914-1918): 1996 Question 1: <i>agreeing with source</i> <i>interpretations</i> <i>explanation</i>	Unit 2 continued	Unit 2 continued
23 FEBRUARY	UNITS 4 AND 5 FACTUAL RECALL TEST PLUS 1997 QUESTION 2 Unit 4 (Origins of the Second World War): 1997 Question 2: <i>interpretations</i> <i>explanation</i>	Unit 4 continued	Unit 5: 1998 Specimen Paper Question 2: <i>explanation</i> <i>sufficiency of information</i> <i>interpretations</i>
2 MARCH	Unit 5 continued	UNITS 3 AND 6 FACTUAL RECALL TEST PLUS 1997 QUESTION 1 Units 3 and 6 (The Home Front in the First and Second World War): 1997 Question 1: <i>comparison of sources</i> <i>usefulness</i> <i>explanation</i>	Units 3 and 6 continued
9 MARCH	Unit 6 (The Home Front in the Second World War): 1993 Question 3 <i>usefulness</i> <i>reliability</i> <i>comparison of sources</i>	Unit 6 continued	UNIT 7 FACTUAL RECALL TEST PLUS 1996 QUESTION 4 Unit 7 (Origins of the Cold War 1945-1949): 1996 Question 4: <i>agreeing with source</i> <i>reliability</i> <i>explanation</i>
16 MARCH	Unit 7 continued	UNIT 8 FACTUAL RECALL TEST PLUS 1993 QUESTION 4 Unit 8 (Aspects of the Cold War 1949-1963): 1993 Question 4: <i>explanation</i> <i>reliability</i>	Unit 8 continued

High expectations, enthusiastic and charismatic teaching, all assist pupils in gaining high grades

Figure 3

Extract from Revision Booklet showing how to approach source-based questions

Pupils often do not use their own knowledge to explain or evaluate the sources

Reliability Questions

A reliable source is one the historian can trust

Stage 1 Look at the **background information** – who produced it, when, where, what the source is – to see what the source might be reliable for.

Stage 2 Look at the **source itself** to see whether it appears to be reliable. Does it give both sides of the argument? Are any exaggerated words or images used?

Stage 3 Use **your own knowledge** to judge whether the information in the source is trustworthy.

Usefulness Questions

A useful source is one that provides information to the historian

Stage 1 Look at the **background information** – who produced it, when, where, what the source is – to see in what ways the source is likely to be useful to the historian.

Stage 2 Look at the **source itself**. Does it contain any useful information? If it is unreliable, then what useful information can it reveal about the person who produced it?

Stage 3 Use **your own knowledge** to judge how useful the source is, and to mention other possible sources for the historian to consult.

Sufficiency of Evidence Questions

*NB it is unlikely that one or two sources will provide concrete **proof** of an event*

Stage 1 Look at the **background information** – who produced the source, when, where, what the source is – to see what information the source is likely to reveal.

Stage 2 Look at the **source itself** to see what information it does provide (the strengths of the source) and to look at what information is not provided (the weaknesses of the source).

Stage 3 Use your **own knowledge** to provide some of the details the source leaves out.
Mention specific historical sources –
photographs, newspaper reports, diaries, statistics, government records – that could be consulted to find out more information.

Interpretations of Evidence questions also use the three stage formula, but stages 1 and 2 are reversed:

Interpretations of Evidence Questions

An interpretation is someone's opinion, or point of view.

Stage 1 Look at the **source itself** to see what the interpretation of the source is.

Stage 2 Look at the **background information** to the source – who produced the source, when, where and what the source is – to see why it has this particular interpretation.

Stage 3 Use your **own knowledge** of the past to help explain why the source has the interpretation it does.

The last major type of question is the one which asks you to use the sources and your own knowledge to explain an event. This requires different treatment:

Questions which ask you to use the sources and your own knowledge to explain an event

Remember that these questions are usually worth 10 or 12 marks and so they should be treated as mini essays.

Stage 1 Jot down, in rough, six to eight points **from your own knowledge** that you will need to make.

Stage 2 Next to these points make a note of the sources which mention these points.

Stage 3 Write your answer in neat, referring where relevant to information contained in the sources.

NB

Some questions like this ask you to **comment on a particular view** e.g. that the Soviet Union was responsible for the Cold War. In these cases it is worth jotting down all the points that **agree** with the view first, then jotting down all the points that **disagree**.

Teaching

At this stage the techniques of analysing sources with reference to their provenance are systematically and rigorously taught. Our department feels that even with the more skills-based Paper 1, pupils still need a detailed knowledge of the topics they are studying. However, there is a danger that pupils spend too much time learning information, and not enough time deploying that information and analysing sources. For

this reason, the department's Revision Booklet contains a detailed summary of each unit of the course. Factual recall tests ensure that pupils learn this information, and allow the bulk of teaching time to be spent on examination technique. Again, the Revision Booklet is the starting point for this. It includes a breakdown of all the major types of examination question as well as guidance on how to answer them. In general, this means analysing each source in three separate stages (see Figure 3).

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Figure 4

Sample student response on Cold War

Source P says that the Cuban Missile Crisis was a real test for Kennedy, but in the end Khrushchev did what Kennedy wanted. The source was written by the American State Department in 1982. The source is more likely to be biased because it was written by an American. It also boasts about how Khrushchev backed down. However, since it is a secondary source, it is likely that the writer was not caught up in the emotions of 1962 and could form a more objective view. Source R says that Russia's only aim was to defend Cuba and had not intended to launch a nuclear missile. The source is biased towards Russia because it was written by a Russian and because it defends the actions of the Russians. It only shows the Russian point of view and therefore is not completely reliable. However, the statement that Russia was only defending Cuba could be accurate because in 1961 the US had attempted to overthrow Castro because he had turned Cuba into a communist country.

Both Source P and R are not completely reliable because they only show their countries [sic] point of view. A historian would have to use other sources to form a more balanced and reliable opinion.

Throughout the teaching of Paper 1 the three stage formula is emphasised. Initially, the teacher explains how each of the stages contributes to the analysis of the sources in question, and gives model answers as examples of good practice. As the revision programme progresses, pupils start writing their own answers, either in an informal environment or, once a week, under test conditions. Pupils read their answers to the rest of the class and comments are made, both by the teacher and by other students. Good pupil answers are photocopied, analysed and used as model answers. Figure 4 is an example of a pupil response to the question: 'Which is the more reliable to an historian writing about the Cuban Crisis, Source P [written in 1982 by a member of the American State Department who witnessed the events of 1962] or Source R [from a speech by Khrushchev to the Supreme Soviet in 1962]?'

Figure 4 was photocopied as a model answer. It is clearly not a 'perfect' response. There is, for example, some confusion over the nature of Source P. Yet the candidate has quite clearly used the three stage procedure in her analysis of Sources P and R, for she uses the provenance and content of each source, together with her own knowledge, to produce a balanced and sustainable case.

Encouraging pupils to assess their own work

To extend our existing revision programme and to try to make it more pupil-centred, we are currently piloting a programme which requires pupils to assess GCSE answers in a systematic and rigorous way. The aim here is twofold: first, we are trying to get pupils to recognise for themselves the strengths and weaknesses of the answers they are producing; second, we are trying to take away the mystery of how examiners will mark their

work by getting them involved in the process of GCSE evaluation.

The criteria by which pupils are asked to assess their answers reinforce the guidance in the Revision Booklet and are intended to be general enough to apply to most types of question found on Paper 1. Presented to the pupils in the form of a checklist (see Figure 5), pupils stick this on to the front of their revision folders. Enlarged copies are also displayed prominently on the classroom wall. Pupils will be familiar with this 'checklist' from early on in Year 10.⁶

Figure 5

Criteria for pupil self-assessment.

THE GOOD ANSWER CHECKLIST FOR PAPER 1

1. Is the **background** of the source explained *in relation to the question asked*?
2. Is the **source** explained *in relation to the question asked*?
3. Has **extra knowledge** been shown *in relation to the question asked*?

Other questions to ask:

4. Is it a **balanced** answer? (Does it show the strengths and weaknesses of the source?)
5. Is it well written?

Figure 6

Table used by pupils to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of different answers.

Answer	Background of source explained?	Source explained?	Own knowledge shown?	Balanced answer?	Well written?
1	X	✓	✓	X	X
2	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
3	✓	✓	X	✓	✓
4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

To introduce pupils to the concept of self-assessment, an exercise has been devised which gets pupils to assess and compare a range of answers to a specific question. These answers have been composed by the teacher deliberately to demonstrate common weaknesses in candidate responses. A 'model' answer is also included and the pupils will eventually be asked to identify which answer is the best one and to explain what makes it a strong response. The pupils are provided with a table that corresponds with the checklist (see Figure 5) so that they can easily compare the different responses. In groups they are asked to examine each of the answers and simply to put a tick or cross in each box of the table

according to the merits or weaknesses of each answer (see Figure 6).

In one example, the pupils were given the question 'How reliable is Source A [a photograph taken in 1914 of men outside a recruiting office] in showing the reaction of British people in 1914 to the outbreak of the First World War?' Pupils were given the following sample of answers in Figure 7 to assess. A wider variety of answers could, of course, have been given, such as answers which included irrelevant information or failed to answer the question set. The suggested outcome of the exercise is recorded in Figure 6.

Figure 7

Four sample answers which pupils assess using the table in Figure 6.

ANSWER 1

I can see lots of men smiling and waving. They look very happy. They are outside a sign that says Army Recruiting Office. This proves that people in Britain were happy about going to war in 1914. From my own knowledge I know that lots of men signed up because they wanted an adventure and to be with their mates.

ANSWER 2

Source A is a photograph taken of crowds outside a recruiting office in London in 1914. As primary evidence it captures the enthusiasm of young men rushing to sign up to fight for their King and country. The men are smiling and waving and holding up their papers. The men were patriotic and thought it was their duty to sign up. They thought the war would be over by Christmas and would be a great adventure. Source A is very reliable.

ANSWER 3

Source A is primary evidence from 1914. It shows men queuing to enlist in the army. We do not know who took the photograph or why and it is possible that it was taken for propaganda purposes, to encourage other men to sign up. The men all look happy and in a holiday mood and there seem to be thousands of them outside the office. However, the camera shot might have made it look like there were more than there really were. Also, lots of men are looking directly at the camera as if they have been told to smile. One man is holding up his papers for the camera so this source might not be reliable.

ANSWER 4

Source A is a photograph showing crowds of men outside a recruiting office in 1914, but it is not known who took it or why. The men are smiling and waving as they queue to enlist. It is true that thousands of men volunteered to fight, feeling patriotic and confident. Most men believed they would be home by Christmas after a short adventure with their friends. However, the photograph could be an example of the propaganda used to encourage men to fight, especially as all the men seem to be looking at the camera. Not all people would have been enthusiastic about the war, such as those who were later conscientious objectors.

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The groups who have undertaken this exercise engaged in lively debate. They developed a greater understanding of what they should be aiming for in their own responses. The checklist approach to assessing candidates' responses will now be incorporated into the revision programme shown in Figure 2. The aim is for pupils to be confident at assessing their own work, and work produced by other pupils, before they sit the GCSE examination.

Assessment of pupils

Once a week throughout the Revision Programme pupils complete part of an examination paper under test conditions. As emphasised above, this helps inform teaching strategies. If many pupils find the analysis of sources for utility difficult, for example, then greater emphasis will be placed on teaching this particular skill. Yet this is far from the only reason why regular assessment takes place. It is our experience that for many pupils the participation in a systematic revision programme, with weekly assessment at its heart, creates a strong sense of purpose and motivation. As pupils develop their historical skills they also feel a sense of progress, which further encourages and motivates.

Conclusion

This article is not designed to be a panacea to restore ailing departments and there is much good practice at GCSE which has not been touched upon. Little mention

has been made of our department's teaching of Paper 2 (a detailed study of the USA and Germany between the wars), and so the role of extended writing at GCSE has not been discussed. The coherence given to our curriculum by devoting our coursework to the role of women in Britain during the twentieth century has not been analysed. Neither have the limitations of GCSE, both for the most and the least able, been subjected to scrutiny.⁷ Nevertheless, it is our experience that the structured and systematic teaching of the knowledge and skills of the GCSE curriculum can lead to raised performance. It is hoped that the examples discussed here will stimulate discussion in other departments.

REFERENCES

- ¹ See 'Labour targets teachers in drive to improve standards' *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 1997; 'Pledge to raise GCSE performance' *The Daily Telegraph* 11 February 1997.
- ² See, for example, Mulholland, M. (1998) 'The Evidence Sandwich' or O'Neill, J. (1998) 'Teaching Pupils to Analyse Cartoons' *Teaching History*, 91, May 1998, Historical Association.
- ³ Terry Haydn, (1998) 'A very peculiar department – a case study in educational success' in Guyver, R. and Phillips, R. *Preparation for Teaching History: Research and Practice*, Lancaster: SCHTE.
- ⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the problems students encounter at GCSE see Haydn, T., Arthur J. and Hunt, M. (1998) *Learning to Teach History in the Secondary School*, Routledge, p235
- ⁵ The notion of the 'historicity' of evidence – that sources are dependent on the wider historical context of the age in which they are produced – was brought into school history teaching discourse by the research of Denis Shemilt and is discussed in McAleavy, A. (1998) 'The Use of Sources in School History 1910-1988: A Critical Perspective' *Teaching History*, 91, May 1998, Historical Association.
- ⁶ See O'Neill, J. *op. cit.* for a more specific use of a checklist at GCSE.
- ⁷ For an excellent analysis of the limitations of GCSE in assessing the most able, see Pickles, E. (1997) 'Does GCSE provide valid assessment of the achievements of the most able?' *Teaching History*, 89, October 1997, Historical Association.