

New, Novice or Nervous?

The *quick* guide to the 'no-quick-fix'



This page is for those **new** to the published writings of history teachers. Every problem you wrestle with, other teachers have wrestled with too. Quick fixes don't exist. But if you discover others' writing, you'll soon find – and want to join – something better: an international conversation in which others have explored, debated and tackled *your* problems. *This edition's NNN problem is:*

Getting beyond bad 'source work'

You notice that if you set pupils little questions on tiny sources they trot out lazy, pointless answers, usually about 'bias'. You wonder whether it is wise to ask pupils if a source is 'reliable'. You notice that pupils write daft things about sources because they do not know enough context. Some of your pupils are bored by sources. They call it 'source work', and groan.

You are in good company. Other history teachers noticed all this twenty years ago. Why fall into the same traps? It is over twenty-five years since McAleavy questioned the value of 'trying to spot an unreliable source at a hundred metres'. Time to catch up?

How could others' work help?

Begin with **Lang (1993) TH 72**. In 'What is bias?' Lang addressed the problem of pupils calling sources 'biased' and writing them off. Lang pointed out that 'bias' does not make a source useless. Any record from the past is written from a position, with a purpose and a perspective, all properties that makes a source *useful*, depending on the questions you ask of it.

Lang got **LeCocq (2000) TH 99** thinking. Deliberately avoiding lazy use of the word 'bias', she taught Year 7 that it all depends on what you are looking for. If trying to establish attitudes or motivations, then 'bias' is precisely what you want. Again, it depends on the questions we ask of the source. She shifted many history teachers into teaching pupils to interrogate sources in order to *establish* evidence for a *particular* enquiry, avoiding the rather meaningless practice of just asking whether a source is 'reliable', 'accurate' or 'complete', in its own right.

Riley (2000) TH 99 reached similar conclusions differently. Challenging isolated source exercises designed to test 'skills' in a vacuum, he argued

that sources should 'join up' more. He built a sequence of lessons built around a *particular* puzzle based on a *single* question – dubbed the 'enquiry question'. Riley argued that unless sources are used *as part of a cumulative journey* with a clear purpose, tasks easily become dry, dull and detached from worthwhile historical study.

McAleavy (1998) TH 91 also reflected on real historical study. Do historians run around looking for 'bias'? Not really. McAleavy argued for knowledge. A source only yields evidence when it is understood in its historical context. Sense of period matters. We question a source well if we know its context. He also challenged tiny gobbets, an issue taken up by **Woolley (2003) TH 111** who used long extracts, even with her low-attaining Year 8s. Her pupils gained a richer sense of period than they had with tiny pieces, ripped from context.

Meanwhile, **Byrom (1998) TH 91** tackled another problem (also noted by David Sylvester, former director of SHP, in an address in 1997). Too much source work is endless atomizing analysis, tiny answers to tiny questions,

rather than synthesis. Byrom overcame this by getting his Year 7 to be *constructive* with sources, writing much longer accounts. Later, **Evans, Grier, Phillips and Colton (2004) TH 114** illustrated the energy, delight and curiosity cultivated by Year 9's use of a collection of closely linked sources from an archive.

These are tasters. Start here, find out what others have done too, and never set dry little decontextualized tasks again.

