

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 substantive concepts

It's worrying when pupils reach Year 9 or 10 unable to properly interpret or find fluency in major abstract nouns that crop up again and again in history. They should have bumped into 'empire', 'republic', 'federation', 'peasantry', 'commons' and 'communism', many times by Year 10, so why are many students neither confident nor accurate in their use? Useful generalizing terms such as 'institution', 'custom' or 'ideology' are often insecure as well. As for specific ones, peculiar to a period, such as 'appeasement' or 'feudalism', these have often floated away, perhaps never secure in the first place.

What do you do?

In research terms, we need to know more. For example, do pupils simply become more secure in their use of these terms if they are exposed to more narratives in which they occur? That sounds a sensible hypothesis, but it needs testing.

Meanwhile, the novice history teacher can find many useful starting points. The history education community has developed and shared many approaches to teaching, monitoring and assessing students' recognition and use of these terms, and doing so systematically rather than leaving it to chance.

It's worth going back to a classic from the Netherlands. **Haenen & Schrijnemakers (2000) TH 98** drew distinctions between 'unique concepts' (D-Day, France, Napoleon) and 'inclusive concepts' (castle, king, parliament, depression). They shared approaches that help to embed these terms with pupils who otherwise appear unresponsive to learning and using these abstract terms. **Howells (2002) TH106** showed how such systematic

attention is often still necessary even with post-16 students. He illustrated the practical methods he uses when teaching political concepts that are still not secure.

Two further articles from the Netherlands, show just how much there is to learn from the Dutch tradition. **van Drie & van Boxtel (2003) TH110** used structured talk and mapping in order to teach concepts such as 'communism' explicitly and thoroughly. **Haenen, Schrijnemakers and Stufkens (2003) TH 112** transformed Year 7's use of the concept of 'imperialism' through in-depth work that included examining characteristics of imperialism in everything from judicial systems to architecture. Each of these approaches also provides fine-grained assessment tools for checking that such concepts are fully understood.

Burnham and Brown (2004) TH 115 developed a new approach to assessing substantive concepts over time, and used it to show the poverty of reliance on England's national assessment

system (National Curriculum 'Level Descriptions'). They shared their approach to tracking pupils' use of terms such as 'imperialism' and 'empire' across an entire key stage, suggesting ways of systematically checking not only fluent and accurate but increasingly nuanced usage. They also made the point that as knowledge grows we should expect pupils to find such terms more complex, more interesting, more problematical, rather than something easy and basic that they leave behind.

