

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:*

Teaching pupils to analyse similarity and difference

Many history teachers feel confident when teaching students to structure arguments about causation or to analyse trends in change and continuity over time. But that confidence evaporates when pupils are tackling a question such as, 'Who were the Chartists?', 'Who lived in eleventh century Sicily?', 'How did Italian and German fascists differ?' or 'How much did European protestants / Indian nations have in common?' What, exactly, are pupils to argue *about* in such questions?

If this is you, you're not alone. Here are some good places to start ...

How could others' work help?

Begin with the **Nutshell in TH 135**. This draws together some ideas on teaching similarity and difference that history teachers have developed throughout the entire period of the National Curriculum in England, going right back to 1991. A requirement to look for connections and contrasts within states of affairs, to define characteristic features or to judge the extent of commonality and diversity has been on the NC ever since England has had one. This Nutshell summarises the kinds of questions that shape similarity/different problems.

The trouble is, what are these questions really about? The point of the historical argument is obvious in causation problems, but what are students supposed to be doing when writing, reading or talking about similarity and difference? **Bradshaw (2009) TH 135** tackles exactly that question. He explains that the moment you start to describe the past you deploy terms that put people and places, situations and states of affairs in *groups* – whether groups of three or of three million. If you're arguing about similarity and difference, you're arguing about how good those groups are. **Counsell's**

(2009) Cunning Plan TH 135 suggests a practical activity to help students notice and improve on their dodgy use of groups. Her 'generalisation game' helps pupils to engage in productive argument about whether their generalisations are any good and then to improve them with more knowledge and tighter analysis.

Building on all this, **Carr (2012) TH 146**, developed a scheme of work in which pupils questioned and then refined the generalisation embodied in the word, 'Victorian'. Her enquiry, 'How Victorian were the Victorians?' helped students to build enough knowledge to revise their earlier definitions of 'Victorians' and create an informed, complex account of what, if anything, the term 'Victorian' means as an historical description of a people in a period.

Black (2012) TH 146 went further. Using the ideas of Burbules, she found an analytical framework for thinking about difference. Using the terms, 'variety', 'degree', 'variation' and 'version', and armed with Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, Black had her Year 12s use these categories as sorting tools to guide their analyses.

Finally, for a challenging re-think, take a look at **McCrorry (2013) TH 152**. In her winningly titled enquiry, 'How many people does it take to make an Essex man?' McCrorry digs deeply into what happens when pupils face the complexity of historical difference. In her practice she brings together a focus on content and on concept, challenging all kinds of assumptions held by her pupils about who lives in Essex and where they come from.

