

Building memory and meaning:

supporting Year 8 in shaping their own big narratives

Sarah Gadd attempted to re-think her department's usual approach to the two-year Key Stage 3.

Concerned that a thematic approach might not be securing the overview perspective it was designed to achieve, she decided instead to develop the potential of Banham's work on using depth to make overview possible. Gadd explored intensive use of story as a way of creating better building blocks from which pupils can start to piece together temporal or topic connections, and learn to stand back from isolated events to discern possible processes and trends. She thus argues for a strong relationship between analytic conceptual work and confidence with substantive content. A central feature of her scheme is the concluding activity where pupils devise their own large-scale narratives. Gadd also illustrates her holistic, reflexive research method, explaining how it improved her ability to understand how her pupils made meaning, and to better assess the quality of their conceptual and substantive understandings.

Why do many lower secondary pupils seem unable to make meaningful connections across time? Why do they fail to remember earlier work when it is needed to provide important context for new topics? Why is it that even when a scheme of work places strong emphasis on looking at processes of change over time, explores large themes across long time-scales and uses enquiries which make discussion of the concept of historical change explicit, pupils' ability to form or even engage with those connections can still be disappointing? And what is a history department to do about this when the National Curriculum (rightly) places yet more emphasis on pupils seeing big pictures but the school reduces curriculum time so drastically that history teachers face invidious, impossible choices concerning selection of historical material?

Our history department has now been teaching a 'two-year' Key Stage 3 for five years and has made successive, serious efforts to solve these problems. Two years ago, dissatisfied with the results of our approach, I decided to address the problem in a new way. This article presents aspects of my 'action research' which was designed to examine pupils' historical learning during an experimental lesson sequence for Year 8. It is a selective and much-shortened version of my MEd thesis which I eventually completed in my third year of teaching.

I have chosen, here, to share just three features of that research, those that have most transformed my approach to improving my practice. First, a new emphasis on narrative – both 'telling stories' to pupils (stories full of colour, detail and drama) and then allowing pupils to construct historical meaning through their *own* new narratives, created on various scales. Second, a shift towards giving pupils time to familiarise themselves with people and events in plenty of 'smaller' topics; in other words, an emphasis on 'depth' rather than 'overview', but not as a way of playing down bigger canvases; rather, paradoxically, as an effort to make exploration of such bigger canvases possible.¹ Third, a reflexive approach to research in which I analysed the way in which *my own* meanings and understandings shifted as I reflected iteratively on what the students' work was telling me about *their* understandings.²

How the scheme of work emerged

My research emerged from my experience in my professional setting. The central problem was the thematic approach of our existing scheme of work. In addition to the usual challenges of addressing an adequate range of content, securing coherence, building chronological confidence and helping pupils examine change/continuity over time, we have the further challenge of working within only two thirds of the time originally allocated for the history National Curriculum. Our history department has always attempted to tackle these challenges by following a broadly social 'thematic story' in Year 7 and a political one in Year 8.³

After teaching this for two years, I noticed several problems. Despite our scheme's regular reference to its overarching themes, pupils appeared to lack engagement when tackling long time-spans. My view was that pupils became frustrated by

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Figure 1: The scheme of work on Britain and India

Enquiries and lesson titles	Suggested content and teaching strategies
<p>Enquiry 1 What <i>was</i> ‘Victorian Britain’?</p> <p>Lesson 1: What did Victoria see?</p> <p>Lesson 2: What did Victoria not see? ‘paupers, criminals and other unpleasant subjects’ (Lord Melbourne).</p> <p>Lesson 3: How did others view Victoria?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Introduce Victoria. While wearing ‘Victorian spectacles’ explore key events in the form of stories (e.g. high politics and also events personal to Victoria e.g. marriage to Albert). Pupils complete diary entries as Victoria. Conclusion: anticipating next lesson, pupils to suggest what Victoria would <i>not</i> have ‘seen’. 2 Wearing ‘Victorian spectacles’ explore through stories a range of events and developments that affected all e.g. Public Health Acts, gradually changing towns. Pupils to reflect upon what Victoria did not ‘see’ by completing a ‘little book’ on social reform in Victorian Britain to <i>inform</i> the upper classes on what they were <i>not</i> ‘seeing’. 3 Pupils are to examine how <i>others</i> saw Victoria at the time e.g. ‘Angel in the home’, Empress of India, mourning Albert, ‘Mrs Brown’ rumours. Pupils write newspaper articles, each from perspective of a different social role or position. Return to enquiry question: What WAS Victorian Britain? Attempt answer together.
<p>Enquiry 2 When was Britain closest to revolution?</p> <p>Lesson 4: When did the Victorians <i>stop</i> protesting for political reform?</p> <p>Lesson 5: Did Chartism bring Victorian Britain any closer to reform?</p> <p>Lesson 6: Was Disraeli a failure?</p>	<p><i>Emphasise: pupils must now wear a very different pair of spectacles in order to view Victorian Britain from a different angle, an historian’s angle.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Different political protests e.g. Spa Fields Riots to Reform Riots. After each story the pupils are to produce a mini-card with the date of the event, a short summary & a picture. Turning to lesson question, steer them beyond events to change: what does it actually mean to work out when protest <i>stopped</i>? 5 Story-telling about Chartism, illustrating physical and moral force of Chartism. Hold a Chartist tea-party in which pupils hear and join in Chartist poetry and song (drawing upon Timothy Randall’s scholarship). Evidential focus. 6 Pupils assess (a) why Disraeli can/can’t be said to have carried out a ‘revolution’. Is there such a thing as a ‘revolution’ from the top? (b) Did Disraeli’s reforms <i>prevent</i> revolution from <i>below</i>? Return to enquiry question by conducting ‘living graph’ to allow whole class to argue when Britain was closest to revolution.
<p>Enquiry 3 When was India closest to revolution?</p> <p>Lesson 7: Indian Mutiny 1857-58</p> <p>Lesson 8: How did Britain see the Mutiny?</p> <p>Lesson 9: Does Dadabhai Naoroji matter?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Discuss scene of Indian Mutiny (British angle). Explore terms ‘mutiny’ and ‘revolution’. Story-telling – include Delhi, Cawnpore and the ‘House of Ladies’. Pupils draw a scene from each story that best represents that story to them. Return to the issue of whether this was a mutiny/ rebellion/ uprising. Challenge pupils to question whether or not India was close to <i>revolution</i>. 8 Hook them with Victoria’s response to the Mutiny. Pupils then analyse cartoons and extracts from British press (<i>Punch</i> / <i>London Illustrated News</i>). Discuss how Indians were represented: language / images / themes in the sources. Evidential focus. 9 Contextualise story of Dadabhai Naoroji. Explain his argument concerning British rule and what Naoroji did to make the British aware of their Indian empire. Explore possible significance Dadabhai Naoroji within various wider developments in Britain and India. Return to enquiry question: When was India closest to revolution? Keep focus on concept of historical change.
<p>Narrative writing task: Telling the story of Victorian Britain and India.</p> <p>Lessons 10 and 11</p>	<p>Introduce final task as exciting challenge. Pupils are to write a giant narrative, drawing all three enquiries together (from an historian’s perspective). Discuss what a narrative is & model types of links that might inform it e.g. comparisons/ contrasts/ similarities.</p> <p>(See figure 2 for detail of how the task was set up)</p>

Figure 2: The concluding narrative task

Narrative task

We are going to write 'The story of Britain and India in the 19th century'.

To link all three enquiries together pupils had to produce a GIANT narrative, from an historian's perspective, of what went on in Britain and India during Victoria's reign. Pupils were to weave *their own* connections across time and space, drawing out change, continuity and diversity as relevant.

Through the use of exemplars and pupils' initial ideas about what formed a historical narrative, we agreed a mark-scheme to illustrate what might make a good historical narrative, emphasising that this was what *they* expected of a historical narrative. We agreed that the following links might make our material into a narrative, rather than just a list or a time-line.

- ▶ comparisons/contrasts/similarities
- ▶ causes/effects (one thing leading to another)
- ▶ things happening at same time
- ▶ how people in each country viewed the other country (e.g. British press on Indian mutiny etc)
- ▶ gradual developments and processes that helped to make sense of how things were changing

Pupils first planned their ideas by using a giant map of 'picture and statement' cards of events, individuals and issues.

the thematic approach as they struggled to latch on to any nuggets of depth story that would give them a sense of period or memorable grasp of any sequence of events. Consequently, pupils struggled to retain and transfer knowledge across topics and themes, making meaningful connections difficult – the very things that teaching thematically is supposed to remedy.⁴ Moreover, pupils' reflection on historical change and continuity, in particular, seemed superficial despite interesting and explicit treatment of this second-order concept in our schemes.

I found myself cautiously hypothesising that the failure to remember enough material to discuss conceptual ideas meaningfully might be rooted in two things: lack of attention to story in the initial delivery of the material (and therefore a lack of memorable mental 'shapes' that story offers), and the lack of opportunity to create or make *their own* meaningful 'stories' out of the material. My hunch was that chronology acquires a more memorable or resonant pattern when it is initially apprehended through a meaning-making device such as story. The dynamism of a narrative – really just a tool for placing interpretation upon events – is more meaningful, and therefore memorable, than a mere 'map'.⁵

To address these issues I chose to trial a different strategy from the 'thematic story' approach as advocated by Dawson.⁶ My approach also departed from that advocated by Howson in that pupils were not presented with 'markers of change' or any other outline in advance.⁷ There was, quite deliberately,

no attempt 'to start with a synthesis and set out an outline structure at the start' and then to use this as a reference point throughout the study.⁸ Both the thematic story approach advocated by Dawson and the (conceptually very different) approach suggested by Howson involve the use of initial outline structures which are then revisited.⁹ In my experience this was not the best place to start. Without fascinating human stories on which to hang initial questions and without 'sense of period' acquired through depth engagement with story, it is hard for many students to find such brief, anticipatory syntheses really gripping.

Instead, I designed a scheme that would allow me to experiment with fresh ways of strengthening the interplay between growing chronological confidence, substantive knowledge transfer and analysis of long-term change. In contrast with our existing scheme's overt emphasis on big, synoptic stories, I wanted to see if pupils might, ultimately, be better placed to understand or create their own such synoptic stories if the scheme were more explicitly designed to address problems concerning memory and meaning.

My lesson sequence consisted of three chronologically parallel enquiries spanning much of the nineteenth century – two on Victorian Britain, one on India (Figure 1). These enquiries had many potential links between them and multiple 'little stories' within them.¹⁰ I wanted to build confidence with knowledge and chronology through frequent use of engaging smaller stories, and then build outwards from that base of secure mental pictures and stories, creating opportunity for pupils to reconstruct their learning into their own, larger storied patterns. Thus they would reconfigure material into *new* 'stories', striving to make meaningful connections for themselves. The unique properties of narrative *writing* would be my main tool.

From story to story

By 'smaller' stories I mean, for example, the passing of the Factory Acts, the Great Exhibition in 1851 or the first Indian becoming a British MP in 1892. By 'reconstructing their learning into larger storied patterns', I mean the final concluding activity (see Figure 2) in which pupils created a narrative, linking together, in their own ways, the events, people, processes and issues we had studied. The final outcome was an individually written historical narrative knitting together the history of Britain and India during a 70-year period, in whatever way pupils found meaningful.

This approach differed from the schemes provided by Cole and Thompson who had first developed our department's use of 'thematic story'.¹¹ While continuing to work within the rough chronology of our existing schemes and maintaining the use of enquiry questions as a way of shaping pupils' second-order reflection at particular stages, I wanted to foster familiarity with a broad content area (India and Britain over a 70-year period) without styling the latter as any particular 'theme'.¹² That familiarity would be secured through multiple stories of different scope and focus. This use of 'story' does not imply something fixed. My use of stories did not preclude – indeed it was deliberately designed ultimately to enhance – the ability of pupils later to challenge, re-shape, reconfigure or reassess the significance of those stories. Indeed, each

enquiry laid the foundations for that by foregrounding particular concepts such as evidence or change, but our main journey was to enjoy and find memorable a rich array of linked material, filling out in pupils' heads stories about characters, settings and events so that sense of period and curiosity about unfolding events would grow. I wanted pupils to experience history as narration. I wanted to do this without making a big deal of such links in advance by presenting them as part of any 'framework' or calling them a 'theme'.

Thus, rather than teaching a theme as a pre-determined story, instead, sets of stories would provide the quarry from which pupils could independently create their own meta-story. At the end of the 12-lesson sequence, pupils were going to have an opportunity to do this on a grand scale by writing a 'big' narrative that 'told a story' of Britain and India across the reign of India. It would be up to them to configure that 'story' however they wanted, drawing upon the smaller stories, showing or creating meaningful narrative relationships (see Figure 2). This would be a huge challenge, but I judged that if pupils were motivated enough, and able to remember enough, they would find it exciting and also liberating. Crucially, I would once again be using the tool of narrative, in its power to attribute cause and significance, make meaning out of 'colligatory generalisations' and convey processes of change which lie beyond events.¹³

Pupils would thus move 'from story to story' – from stories initially received, enjoyed and analysed at a micro-level, to 'larger' stories that they would construct themselves. I did not expect this final story-writing activity to result in sophisticated constructions and fully expected them to contain some bizarre links. But it would be a starting point for two things. First, it would show pupils that accounts of the past are constructed and constituted, not 'found'. It would show them that the story form in which they first hear things can be re-shaped into new stories with different kinds of links, resolutions and internal patterning, depending on the question the narrator is answering. This process would underline some key aspects of their second-order learning. Second, it would act as a powerful assessment and research tool for me, allowing me to work out how pupils make meaning through narration and how I could use this, in future, to strengthen both their substantive knowledge and second-order understanding.

When introducing pupils to the narrative outcome task, I deliberately did not provide writing frames or other structures so that the challenge of shaping an overarching narrative was theirs. I did have one preparatory lesson, however, in which we discussed meaningful connections that could make a 'narrative' of the mass of material addressed in the earlier three enquiries (see Figure 2). I also drew upon strategies suggested by Counsell for modelling narrative style.¹⁴ Beyond this, pupils were given relative autonomy to weave a historical narrative of Britain and India, albeit within the constraints of a narrative form and a requirement for factual and chronological accuracy. They would have to do their own wrestling with such issues as relative weight to attach to particular events within the wider narrative, or implicit causal and comparative relationships and other devices which historians use to give accounts of the past some internal patterning that creates meaning.¹⁵

In order to address a broad range of content as required by the National Curriculum, I decided that societies and cultures would be examined through varied, mini-depth foci embracing diverse experiences in diverse settings both in Britain and India. I encompassed both traditional stories of 'high politics' and broader social and cultural issues. Naturally I had to be selective, but the material I chose was sufficiently wide-ranging to allow them to build implicit hypotheses concerning comparison, cause, consequence or change that might make for emergent meaning in a narrative. The idea was that as the pupils' interest was caught and memory cultivated by the stories, pupils would acquire a working mental framework which would help them to 'see' processes unfolding over a longer time-span and to keep track of where events might fit in such a span.

If there was a central influence on my experiment it was the work of Banham.¹⁶ Banham's idea of 'the overview lurking in the depth' has not been developed in print to any great extent, but has been illustrated in two major articles and is much discussed in the more ephemeral culture of history teacher conferences, in-service training and so forth. The genius of Banham's argument for *depth* is that it is an indirect argument for the best way to teach *overview*. In contrast to a focus on thematic stories or frameworks, Banham suggests that it is by spending several weeks soaking up a topic in great depth (he famously had Year 7 spend 8 weeks on King John), pupils acquire sufficient sense of period

Figure 3: Research questions and data types

Research Questions (RQ)	Data type
RQ 1: Where and how do pupils draw upon 'small stories' when creating bigger ones?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Outcomes of tasks (Pupils' work) ▶ Whole class discussions ▶ Final narrative written piece
RQ 2: What kinds of meaning can pupils make when invited to represent a wide range of events and changes as a whole?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Final narrative written piece ▶ Interview with focus group ▶ Preparation task outcome (map) ▶ Questionnaires
RQ 3: How do pupils' ideas about change and continuity manifest themselves within pupils' efforts to construct narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Final narrative written piece ▶ Interview with focus group ▶ Questionnaires

to assimilate broader frameworks or overviews more quickly.¹⁷ Banham justified his extended depth study by arguing that a deep, close period knowledge of politics, culture and society in the reign of John, embracing rich detail about people and events, creates a readiness to understand and assimilate a swift overview or bigger picture of medieval kingship. This differed substantially from our department's usual approach where content is taught 'thematically', driven explicitly by a largely teleological 'big picture' within a particular (political or social) domain and with the patterning of that big picture set out in advance.¹⁸

Thus the two key influences on my work were from very different, in many ways contrasting, stables: Banham's focus on depth as the key to ultimate overview through initial engagement with secure period knowledge; and Shemilt's aspiration for pupils to create 'narratives of their own devising' – flexible, meaning-making devices capable of shifting and changing according to the question being asked.¹⁹

Developing a research focus

In sum, I wanted to implement, develop and evaluate Banham's idea of the 'overview lurking in the depth' by using several 'small' engaging stories as springboards from which to develop (a) pupils' 'sense of period'; (b) pupils' chronological security through better memory of events; (c) the seeds of reflection on conceptual issues such as patterns of change or continuity over longer periods.

During the 12-lesson scheme as a whole, I provided contrasting but complementary ways of helping pupils to make meaning out of second-order concepts such as change/continuity and similarity/difference. The enquiry questions were carefully constructed to focus upon change/continuity in particular (see Figure 1). Thus for example, an enquiry such as 'When was Britain closest to revolution?' requires pupils to transcend the events they have learned about and consider processes, shifts in states of affairs, as well as rate or type of change.²⁰ In addition, the concluding historical narratives allowed pupils to deal directly or indirectly with such concepts. This might seem a surprising move: a narrative, by definition, tends to render direct analysis somewhat opaque. It creates a shape that privileges the narrative dynamic over explicit analysis of (say) degree or type of change. Yet although this *indirectness* posed potential interpretative challenges for me as a researcher, I judged that it would enable me to see, in a 'natural', if indirect way, what sense and meaning pupils made of the events in Britain and India – meanings that would convey an implicit grasp of concept of change or continuity. Mink has argued that narratives 'express their own conceptual presuppositions'.²¹ Thus the balance of form and freedom of my final narrative task had rich potential as a research tool across the web of my objectives.

Having clarified my broad aims for the scheme, I developed three research questions with which to focus my research. These helped me to decide what data to collect (see Figure 3 on p. 37). The final narratives became valuable data for all three questions, but some questions needed a supplement of other data such as interviews with pupils.

For the purposes of this short article, I will simply summarise aspects of my findings for Research Question 1, focusing

on the concluding narrative task. Here, I simply wanted to examine *how* pupils used small stories in relation to larger ones. Achieving this was far from straightforward and what follows is the beginning, rather than the end of my journey. But I found it astonishingly illuminating. It made me ask fundamental questions about my own practice and the assumptions that underpinned it. It also gave me multiple ideas for how to take forward in my future practice the issues that it raised. To analyse the narratives, I used a holistic theming method, involving the creation and testing of emergent themes through iterative readings. This was almost entirely derived from the work of van Manen.²² Following Etherington, I also adopted a reflexive approach, openly exploring my own subjective understandings, not in order to screen them out, but as a tool for understanding what I was reading.²³

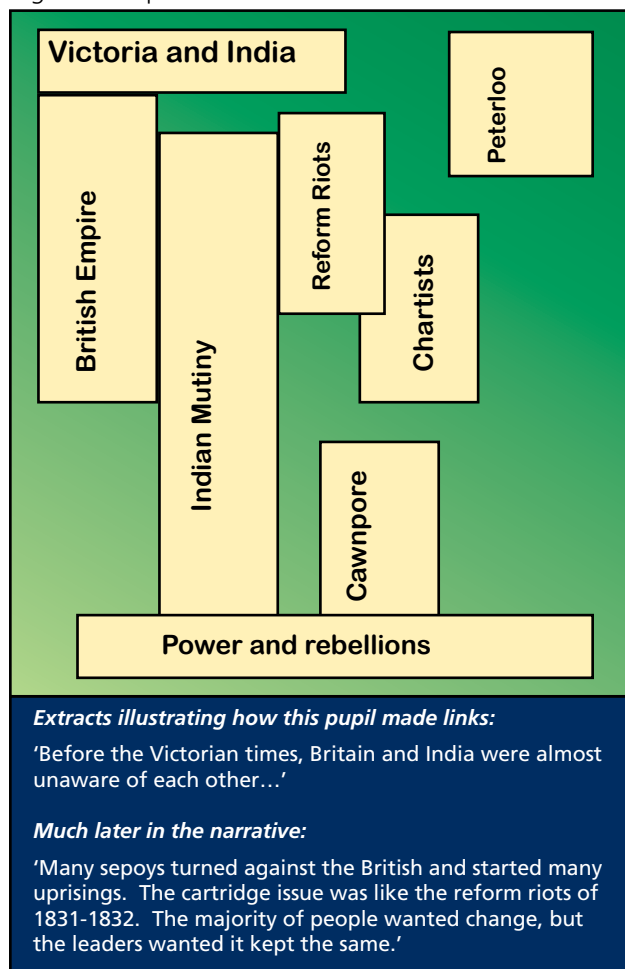
Research Question 1: Where and how do pupils draw upon 'small stories' when creating bigger ones?

Here I wanted to examine which 'stories' pupils had selected to use, and when and how they used them in relation to one another. As with literary stories, historical stories take on form depending on how facts, events and people are selected, presented and linked to one another.²⁴ The author, in effect, determines the nature of the 'plot', even though the events are real, fixed and cannot be changed. In order to support my initial readings, and to help structure deeper analysis at a later stage, I decided to represent my understandings of these texts diagrammatically. I kept a diagrammatical diary to show how my own understandings were changed through repeated re-readings.

As I read through the long narrative pieces, many running to several pages, I soon realised that pupils were doing more than creating a single narrative. They were weaving lines of narrative, sometimes with a dominant story at the centre, sometimes with several stories interwoven. Most were creating what I began to refer to as 'story fragments' – pieces of story or references to other stories that were linked in order to make an overall narrative. Once I had decided (for the purposes of my study) what would constitute a 'story' or 'story fragment', I established where in the overall account the pupils had placed them and how they related to the other story fragments. I decided to represent these as shown in Figure 4 opposite.

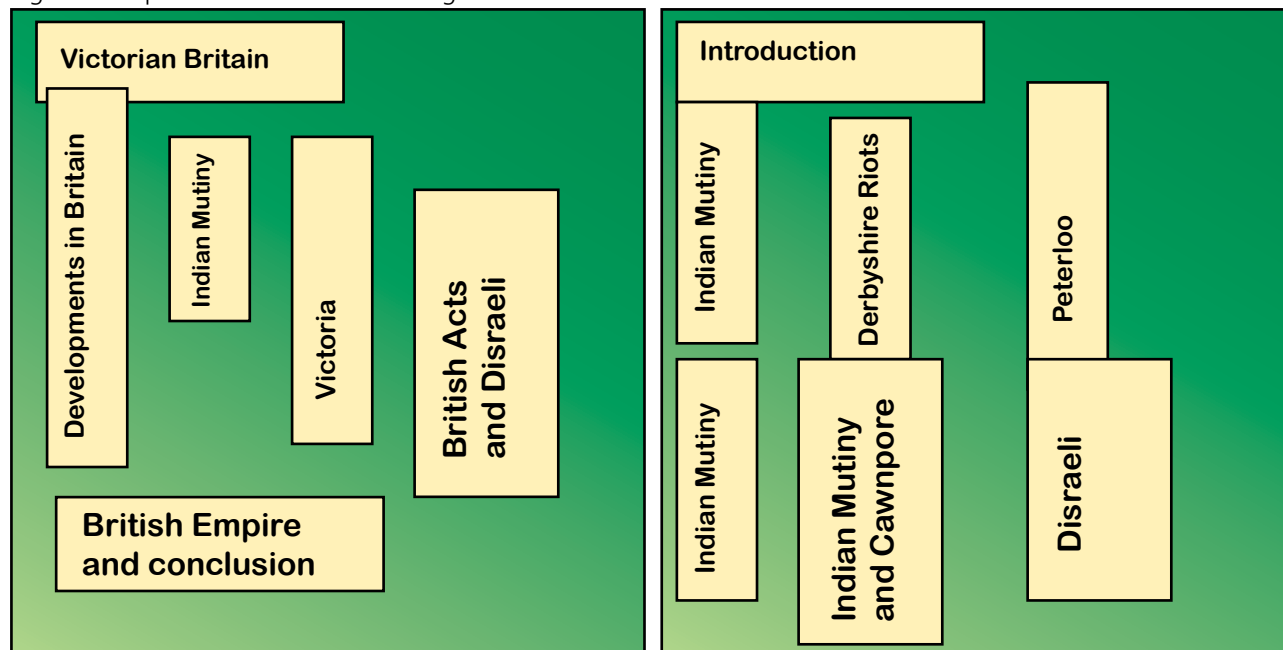
By reading and representing Pupil A's text in this way I was able to explore how Pupil A had placed a value on certain smaller stories in his effort to illustrate a bigger story – in this case, a meta-narrative detailing a broader account of power struggles which was implicit throughout and then became explicit, with much backward-referencing, in a final section. But after several readings of Pupil A's writing I started to see that he had explicit and implicit ways of integrating several stories, large and small, both through structure and through explicit echoes of earlier material. On my second reading, it occurred to me that he was contextualising events in the British Empire by using what *he* was treating as a second 'big' story, the Indian Mutiny. From this, Pupil A would diverge to discuss a smaller story, perhaps a story from the Mutiny itself or other stories he saw linked to his original narrative, such as the Peterloo Massacre.

Figure 4: Pupil A



Through early holistic readings I began to refer to this approach as **concurrent narrative**. Pupil A had achieved a controlled and reasonably fluent movement between stories and story fragments, showing multiple interlocking storylines and arguments without fracturing. Few pupils accomplished this mature form, however. Subtle differences and divergent ways in which pupils used stories to construct their own narratives became more apparent as my story diagrams began to take on new and evolving forms. Indeed,

Figure 5: Pupils D and E on first reading



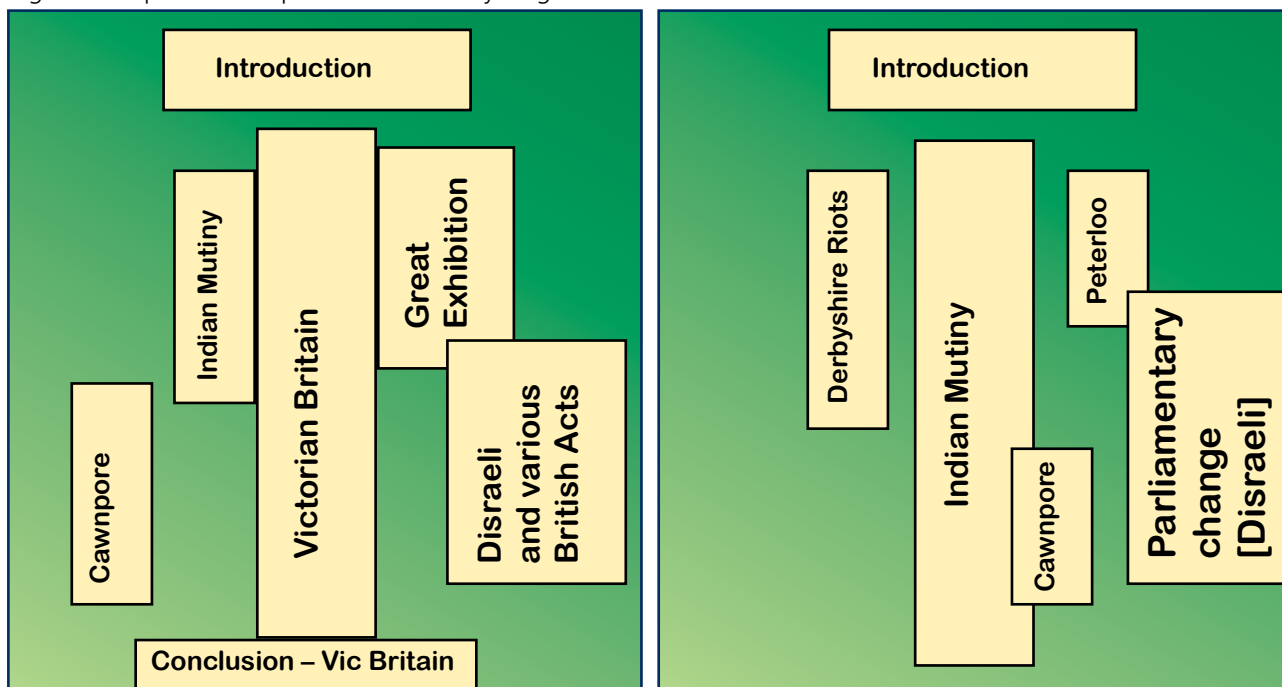
such diagrams proved to be valuable interim devices rather than final conclusions. After several readings it emerged that there was a significant difference between how pupils saw the use of stories and my own starting assumptions. When employing a hermeneutic method of moving between 'parts' and 'whole', my understanding changed with every reading.²⁵ For example, my initial reading of the work of Pupils D and E led me to suggest that there were several story fragments merely juxtaposed, with no main narrative line (see Figure 5).

Here my iterative, holistic reading approach became critical. When I first read them, I saw their narratives as fractured. As I re-read, however, I began to recognise that they were *not* fractured – there was an implicit central story to which they regularly returned. I began to identify this as a **stable narrative**; a story that was rested upon for security or that had somehow grasped that pupil's attention and imagination. Pupil D had chosen to use Victorian Britain as his stable narrative. For Pupil D, the stable narrative was used to *climb into* the Indian Mutiny, which in turn became a relatively small story fragment, whereas for Pupil E, the Indian Mutiny was the stable narrative of his story, with events in Victorian Britain being related to it. Despite a contrasting writing style and content choices, they had achieved a similar form. Figure 6 overleaf shows my more developed understanding of what Pupils D and E were doing.

Compared with Pupil A's writing, however, the links made by Pupil D and Pupil E were generally less powerful and sometimes chronologically vague. At the same time, although tenuous, the main links made by both pupils did relate to the concept of power. In looking for relationships, they appeared, often, to be thinking hard, and independently, about issues that were worth exploring with them in future.

I had presumed that most pupils would see a 'big' story (relative to isolated events or 'little stories') as a broader chronological span: a form of meta-narrative that was conceptually rooted and revealed processes of change underlying, say, industrial change or imperialism. However, many pupils used the Indian Mutiny as a 'big story' in that it became their linking device, their reference point for other material and their orienting

Figure 6: Pupil D and Pupil E – revised story diagrams



mechanism. They did this in different ways. For some pupils, the Indian Mutiny was not only comprised of little stories (concerning Delhi, Cawnpore and Lucknow, for example) but additionally it drew in what they saw as its antecedents and its apparent legacies. For a few pupils, it became a structure with which to frame their use of other ‘smaller’ stories at several removes from the mutiny itself, such as the Chartist movement or the role of Victoria in India. While this sometimes made for strange or meaningless ‘links’ it did allow them to construct, in effect, thoughtful hypotheses about how events might be compared, if not related, and also to reflect with interest on disparate things that were happening concurrently.

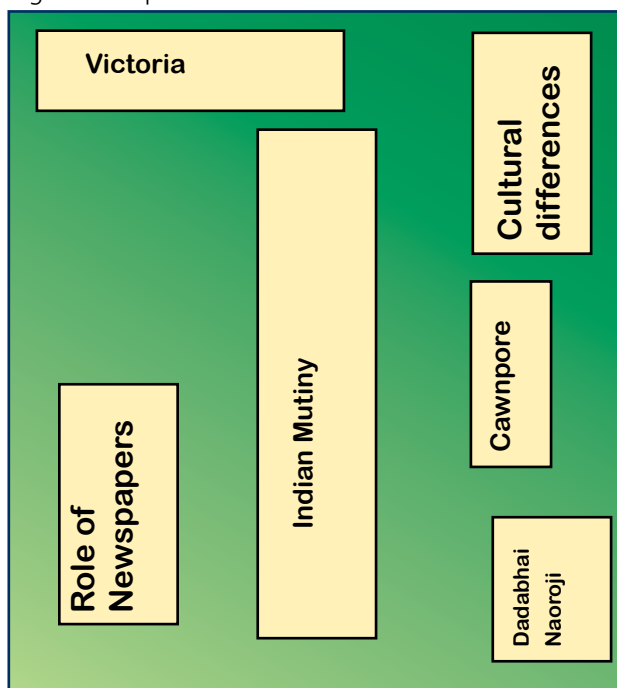
A different phenomenon, revealing a different blend of possible achievements and possible misconceptions, can be seen in Pupil F’s work (see Figure 7). Pupil F was arguably understanding and presenting the past as ‘event-space’.²⁶ He was simply trying to show to the reader various things that ‘happened’. Here the Mutiny dominates the narrative but smaller stories become discrete segments that are packed around this big story, with no discernible effort to show connections or even concurrent chronology. Realising that this was different from what I had discerned in the work of Pupils D and E, I began to refer to a theme of **fractured narrative**. A few other pupils adopted similar approaches, surrounding the mutiny with smaller satellite stories that are not connected but just appear to exist. Sometimes these smaller satellite narratives were developed at length, but without any significance teased out. They appear to be there simply because pupils held better knowledge of (and perhaps interest in) a particular event. The flow of the narrative was therefore interrupted or did not make chronological sense.

Continuing in this way, my theming approach helped me to discern many functions of pupils’ ownership of ‘small stories’. Here, Pupil G was trying to use smaller stories to make a certain kind of comparative link between Britain and India:

Both countries wanted change... In Britain the lower classes wanted to have the right to vote because at the

time only the upper class men would have a say in anything political. This was because the government thought that there should be a specific hierarchy in society so by not letting certain people vote there could be order and the prime minister that the upper class wanted would be the prime minister. ... Over in India all the natives or sepoys where [sic] forced against their will to work for the British... The British were the ‘owner’ or ‘masters’ of the Indians. They were seen as inferior because they had coloured skin or they practised a different religion, some of their traditions were also scrapped.... Both of these things would have made a country very angry so people started to rebel.

Figure 7: Pupil F



In comparison to Pupil F's telling us 'what happened', Pupil G was attempting to tell the reader 'what was going on'.²⁷ But Pupil G's use of events was interesting and complex. In some places, while he seems to be just describing events, an implicit significance is in fact attached to those events, evident from his positioning of the event in relation to other material. Unlike Pupil F, Pupil G appears to be concerned with finding possible turning points. Yet parts of the 'narrative' sometimes turn into a clinical presentation of facts, even though a deeper reading shows that he is trying to make analytic links and is conceptualising change as process. Pupil G's lack of explicitness about the role of his chosen facts helped me to re-consider the achievement in some other pupils' work. I realised that in comparison to other pupils' writing, Pupil A had achieved more than I first recognised. Pupil A had constructed more than a **concurrent narrative**. I therefore decided to replace this theme with **blended narrative**, which seemed to capture his achievement in not merely dealing with trends, processes and relationships but in weaving these into a recognisable *narrative* and simultaneously showing the place of assorted mini-depth foci in several possible 'big pictures'.

Conclusion

It is only possible to draw limited, tentative conclusions from this very small-scale study. For me, as teacher-researcher, it was a starting point, not an ending. The research gave me new intellectual tools for *talking* about how pupils handle overview and depth and for assessing the nature of their misconceptions and accomplishments. It also gave me many new ideas and hypotheses concerning the importance of substantive knowledge stored as stories. In particular, my exploration of how pupils linked 'small' stories with 'larger' ones gave me helpful insights into the potential of my original hypothesis that security with mini-'depth' studies could be a key tool for building a range of later, flexible, alternative 'overviews'. The pupils' narratives were often flawed and revealed considerable confusion, but confidence with content and enjoyment of story had nonetheless made them tackle the final, challenging task with zest and enthusiasm – a foundation on which I could now build. The emphasis on narrative – received and constructed – seemed to have given them something of what was missing before: enduring, remembered meaning and a more natural fascination about broader trends and processes (often arising from their questions about the detail and drama of 'depth').

My deliberate emphasis on content was not intended to replace critical conceptual work, but rather to make it possible. Whatever the limitations of their final narrative work, pupils were sufficiently familiar with enough varied material to be able to do many interesting things with it, including the questioning approach and conceptual emphasis our department has always striven for. My findings in relation to Research Question 2 provided some evidence of conceptual progression. Research Question 3 helped me to examine the potential of narrative and linguistic techniques for building explicit reflection on change and continuity.

But perhaps just as important as the above was the way that the iterative reading and theming process, with its continuous, circular reflection, changed my way of being

a teacher. The approach occasioned a new reflexivity concerning my initial assumptions about pupils' meaning-making. Through a hermeneutic process, moving between parts of the data and the whole, and reflecting on how my own understandings were changing, I had recognised the positive role of my own subjectivity in interpreting pupils' work. As Etherington has it, we should use subjectivity 'to filter our participants' experiences *through* our own, *not* to supplant their experiences with our own'.²⁸

REFERENCES

- I use 'depth' here in a relative sense. It will be obvious from Figure 1 that compared with, say, an A-level course, my treatment of topics was still light of touch. But in comparison with our previous approach (in which large frameworks such as thematic stories tended to drive delivery), this was a major shift towards dwelling on substantive content for long enough to become reasonably familiar with period settings and sequences of events.
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