

GUIDANCE PAPER



Progression and Assessment in History

This paper is suitable for school and subject leaders in England with responsibility for planning and delivering the history curriculum, and should be used in conjunction with ASCL's *Summary guidance to good practice in progression and assessment in history* and ASCL's *Embedding a culture of professional development in history framework*.

Section 1 Overview

Section 2 What is progress in historical understanding?

Section 3 Developing a model for progress in historical understanding

Section 4 What is the purpose of history?

Section 5 How can progress in historical understanding be assessed most effectively?

Section 6 The role of summative assessment

1 Overview

The National Curriculum levelling system was abolished in 2013. The period since then has seen a welcome shift towards putting a formative conception of assessment at the centre of classroom practice. A ‘formative conception of assessment’ means, in this case, a major focus on the potential for assessment to be used formatively to help pupils, rather than to measure their attainment.

Planning for effective formative assessment in history requires addressing two major questions in turn:

- What is progress in historical understanding?
- How can progress in historical understanding be assessed most effectively?

The rationale for this is simple. Formative assessment means assessing what pupils currently know and understand, and using this information to help improve their understanding. It is therefore immediately obvious that formative assessment cannot be discussed without first considering the fundamental questions that lay behind it: what does it mean to ‘know and understand’ in history? How do pupils make progress in their knowledge and understanding in history?

It is impossible to design a system or policy of formative assessment without a deep, shared understanding of what it is that is being assessed. These two topics get to the heart of history education. Therefore, to reform formative assessment within a department, a wholesale discussion of progress in history is needed. (For primary teachers, this may not be possible given the shortage of specialists and time constraints. Therefore, this document provides a summary of debates around progress in historical understanding and formative assessment to help guide your practice)

2 What is progress in historical understanding?

No two teachers, professors or departments will ever arrive at exactly the same conclusion to this question. Debates about what it means to make progress in history, and what historical understanding is, have taken place for centuries, and there is still no consensus. It is consequently vital for each department to discuss, reflect, and arrive at its own conclusions.

Having said that, our understanding of progress in historical understanding has moved on profoundly as a result of these debates, and there is more agreement than might be imagined at first. This guidance acts as a primer to ideas on progress in historical understanding and links to further reading are included throughout.

Substantive and second-order understanding

Studying history requires both substantive understanding of historical concepts and second-order understanding of the procedural ‘tools’ of the discipline which are used by historians.

Much of the extensive media coverage devoted to school history in recent years has viewed the recent curricular struggles through the tedious prism of ‘skills versus knowledge’, with observers lining up to choose a particular side which is (usually) based on their political perspective. This debate is dispiriting for two reasons: it misrepresents a complex debate, and it ignores the degree of consensus achieved by educators in recent years.

Perhaps the most important product of all debate about historical understanding in recent decades has been the idea that it involves developing both substantive and second-order (procedural) knowledge and understanding.

- **Substantive knowledge** refers to the substance of history: names, dates, places, events and concepts.
- **Substantive concepts** are the concepts that we encounter in history, for example kingship, society, revolution, liberty, and feudalism. While they are specific and historically grounded, many have seen their meanings change over time, presenting an additional challenge in interpretation. Furthermore, the same concept may have vastly different meanings, for example, ‘revolution’ could mean the Russian Revolution or the Industrial Revolution, while even a term like ‘king’ has been applied to figures as diverse as William the Conqueror and Elvis Presley!
- **Second-order (procedural) knowledge** is summarised by Stephane Levesque as understanding ‘the conceptual tools needed for the study of the past as a discipline’. These tools capture what is at the heart of history as an academic discipline. If substantive concepts are concepts that we encounter in studying history, second-order concepts are concepts that help us organise the process of studying history.

Many different versions of key second-order concepts have been presented (see links below), but there is considerable overlap between these. Some of the most commonly-suggested concepts are:

- causation and consequence
- change and continuity
- significance
- historical interpretations¹

¹ It is important to note here that ‘interpretation’ does not mean pupils coming up with their own interpretations of particular people or events. Instead, it means studying the different ways in which the past has been interpreted and represented, for example, representations of the British Empire over time, in order to tease out some understanding about both the object of interpretation and the interpreters.

- similarity and difference

Commonly suggested disciplinary procedures include the use of evidence and the process of historical enquiry – devising and investigating questions about history.

Further reading

- 1 **The Historical Thinking Project** – a Canadian project set up to uncover the concepts at the heart of ‘historical thinking’ – has elaborated a useful scheme of historical concepts.
- 2 The **2007 National Curriculum** for history splits second-order concepts into ‘key concepts’ and ‘key processes’ and is one of the more insightful attempts at definition.
- 3 Teaching History has a selection of ‘**article trails**’ on key concepts such as significance (subscription required for all Teaching History resources, unless otherwise stated).
- 4 Dutch researchers **Jacques Haenen and Hubert Schrijnemakers** have detailed the methods that they use to teach new substantive concepts to pupils.

The relationship between substantive and second-order understanding

Substantive and second-order understanding cannot be considered in isolation; they build on each other, and only function together. Substantive understanding of a topic precedes, but is not necessarily simpler than, second-order understanding of that topic.

Above all, developing substantive and second-order knowledge and understanding is a mutually supportive, continuing process.

- **It is mutually supportive.** Second-order concepts only make sense with reference to historical matter; they rely on, and stand on, substantive concepts. Pupils cannot look at ‘causation’ without tying it to a particular event, and when they analyse evidence they are doing so to make claims about something historical. The second-order concepts will themselves develop in response to the substantive matter – causation in the context of the Peasants’ Revolt is very different to the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, for example.
- **It is continuing.** Perhaps the biggest danger of seeing a substantive/second-order relationship which is analogous to a knowledge/skills relationship is that it implies second-order understanding is a more advanced understanding, to be tackled once ‘lower-order’ substantive understanding has been accomplished. This is not possible or desirable. As Levesque says, “progression in historical thinking ought to be developed simultaneously within each of these domains of knowledge”. As mentioned before, substantive concepts can be just as complex as second-order concepts, grappling with concepts such as imperialism, liberalism or kingship is no easy task. Of course, a grasp of substantive concept often comes before, and facilitates, second-order understanding within a particular topic. Pupils will find it hard to argue about the causes of the Black Death without knowing about medieval trade patterns, inadequate medical knowledge and the nature of the disease itself.

Therefore, any progression model must plan for the continued development of both substantive and second-order knowledge and understanding. Developing a model which has a good balance between the two is the focus of the next section.

Further reading

Kate Hammond and **Dominik Palek** have written about the role of substantive knowledge in historical understanding in recent editions of *Teaching History*.



3 Developing a model for progression in historical understanding

A progression model is an attempt to explain what it means to make progress in history. Recent years have seen many attempts at designing progression models in history. These can largely be split into models which are based around second-order concepts, and those which are based around substantive concepts.

The last two years have seen numerous attempts to design new history progression models and assessment systems in England. It is an exciting time for history teachers, and these models are a good starting-point for departments looking to create their own. Progression in history is extremely complex, but once again many efforts have been made to decode it. A crucial point to remember is that progress is not linear and easily explicable. Pupils do not go through a simple process of mastering steps to success in history; they may achieve some quite complex conceptual thought while still lacking basic tenets of historical understanding, for example chronology. Therefore, any system which plans for, and expects, linear progress over a key stage is flawed from the start.

Many of the existing progression models focus on developing pupils' mastery of second-order concepts as a vehicle for developing their historical understanding. This has been the traditional approach of the National Curriculum, heavily influenced by the Schools History Project. The rationale for this has been explained by Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby. They have argued that the second-order concepts provide the best way to conceptualise progression because it is best to imagine progression as a process of getting to grips with history as a discipline.

- A notable example of the approach which uses second-order concepts as key to progression is Alex Ford's model. This model is based on six second-order concepts and the process of historical enquiry. These concepts are deepened and strengthened by continuous revisiting, and pupils work towards the mastery of each concept (shown through signposts). Ford emphasises that the second-order concepts should not be thought of in isolation, and that substantive content is still vital to the model. Ford's summary of the model is shown in Figure 1.
- Another second-order model comes from Richard Kennett, whose department has identified five key second-order concepts and devised a progression map for each of these. This is a common form of progression model.

Figure 1: Alex Ford's summary of his progression model. Taken from: Alex Ford, 'Progression in Historical Thinking: An overview of key aspects of the mastery of historical thinking and practice', published online.

Causation		Historical Interpretations	
SIGNPOST 1 Causal Webs	Change happens because of MULTIPLE CAUSES and leads to many different results or consequences. These create a WEB of related causes and consequences.	SIGNPOST 1 Identifying Interpretations	Historical interpretations are everywhere. Every piece of historical writing is an interpretation of some sort. The past is not fixed but CONSTRUCTED through interpretations.
SIGNPOST 2 Influence of Factors	Different causes have different LEVELS OF INFLUENCE. Some causes are more important than other causes.	SIGNPOST 2 Drawing Inferences from Interpretations	It is possible to draw INFERENCES from interpretations of the past, just like with historical sources. INFERENCES will reveal the MESSAGE of a particular interpretation.
SIGNPOST 3 Personal and Contextual Factors	Historical changes happen because of two main factors: The actions of HISTORICAL ACTORS and the CONDITIONS (social, economic etc.) which have influenced those actors.	SIGNPOST 3 Evaluating Interpretations	The APPROACH of an author must always be considered. This means considering their VIEWPOINT, PURPOSE, AUDIENCE and EVIDENCE chosen to build their interpretation and how this might impact on the final interpretation.
SIGNPOST 4 Unintended Consequences	HISTORICAL ACTORS cannot always predict the effects of their own actions leading to UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES. These unintended consequences can also lead to changes	SIGNPOST 4 Interpretations in Context	Historical interpretations must be understood on their own terms. This means thinking about the CONTEXT in which they were created, what conditions and views existed at the time, and how this might impact the final interpretation.



Change and Continuity		Significance	
SIGNPOST 1 Identifying Change	Past societies are not fixed, there are changes which have occurred spanning centuries. Changes in the past can be identified by looking at DEVELOPMENTS between two periods.	SIGNPOST 1 Resulting in Change	Events, people and developments are seen as significant because the RESULTED IN CHANGE. They had consequences for people at and/or over time.
SIGNPOST 2 Interweaving Continuity and Change	Change and continuity are INTERWOVEN and both can be present together in history. CHRONOLOGIES can be used to show change and continuity working together over time.	SIGNPOST 2 Revelation	Significance is ascribed if they REVEAL something about history or contemporary life.
SIGNPOST 3 Flows of Continuity and Change	Change is a process which varies over time. Change can be described as a FLOW in terms of its PACE and EXTENT and can be said to TRENDS and have specific TURNING POINTS.	SIGNPOST 3 Identifying Significance Criteria	Significance is seen as something constructed therefore CRITERIA are needed to judge the significance of events, people or developments within a particular historical narrative.
SIGNPOST 4 Complexity of Change	Change and continuity are not a single process. There are many FLOWS of change and continuity operating at the same time. Not all FLOWS go in the same direction	SIGNPOST 4 Provisional Significance	Historical significance varies over time, and by the INTERPRETATIONS of those ascribing that significance. Significance is PROVISIONAL.
Historical Evidence		Historical Perspectives	
SIGNPOST 1 Inferences from Sources	When we write history we need to create interpretations of the past based on evidence. INFERENCES are drawn from a variety of primary sources to create interpretations of the past.	SIGNPOST 1 Appreciating world-views	There are major differences between modern WORLD-VIEWS and those of people in the past. Differences are seen in their beliefs, values and motivations. We must avoid PRESENTISM.

SIGNPOST 2 Cross Referencing Sources	Historical evidence must be CROSS-REFERENCED so that claims are not made based on single pieces of evidence. CROSS-REFERENCING means checking against other primary or secondary sources.	SIGNPOST 2 Perspectives in context	The perspectives of HISTORICAL ACTORS are best understood by thinking about the CONTEXT in which people lived and the WORLD-VIEWS that influenced them
SIGNPOST 3 Source Utility	Historical evidence has multiple uses. The UTILITY of a piece of historical evidence varies according to the specific enquiry or the questions being asked.	SIGNPOST 3 Perspectives through evidence	Looking at the perspective of an HISTORICAL ACTOR means drawing INFERENCES about how people thought and felt in the past. It does not mean using modern WORLD-VIEWS to imagine the past
SIGNPOST 4 Evaluating Sources	Working with evidence begins before the source is read by thinking about how the AUTHOR, intended AUDIENCE and PURPOSE of an historical source might affect its WEIGHT for a purpose.	SIGNPOST 4 Diversity	A variety of HISTORICAL ACTORS have very different (DIVERSE) experiences of the events in which they are involved. Understanding DIVERSITY is key to understanding history.
SIGNPOST 5 Sources in Context	Historical evidence must be understood on its own terms. This means thinking about the CONTEXT in which the source was created and what conditions and views existed at the time.		

However, the progression model does not have to be structured around second-order concepts. There are several pitfalls in this approach, particularly given the emerging research on the importance of substantive knowledge in history (and in the learning process in general). It is extremely difficult to say that a pupil has ‘mastered’ a second-order concept: second-order conceptual mastery can only be inferred from repeatedly strong, and improving, performance on specific historical tasks. Moreover, a model which is structured around second-order concepts may under-emphasise the central importance of developing substantive knowledge.

In line with this, some have suggested that a focus on substantive concepts should be at the heart of progression in historical understanding.

- Notably, Michael Fordham has argued that substantive concepts are ‘the ideal tool for both supporting and identifying pupil progression in the subject.’ Fordham argues that the second-order concepts’ value is as a way to frame questions, *not* as yardsticks of progression. In a separate piece, he contends that any model which plans for a staged progression in second-order concepts, to be applied to pupils’ work, is ‘bound



to fail'. This is not to rule out the possibility of using second-order concepts as central to the model, but simply to note that planning for a linear progression between stages – for example, moving from 'explaining some causes of an event' to 'explaining and linking many short-term and long-term causes of an event' to 'prioritising the causes of an event' is neither accurate nor complex enough to account for progress in historical understanding. A model which plans for pupils' ability to comprehend and use concepts such as imperialism, liberty and suffrage may be just as valid as one based around the disciplinary procedures such as analysing causation.

It is important to note, as Evelyn Vermeulen did fifteen years ago, that when pupils are 'doing' history they are guided by the 'interplay' between substantive knowledge and knowledge of history's disciplinary tools. Moreover, a pupil can only demonstrate facility with a second-order concept with reference to a particular topic; their general mastery of that concept can only be inferred from a repeated ability to do this across different contexts. Therefore, any attempt to test them separately may not be beneficial for measuring progress. Whatever the department's opinion on the primacy of substantive or second-order concepts in designing a progression model, it is vital to consider the balance between substantive and second-order knowledge carefully when discussing progress in historical understanding and planning how it will be assessed.

A progression model, therefore, should:

- set out the department's understanding of what it means to achieve excellence in historical knowledge and understanding
- structure this through a series of key concepts, whether these are second-order, substantive, or a mixture

It may be helpful to:

- set out the steps to achieving excellence (for example, the 'signposts' in the model shown above) – but caution should be taken against positing a simple, linear idea of 'steps to success'
- detail the stages at which a pupil might reasonably be expected to be at each stage of the progression model, taking into account the wide variation in pupils' development of historical thinking

Planning for and assessing pupils' progress against a progression model is discussed at length in section of this paper

Further reading

- 1 Alex Ford's model is an excellent example of thinking about progression in history. It can be found [here](#). He has also written about the process of constructing the model [here](#).
- 2 **Peter Seixas and Tom Morton** have written about planning for progression in the 'big six' historical thinking concepts. A sample of the work is available [here](#).
- 3 **Jamie Byrom** has written on planning for progression from early years to Key Stage 3. He emphasises the importance of developing 'historical perspective' in pupils.
- 4 Jerome Bruner's seminal 1960 work *The Process of Education* proposed the idea of the 'spiral curriculum'. This suggests that curricula should concentrate on the core concepts and content of a subject, and progressively develop an understanding of these through revisiting them in more complex ways, building on prior knowledge. This process offers a powerful way to conceptualise the development of historical understanding through an increasingly sophisticated grasp of core concepts.
- 5 A more recent breakthrough in learning theory concerns the idea of 'threshold concepts', theorised by **Erik Meyer and Ray Land**. These concepts are seen to be central to a subject, and, when understood

by pupils, to transform their understanding of that subject, hence the idea that they allow pupils to ‘cross a threshold’ in their understanding. The webpage above summarises the features of threshold concepts. An example of applying threshold concepts to history can be found in this blog by history teacher **Sally Thorne**. Along similar lines, **Indiana University researchers** have proposed that history undergraduates confront ‘bottlenecks’ which limit their historical understanding, and that the teacher’s job is to move them past these.

4 What is the purpose of history?

The purpose of history as an academic subject is, and always will be, contested. Departments must develop their own thoughts on: the purposes of teaching the subject, the content to be taught, and the extent to which it is desirable for their students to be trained as historians.

Instead of the discussion on progress in historical understanding acting as a simple funnel towards assessment, it actually leads to an even more fundamental question: what is the purpose of history? In other words, why do we study (and teach) it? This discussion is especially important as history is a uniquely politicised subject in education, and its teaching has been contested far more than any other subject in Britain in recent years.

There is not enough space for such a profound discussion here – departments who are looking to explore the purposes of history further can consult the further reading section below. However, some of the most powerful responses to this question have included:

- Sam Wineburg has made the powerful and bold claim that studying history can ‘humanise’ people, by enabling them to engage with the past outside of the terms and mindset of the present. This, he argues, allows people to comprehend the differences as well as similarities that tie us to the past.
- Peter Stearns argues that history encourages the creation of ‘good citizens’ by helping pupils to develop ‘habits of mind’ that enable them to participate in a democratic society; he also argues that history contains ‘the only significant storehouse’ of information about the development of a given society.
- Penelope Corfield believes that history has the power to ‘root’ people in the world – and that if this is not done, the consequences can be catastrophic. She believes that, in the absence of a rigorous historical education, people would pick up some perceptions of history – but these would likely be ‘patchy or confused...simplified and partisan’.

History, politics and national identity

Two particularly important debates spring out when considering this question. Firstly, settling on the content to be taught is vital, particularly given recent debates about the desirable balance between local, national and world history in schools. The complex relationship between history and national identity is an important one to consider. The extraordinary degree of disagreement over the proposed 2013 National Curriculum of history exemplified this – but also stood in a long line of attempts by politicians to bend the teaching of history to their own aims. Gordon Brown’s notable 2007 speech on citizenship clearly suggested that history should be taught partly to celebrate Britain’s achievements and to encourage the development of British identity.² Historians in Britain and around the world have rebelled against the idea that history should be used to celebrate the nation’s past and develop a national identity, as it can lead to a misguided, inaccurate, simplistic presentation of that past. Of course, this does not mean that Britain’s history should be ignored or reflexively criticised.

² In the speech, he spoke of “two thousand years of British history” with alarming regularity!



Departments must consider how their historical education informs and develops pupils' understanding of the nation around them. Similarly, they must consider the appropriate balance between national and wider history (and how these relate). Is the primary aim of school history to help pupils to understand the community around them, the nation, the wider world?

Secondly, departments might like to consider whether it is desirable to align a school's progression model and history curriculum with the requirements for mastery of academic history. Many teachers have debated whether pupils should be asked to carry out the same tasks that academic historians do – particularly in terms of analysing primary source material. Thinkers such as Sam Wineburg have argued that training pupils to think and act like historians – ie training them in the mental processes and habits of historians – is absolutely central to the process of history education, and that if a teacher is not doing this they are not teaching history. However, academic historians make inferences from sources with a vast range of accumulated knowledge at their fingertips and in their long-term memories, which enables them to do it successfully; pupils do not have these resources and therefore cannot do act in the same way. This has often led to schools (and exam boards) asking pupils to do artificial source activities with small, modified snippets of sources and little prior context, with demoralising results. Teachers such as Sean Lang have vehemently criticised the trend towards reductive source activities since the early 1990s, while Michael Fordham has analysed the weaknesses of GCSE and A Level exams in source content. Fordham instead advocates training pupils in the non-source based aspects of what historians do: reading secondary work, discussing historical issues, and listening to the arguments of other historians. Of course, departments must bear in mind that GCSE and A Level exams have significant source components, and must plan for this accordingly – source analysis is a major area of weakness and frustration for many pupils.

Most history teachers would agree that at least some training in the methods and habits of historians is fundamental to helping pupils make progress in history. Without this, pupils are neither 'doing history', nor aware of what history is and what separates it from memory and myth. Despite this consensus, research conducted by Terry Haydn in 2005 found that many Key Stage 3 pupils could not explain any purpose of studying history other than improved employment prospects – an understanding of the loftier ideals of the subject was mostly absent. This suggests that departments have a lot of work to do in order to create a curricular model that explicitly trains pupils to think historically.

Further reading

The question 'why study history?' has as many answers as there are historians in the world. Tepid and generic responses such as the **2007 Ofsted** verdict that school history 'should help young people to understand why things are the way they are and that history relates clearly to the present' are not particularly helpful. Many departments and individual teachers have found the works below to be useful starting points for considering the broadest of all historical questions.

Some of the more notable responses:

- 1 **Richard Evans** and **John Tosh** have produced notable book-length explorations of the purposes of history in the last 20 years. Tosh was outlining the nature of historical study; Evans was writing 'in defence of history' against the criticisms of postmodern and other scholars in the 1970s and 1980s. These are widely used in undergraduate disciplinary courses, and have largely superseded the well-known works by historians such as **Geoffrey Elton**, **Marc Bloch** and **EH Carr** – although of course each of these has its remarkable insights into the practice of history.

- 2 Peter Stearns of the American Historical Association provides a more concise explanation of the purposes of history: [www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](http://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-(1998))
- 3 Sam Wineburg has elaborated on the ‘unnatural’ and counter-intuitive nature of historical thinking, and the primary importance of teaching the disciplinary habits of historians. (The first chapter is available free [here](#)).

5 How can progress in historical understanding be assessed most effectively?

Once departments have settled on a shared understanding of what constitutes progress in historical understanding – as far as this is ever possible – the next step is to consider the question above. It is little use to have a clear idea of what it means to ‘get better at history’ if a teacher has no idea how to analyse a pupil’s progress against this benchmark.

This section therefore sets out the current thinking on good practice in formative assessment. It covers the following areas:

- The shortcomings of levels as an assessment framework.
- Designing an overarching framework for formative assessment.
- The role of summative assessment.
- Embedding good practice in formative assessment.

There is a strong consensus that National Curriculum levels (NC levels) are not a good fit for assessment in history, and a critique is set out below in the first section.

Fortunately, the removal of levels gives teachers the opportunity to create effective overarching frameworks for formative assessment in their place. The process of doing so is discussed in the second section. It is vital to consider how a formative assessment model will also provide summative information, and guidance is set out here in the third section.

This guidance concludes with advice on embedding good practice in formative assessment through day-to-day practice and professional development.

The shortcomings of levels as an assessment framework

NC levels are woefully inadequate as an assessment framework for several reasons: they conflate attainment and progress; they do not provide meaningful information on how to improve; and there are numerous methodological problems.

The government’s decision in 2013 to remove the national system of levels at Key Stage 3 was mourned by few. The system of assessment by levels was notoriously flawed and was an especially bad fit for history. The main criticisms of the National Curriculum levelling system were as follows:

- **They were never used for their proper, summative, purpose.** Originally intended to be used at the end of the Key Stage to give an overall picture of pupils’ attainment over the Key Stage, they instead rapidly became used to measure attainment on individual tasks *and* progress between tasks. They were not well-suited to assessing individual tasks, resulting in the construction of complex mark-schemes which aimed to fit the content of every single task to a level descriptor. This was worsened by the development of sub-levels.



- **The conflation of progress and attainment had seriously negative impacts on learning.** It is misleading and damaging to suppose that progress necessarily means obtaining higher marks on each successive task. For example, as Harry Fletcher-Wood has observed, a pupil who achieved a Level 5 in an essay focused on causation and then a Level 5 in an essay focused on interpretations would have made substantial progress in their historical understanding (assuming the levels were accurate!). Similarly, a pupil consistently scoring the same mark on knowledge tests would also be making good progress. The level system pushed teachers to show that pupils had scored higher and higher on each task, causing a profound breakdown of the reliability of the levelling system.
- **They could not adequately serve a formative function (as they were not intended to).** Presenting pupils with a single number which concealed a large amount of information on a pupil's performance did not help the pupil (or their parents) to understand what they had done well and what they needed to improve on.
- **They were ill-suited to history for many reasons.** Progression in history is complex and not suited to a linear progression model. Pupils could often achieve supposed 'higher-order' skills of evaluation and judgment while still having huge gaps in their knowledge, forcing teachers to impose misleading 'best-fit' levels. Moreover, the level descriptors were often vague and arbitrary to the point of meaninglessness; as Christine Counsell³ has shown, teachers found it nearly impossible to re-order a mixed-up set of level descriptors from the 1991 NC, and subsequent attempts did little to improve this.
- **Above all, levels became the centre of the system, displacing the programme of study.** Feedback which focused on helping pupils to improve became twisted into feedback which focused on helping pupils to improve their levels. The tendency for teachers and departments to plan questions, lessons and schemes of work around levels, rather than historical understanding, was extremely damaging. This is especially true in light of the above criticisms around the unreliability of levels.

Any one of these criticisms is serious; taken together, they virtually invalidate NC levels as plausible assessment systems, in history at least. Fortunately, the opportunity to develop alternative systems is now open.

Further reading

- 1 **Joe Kirby** has produced an excellent summary of the problems with National Curriculum levels, arguing that they are "imprecise, misguided, engulfing [and] distorting." Another English teacher, **Alex Quigley**, has also critiqued the system.
- 2 The DfE-appointed Commission on Assessment without Levels is to release a report into the levelling system and the possibilities of alternative assessment frameworks in September 2015. The National Association of Head Teachers released **its own report** into assessment in English schools in 2014.
- 3 The pages of *Teaching History* have been full of articulate and insightful critiques of levels for many years. **Sally Burnham and Geraint Brown** here reflect on their original criticisms of levels and propose alternatives; **Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt** have analysed the major problems with levelling in history; and **Alex Ford** has recently outlined how levels 'caged' understanding.

³ Counsell's activity is cited in a footnote to the blog entry.

Designing an overarching model of formative assessment

Replacing levels will require extended departmental reflection on progression in history and how it can best be measured. It is, however, hard to imagine a suitable framework which does not include: regular knowledge-based tests, extended written tasks linked to task-specific mark schemes, and regular formative feedback through a variety of methods.

The history profession now has a golden opportunity to develop assessment systems and progression models which can serve to advance pupils' learning. Once departments settle on an idea of what it means to get better at history, they can focus all their efforts on how to help pupils get better at history.

As noted before, any good system of assessment will be intricately connected to an understanding of progress in historical understanding. Therefore no ready-made assessment systems can be offered here. However, in recent years, several guiding principles have emerged from the vigorous debates on assessment in history. It is hoped that these will serve as a useful starting-point to departments in developing their own systems. For example, it is hard to imagine a good assessment system which does not elicit information on pupils' development of substantive and second-order knowledge and understanding.

A department should look to construct an overarching framework for formative assessment, into which the day-to-day practice can be fitted. There is an emerging consensus that a good assessment framework should include three parts:

- Short, regular knowledge-based tests
- Extended written work in response to enquiries
- Regular formative feedback.⁴

Short, regular knowledge-based tests

These are a very useful way to assess pupils' development of substantive knowledge and understanding. The most high-profile efforts to design assessment models in history in recent years have all included a role for short, regular factual tests – see Burnham and Brown, for example. Three major reasons for this are:

- The role of precise and detailed substantive knowledge in history is undeniably vital, and regular testing is one way to build this up, as Lee Donaghy has found.
- Short tests of substantive understanding give teachers an efficient way to assess pupils' learning. They offer a snapshot of which pupils have grasped particular concepts and developed substantive knowledge; Michael Fordham has compared them to 'search-and-rescue operations' for pupils who are conceptually or contextually stranded.
- Cognitive science supports the idea that the most (perhaps only) effective way to ensure learning takes place in the long-term is to test material repeatedly over time. As cognitive psychologists Kirschner, Sweller and Clark argued in 2006, "the aim of all instruction is to alter long-term memory. If nothing has changed in long-term memory, nothing has been learned." Departments should therefore consider how they can test accumulated historical knowledge and understanding over time – whether through end-of-unit, end-of-term and end-of-year tests, spot checks, or enquiries which are explicitly planned to draw on earlier knowledge. The work of Christine Counsell and Elizabeth Carr is a good starting-point for this.

⁴ This is not to be prescriptive and say that a framework should only include these three parts; there may be other concerns when constructing a framework for formative assessment. However, there are the most commonly included elements of good frameworks, and it is hard to see how one could succeed without any of these.



While these tests are vital, extended written work in response to historical enquiries is at the heart of history. Assessing written work is a far more complex task than assessing short knowledge-based tests. Fortunately, many years of research and innovation amongst history teachers mean that no-one is starting from a blank canvas.

The importance of having an enquiry question to structure a unit of work, with the end-of-unit task directly answering that enquiry, is by now well known. A great deal of work went into theorising enquiry questions in the early 2000s, particularly by Michael Riley. Riley's innovative work showed the power of a well-chosen question to structure and organise a topic. A well-chosen set of enquiries, it follows, is crucial to a department's long-term plan: they are the questions which set the agenda, give shape to the chosen content, and allow pupils the opportunity to develop their substantive and second-order knowledge. Pupils' engagement with them is what makes them better at history. Departments may like to take this further and structure each lesson in a sequence around a key question, which contributes to the understanding of the enquiry question. Second-order concepts offer a powerful way to structure questions, even if they are not central to the progression model.

It is highly advisable to use task-specific mark schemes. It is well recognised that generic marking schemes are a poor way to mark written tasks, as they cannot hope to capture the specific, complex requirements of that task. These are designed with reference to the enquiry question, and specify the kind of substantive knowledge that a good answer would contain, as well as the second-order demands of the question. They can be divided into (for example) fail/pass/merit/distinction grades, thereby also providing a useful snapshot of a pupil's current attainment. An example can be found in Figure 2 as follows; another example can be found [here](#).

Figure 2a: Task-specific mark-scheme for a Year 7 enquiry relating to change and continuity

Year 7: Did the Normans transform England?	
Excellent	Good
<p>The analysis categorises the types of changes taking place (e.g. in relation to the feudal system and loyalty, law, religion, language) as well as characterising the nature and extent of that change (whether things were switched, uprooted, replaced, reshaped, altered, maintained, etc.).</p> <p>Selects, organises and displays a wide range of knowledge effectively in order to support their analyses and arguments about change and continuity, perhaps contextualising it beyond the period studied using prior learning.</p> <p>By examining how changes after 1066 were experienced by different groups in medieval society (lords, nobles, peasants), identifies and explores the co-existence of change and continuity and identifies when things changed, for whom and in what ways.</p> <p>In the context of the work, terms such as 'feudal system', 'religion' and 'law' are used confidently and meaningfully to support explanation and analysis.</p> <p>Reaches a substantiated conclusion about how England was transformed, which is persuasive. These conclusions are compared and contrasted to the conclusions reached by Scheme, which are also explored in-depth.</p> <p>A clear argument is conveyed through well-organised paragraphs; the structure is purposefully and deliberately constructed and the writer's style shows a sense of audience and employs some carefully chosen 'language of change and continuity'.</p>	<p>Accurate and sometimes rich descriptions of changes that took place (e.g. in relation to the feudal system and loyalty, law, religion, language) and some analysis of those changes is offered. For example, may focus on describing and categorising the types of changes or characterising the nature and extent of change, potentially, but probably does not analyse all these different aspects. Justification of the analysis may show some weaknesses.</p> <p>While different groups in medieval society might be mentioned, they may not be linked to specific changes and pupils are unlikely to describe how change and continuity occurred.</p> <p>Substantive knowledge will be selected according to some discernible criteria, even if they are not explicit. This is organised into a chronological account, although the use of the knowledge in supporting explanations may be left implicit and undeveloped. Terms such as 'feudal system' and 'religion' are used when exploring forms of change but not always in direct support of analysis.</p> <p>There is an attempt to address the claim that England was 'transformed' but any conclusions are not fully justified. Scheme's argument may be described accurately but its claims are not compared explicitly to the pupil's own description and analysis.</p>
Very good	Fair
<p>Direct analysis of the types of change taking place by categorising them, as well as by characterising the nature or extent of change, in order to develop simple arguments about change and continuity after 1066.</p> <p>The experiences of different groups in medieval society are described and there is evidence of comparisons being drawn between groups to identify change and continuity happening concurrently.</p> <p>There is a conscious development of the analysis and the account shows evidence of careful, deliberate selection and organisation of information to produce a structure that is directly and explicitly analytic. Terms such as 'feudal system' are used confidently, demonstrating a working understanding of them.</p> <p>There is a reasoned conclusion, effectively linked to the substance of the essay, in which pupils consider how England was transformed. Scheme's argument is described and there is some consideration of how far the pupil agrees or disagrees with his claims.</p>	<p>The response describes some changes that took place in contrasts 'before' and 'after' without explicitly characterising the nature, extent or type of change. Events described (such as feudal systems) have relevance but are not used to form clear explanation and analysis. Contributions are likely to be sparse.</p> <p>Terms such as 'feudal system' and 'law' are used but there is no evidence that these are securely understood.</p> <p>Reasonable use is made of substantive knowledge, although its selection and replacement may appear random. Some pupils may use everything they have studied whereas others omit key details that could have strengthened their explanations.</p>
	Ungraded
	<p>Does not directly answer the question. Reference is made to the Norman invasion, and to aspects of life in Britain or to key events, but no apparent attempt is made to identify or describe change or continuity.</p>

Figure 2. An example of a task-specific mark scheme, for the enquiry question 'Did the Normans transform England?' Taken from: Geraint Brown and Sally Burnham, 'Assessment after levels', *Teaching History* no. 157 (December 2014), page 11.

Extended written work in response to enquiries

Task-specific criteria are vital, but unfortunately it is notoriously hard to mark a written piece of work solely according to written criteria. This is because of the subjective nature of the task (everyone has different standards and dispositions) and the inherent problems with criteria-referenced testing, which Daisy Christodolou has outlined. Therefore, simply relying on a mark-scheme may not be enough to assess pupils' knowledge and understanding of that particular task. Headteacher Tom Sherrington has argued for the importance of defining standards with reference to the best work that a pupil of that age could reasonably be expected to produce, ie written exemplars. Departments may find it very useful to produce a series of exemplar essays to begin with, and then to collect examples of excellent pupil work in response to each task. Importantly, these can be shared with subsequent cohorts to show them what an excellent response looks like on that particular task. The value of modelling expert work during the learning process, rather than simply giving pupils a set of success criteria is clear.

This process builds to the goal: providing specific, detailed formative feedback to pupils, which they act upon to further their progress in historical understanding.

Regular formative feedback

The discussion of extended written enquiries leads naturally to the third vital part of an overarching assessment framework: regular formative feedback. Feedback is often taken to mean comments made after a task has been completed, but would better be described as information given to someone in their attempts to 'reach a goal'. As John Hattie's extensive analysis of educational research has found, feedback is "one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative". It is notoriously hard to get this process right, and the consequences of not doing so can be profoundly negative. The Hattie paper cited above draws some powerful conclusions about feedback. Hattie argues that feedback is only effective when it provides cues about the task and the processes involved, and helps pupils to self-regulate in order to continue towards further goals. Strikingly, he asserts that 'inefficient' learners may not benefit from much feedback at all, in this case he argues instead for 'elaborations through instruction' rather than 'feedback on poorly understood concepts'. Above all, he argues, feedback is effective when "students are grounded in and committed to the goals of learning and when the feedback is related to accomplishments of learning".

Put simply, good feedback in history aims to spot and explain the strengths, errors, misconceptions and areas for development in a pupil's work, and then to provide specific advice on how to go about tackling these and thereby making progress in their historical understanding. History is a challenging subject in which to give feedback. It must be done in a way which is supportive and does not demoralise pupils, but equally pushes them to achieve the highest possible standards. It must take account of the complexity of historical understanding, without making pupils despair at the challenge. For pupils with low levels of literacy and little experience of constructing extended written work, the challenges are greater still. It may be useful for departments to consider two forms of feedback as starting points: formative feedback on written enquiry tasks and other forms of 'day-to-day' formative feedback.

Providing formative feedback on written enquiry tasks is arguably the most important part of the enquiry process. It enables pupils to reflect on their work, and guides them in realising the areas for their development, while also recognising the ways in which they have demonstrated a good historical understanding.

Therefore it must be tied to the specific task and that task's mark scheme. Generic comments (such as 'improve your evaluation' or 'make links between your factors') or suggestions which focus on how to improve the mark or level of the work are far less helpful than specific comments. For example, take three pupils tackling



the common Year 7 enquiry task ‘Why did William win the Battle of Hastings?’ One, who has described a wide range of reasons but not made their opinion clear, might be encouraged to add a sentence at the end of each paragraph to sum up the relative importance of each reason, and then to re-write their introduction to make a clear assertion. Another, who has struggled to identify relevant factual information, may be re-directed to a source sheet to encourage them to find examples of William’s good luck or good leadership. A third, who has produced a specific, clearly-argued response, might be asked to develop their causal reasoning through a counter-factual prompt ('If Harold's army was not tired, then...'). This type of feedback is far more likely to help pupils make progress in history than alternative approaches, because it stems from the teacher’s professional judgment and understanding of progression in historical understanding.

Research strongly suggests that providing pupils with a grade is not good practice, because pupils focus on the grade rather than the feedback.⁵ Instead, departments should look to emphasise written feedback. Teacher workload must be considered here – the prospect of having to mark thirty essays in detail can often seem dispiriting, especially if subsequent pupil response is patchy. Therefore, departments should look to explore ways to maintain the detail, efficiency and personalisation of the feedback while reducing marking load. Written enquiry tasks are unlikely to be completed on more than a half-termly basis (assuming one lesson per week). Departments should therefore look to prioritise marking these tasks and subsequently giving pupils time to respond, rather than following a rigid policy of written marking every two weeks.⁶ Assessing pupils’ responses is vital, as it demonstrates the extent to which they have grasped and acted on the advice – but again, workload must be considered.

Other forms of ‘day-to-day’ feedback are just as important as written feedback on extended tasks – perhaps more so. A history teacher’s goal is to help their pupils develop an excellent knowledge and understanding of history. To do this, teachers should regularly elicit information on their pupils’ progress towards this point. This information shows how close the teacher is to their goal, and is used to modify their subsequent teaching efforts. Similarly, a pupil’s goal is (or should be) to develop excellent historical knowledge and understanding. If well-taught, pupils will receive information from the teacher about how to meet their goal, and will use this to progress towards that goal. Therefore, the teacher is receiving information from the pupil on their learning, using that to generate information for the pupil on how to improve that learning. This is the most appropriate way to conceptualise feedback in history, moving beyond the simple provision of occasional written comments to consider the wide range of activities that can facilitate this process.

There are several ways in which departments can generate an effective formative feedback process within lessons. The list of possible ways to do this is endless, and their effectiveness will heavily depend on the context, so there is no prescription here on how it should be done. The overriding principle should be that activities are considered based on how far they help pupils to make progress in history.

Having said this, it is hard to imagine effective day-to-day formative feedback without certain features present. One is the selective use of questioning – posing a mixture of questions which test knowledge, probe beliefs, challenge responses, and assess whether pupils have grasped key concepts (hinge questions)⁷. Although

⁵ Giving grades may be mandatory in certain schools (lamentably, often for the purposes of ‘proving’ to Ofsted that pupils are making progress), and therefore unavoidable. In this case it is still important to emphasise the formative feedback over the grade, and to discourage any pupils from holding fixed notions about their potential level of performance. There are also ways to circumvent school systems – for example, by delaying grades until the feedback has been acted on.

⁶ Again, this may not be possible given school policies – departments may wish to consider the possibility of using self- and peer-assessment to reduce the marking load in this case. (Of course, these can be very useful strategies in their own right)

⁷ The terms ‘open’ and ‘closed’, or ‘higher-order’ and ‘lower-order’, are often used. They are avoided here as they can obfuscate rather than clarify. A ‘closed’ question usually means a question which has one factually-correct answer and tests understanding, but these can be extremely complex and challenging.

vague claims about the benefits of questioning abound, the beneficial effects of good-quality questioning are not in doubt. Multiple-choice questions can be used to quickly gauge the class's understanding of substantive content or concepts, while pupils devising their own questions will be getting to grips with a key process in history.

Providing verbal feedback – responding spontaneously and verbally to the developing lesson – is closely linked to this. English teacher Alex Quigley has argued that “effective teaching hinges absolutely on oral formative feedback and questioning on a lesson by lesson basis”. Teachers will learn a huge amount about pupils’ grasp of content and concepts simply by observing their discussions in response to questions, while verbal feedback is immediate, specific and flexible in response to the learners’ situation.

Finally, short written activities to test understanding are common to most formative assessment systems. These, when designed well, have the benefit of eliciting a substantial amount of information from a group of pupils. They can be collected and acted upon almost immediately (such as exit tickets), re-drafted immediately (in books or on mini-whiteboards), or even marked during a lesson (such as dot marking).

Testing over time

Research into formative assessment is constantly evolving and has thrown light on the complexity of assessing learning. Learning is very hard to assess and impossible to assess in a given lesson – because learning happens from long-term changes in memory. Any activities which claim to assess learning are actually assessing performance on a particular task. Therefore, formative assessment frameworks need to consider how they can build in opportunities to assess learning over time. Somewhat perversely, a good deal of research suggests that the best way to do this is *not* to provide regular, timely, extensive feedback, but in fact to do the opposite. Psychologist Robert Bjork has found that “delaying, reducing, and summarising feedback can be better for long-term learning than providing immediate [feedback]...frequent and immediate feedback can, contrary to intuition, degrade learning”, because learners become too reliant on it. Consequently, Bjork has coined the concept of ‘desirable difficulties’. This concept suggests that adapting teaching to introduce a higher level of complexity in tasks and processes may challenge and disorientate pupils, but is likely to strengthen their learning over time.

These three practices – frequent knowledge-based tests, extended written work, and regular formative feedback – will provide a solid backbone for a formative assessment model. History teachers will harvest a wide variety of information about their pupils, and can use this to aid their progress.

Departments should constantly explore ways to make their feedback more effective, through research and through sharing good practice. Questions to structure this reflection might include:

- How do we gather information on our pupils’ development of historical knowledge and understanding within a particular lesson?
- How do we gather information that historical knowledge and understanding is developing in the long-term?
- How do we deliver feedback on the information that we have gathered?
- How do we know this is likely to be effective? What could make it more effective?
- How does the information which we have gathered affect our immediate, short-term and long-term planning?
- Does the information modify our understanding of historical progression and the ways in which pupils achieve it?



Further reading

- 1 Consult the further reading listed under ‘developing a model for progression in historical understanding’.
- 2 Sally Burnham and Geraint Brown’s **2004** and **2014** articles offer an excellent, detailed description of developing a framework for history education over several years. **Christine Counsell and Elizabeth Carr** have also written about their separate attempts in this area – their focus on developing knowledge and understanding over time, and testing it repeatedly, is highly relevant.
- 3 **Michael Fordham**, writing for the Historical Association’s curriculum supplement, advocates a ‘mixed constitution’ of factual recall tests, enquiry tasks and end-of-term assessments of pupils’ ‘substantive conceptual development’.
- 4 **Michael Riley and Jamie Byrom** have written about the centrality of a good set of enquiry questions to a department’s planning for progression.
- 5 The importance of developing assessment of learning over time is now well-known. For **over a century**, psychologists have detailed the tendency of humans to forget information if it is not revisited, and committed to memory. Recently, **cognitive psychologists** have emphasised the centrality of long-term memory in performance, suggesting that teaching must ensure that pupils’ long-term memory changes. **David Didau** has written about the application of these findings in education.
- 6 Dylan Wiliam is widely considered the leading authority on formative assessment, with dozens of published books and research papers. His **Embedded Formative Assessment** (2011) is perhaps the best summary of his thinking. It makes a concise case for formative assessment (chapter 2) and then details what he argues are the five constituent parts (chapters 3–7).
- 7 **John Hattie** has researched feedback extensively, and summarises his findings here (with Helen Timperley)
- 8 **Harry Fletcher-Wood** has written about his attempts to embed feedback in history lessons on **several occasions**. Fletcher-Wood found that there were profound positive impacts from giving his pupils real-time feedback on their efforts. He employed strategies such as on-the-spot redrafting of work, the use of **hinge questions** to check for understanding of key concepts, and **dot marking** (giving pupils an activity based on whether they had completely, partially or inadequately grasped the concept of a previous lesson). His work is a very useful starting-point for departments looking to explore day-to-day formative feedback.
- 9 David Didau’s **critique of AfL** stimulated a wide-ranging debate on formative assessment amongst readers, including a response from Dylan Wiliam (below the original post). **Andy Day** and **David Didau** have both explained that the approach of frequent, detailed feedback may not be as effective as it is widely assumed to be, and that *reducing* feedback may actually increase its effect – this is a counter-intuitive but vital argument (especially when considering the marking of written enquiry tasks).
- 10 There are many collections of **suggested formative assessment strategies** online. These should be used with professional discretion as they have often arisen from misguided beliefs that AfL can simply be applied to any classroom, regardless of the context. However, there is nothing wrong with trying out an activity that seems likely to elicit powerful evidence of pupils’ developing historical knowledge and understanding, or to provide pupils with useful feedback.

6 The role of summative assessment

Departments should consider how they can use their framework to build up a detailed picture of students' overall attainment and progress in history. Attainment and progress must be kept separate: attainment refers to specific tasks, while progress refers to the overall development in a subject.

It is vital for departments to consider how they will record their pupils' attainment and progress. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, senior leaders are unlikely to be content with a history teacher's messy mark book as the sole source of evidence! Secondly – and more importantly – the teacher's overall judgment of a pupil's progress and attainment is the most important judgment of all. It is used to report to pupils and parents, but also to facilitate intervention, in this sense it is still used formatively.

Departments must firstly ensure that notions of attainment and progress are kept separate, and that all pupils and parents understand this. Attainment means the grade (or similar measure) that a pupil received on a particular task. Progress means the rate at which a pupil is developing their historical knowledge and understanding. Pupils and parents must understand the difference between 'writing a good essay' and 'making good progress in history.' Similarly, they should be aware that progress does not necessarily mean continually higher attainment in tasks (a mind-set which will be hard to change with pupils who are used to NC levels).

Using attainment to judge progress

Departments must consider *how* they will use pupils' attainment in tasks to build a judgment on their progress. This is a complex process. It requires information on pupils' prior performance, the reasonable expected rate of progress for a pupil of that age, and the wide variety of pupils' assessed work. Above all, it links with progression in historical understanding. Linking this to age ranges is particularly difficult, because of the wide variation in child development. Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt have outlined this with reference to history – they sensibly argue that 'a progression model can show us how most students of a given age are likely to be thinking, given teaching as it is and the ideas current in our society.' Departments must consider (for example): what is it reasonable to expect a high-performing Year 3 pupil to do in history? What depth, breadth and complexity of substantive knowledge should a Year 9 have? What would constitute excellent, acceptable and poor understanding of causation amongst a Year 12? How could a year 7 who is out-performing the rest of the year be stretched further in their understanding? An attempt must then be made to match the tenets of progression in historical understanding to the stages that pupils are at.

Written, subject-specific comments to pupils and parents on pupils' progress, and how they can accelerate it, are much more useful than just numbers or generic targets (such as 'revision'), but teacher workload must be considered.

The challenges are greater for departments in schools which continue to use National Curriculum levels or similar 'GCSE-ready' level schemes. Schools which mandate National Curriculum levelling, for example, will clearly not accept this model of assessment wholesale, and so a department will have to consider how to convert task-specific mark schemes and feedback into levels. This may be particularly difficult if schools force teachers to report pupils' current attainment in terms of GCSE outcomes and success criteria. The key for such departments is to preserve the principles of good practice as far as possible within the constraints of the system, adapting them where necessary and creating 'shadow systems' (effective systems which operate at a departmental level to deliver good practice, but do not impinge on whole-school policy) where possible.

An idealistic progression model in history could easily be seen by senior leaders to be misguided and downright irresponsible in a school with such systems, and its arguments trampled on. However, this would be an enormously misguided assumption on the part of such a leader. Designing a good progression model is not



simply a utopian task, borne out of a refusal to engage with the dreadful current state of the history GCSE. A good progression model will set pupils up to gain a strong understanding of history and perform better on their exams, because they will have a far more sophisticated understanding of historical fundamentals. In this case, some drilling in exam technique in Years 10 and 11 will complement, rather than substitute for, the good-quality historical education which has already taken place. The case for a good-quality historical education should be presented to senior leaders as regularly, and vociferously, as possible!

Further reading

- 1 **Shaun Allison** has written a detailed account of his school's attempt to move to assessment without levels. The section on 'tracking progress and reporting to parents' is especially useful.
- 2 **Alex Ford** has explored progress descriptors and how they could be used in history (for example, pupils' speed at grasping new concepts, ability to link topics and clarity of communication).
- 3 **Michael Tidd** has posed seven key questions for any new system of assessment, while for those with a little more spare time **Robert Coe** has 47 questions to ask of any assessment system 'before you let [it] into your classroom'.
- 4 **Dylan Wiliam** has written on the need to integrate formative and summative assessment (that is, to use so-called 'summative' assessments formatively) here.

Embedding good practice in formative assessment

Succeeding in the tasks above requires embedding a departmental culture of development. This requires some detailed discussion and reflection when developing the assessment framework, followed by regular evaluation of its effects.

The overarching framework for assessment is vital, but it does not ensure good-quality formative assessment on its own. It is often remarked that while teachers plan for pupils' understanding to be constantly modified and constantly developing, they do not do the same for their own understanding. No area of education bears out this saying as much as assessment. The recent government-commissioned Carter Review of initial teacher training (ITT) found that "of all areas of ITT content, we believe that the most significant improvements are needed in assessment... there are significant gaps in both the capacity of schools and ITT providers [to provide for training in assessment]". This continues with insufficient training in assessment for qualified teachers. Therefore, the final aspect of good practice in formative assessment is to plant the seeds for a continual evaluation and improvement of a department's thinking on assessment, that is to say, to embed a culture of professional development in formative assessment.

A 'community of practice'

There are several things that a department should do to facilitate this. Moderation meetings within the department and with other local schools are vital. Moderation meetings can be catalytic for good practice – bringing teachers together to discuss the quality of pupils' work and the appropriate feedback is some of the most useful CPD there is. Secondly, the sharing of good practice within the department is crucial. Thirdly, departments should periodically review their assessment frameworks, policies and their overall thinking on the nature of historical progression. *Teaching History*, the journal of the Historical Association, contains a wealth of articles on assessment and progression, but the vast majority of writings are at least implicitly connected with assessment.

Above all, becoming a ‘community of practice’ in history, with discussions, meetings and events centred on improving the department’s ability to develop historical knowledge and understanding, is the key. It will ensure that a department is providing the best quality of history teaching that it possibly can.

Guidance on implementing the advice given in this document is appended. It contains a process by which a department might like to review its thinking on progression and assessment in history, some key questions to structure this process, and a detailed plan which departments could follow in order to ensure that good practice is embedded.

Further reading

- 1 On professional development, the work of **Etienne Wenger** into ‘professional learning communities’ (or ‘communities of practice’) is very useful. Wenger suggests that communities of practice are groups which engage in ‘collective learning in a shared domain’, interacting regularly with the effect that they learn how to become better at the shared concern.

Acknowledgements

Alex Ford and Harry Fletcher-Wood read and made very helpful comments, on the short-form and long-form guidance respectively. Their help has been valuable to this project.

Guidance paper by Stephen Ayres, history teacher at Foxford School and Community Arts College.

Prepared with support from the Teach First Leadership Development Programme via Teach First and ASCL.



