

# What's the wisdom on...



## Evidence and sources

### The purpose of this guide

This short guide provides new history teachers with an overview of the 'story so far' of practice-based professional thinking about a particular aspect of history teaching. It draws on tried and tested approaches arising from teachers with years of experimenting, researching, practising, writing and debating their classroom experience. It therefore synthesises key messages from *Teaching History* articles, blogs and other publications. The guide includes practical suggestions suitable for any key stage and signposts basic reading essentials for new professionals.

### How did sources end up in the history classroom?

The year 1910 saw the publication of a remarkable book on history teaching by M.W.Keatinge. To read the book now is to marvel at a recurring tragedy of our profession: how easy it is for successive generations of history teachers to forget the accumulated wisdom of experienced, thoughtful, academically serious history teachers who came before them.

In 1998, Tony McAleavy wrote a critical commentary for *Teaching History* on the history of using sources in history classrooms (*TH91*), an article now invariably discussed by trainee teachers at the start of their training. McAleavy began by summarising Keatinge's genius. Keatinge had his pupils discuss lengthy primary source extracts in order to understand how differing accounts arise. He taught pupils to interrogate sources using considerable contextual knowledge, including knowledge of each source's original function. Keatinge also realised the importance of pupils knowing how a particular type of document was *usually* written. Was this one typical? What conventions was it deploying? Which contemporaries read or saw it?

What pulses through Keatinge's work is a concern to use sources to foster sense of period or 'atmosphere' as he called it, and, conversely, a concern to ensure that pupils used that sense of period when drawing on those sources to create their own evidence-grounded accounts. No tiny, decontextualized gobbets here, with just a couple of lines of provenance. No predictable questions, with responses reduced to a learned routine. No short-cuts to a performance not worth having.

McAleavy points out that Keatinge's activities are worth using today. A modern history

teacher will be struck by the depth of Keatinge's reflections on how to make each one work. But this was not just pedagogy. This was a curriculum change. Keatinge was teaching pupils something different. He was teaching pupils how the discipline works, beyond school.

And what were Keatinge's curricular purposes? A serious subject, he wrote, should be 'thought-compelling'. He wanted the subject to teach some of the method of the historian in order to develop a pupil's 'critical faculty'. Many justifications for teaching history at this time were related to moral education, but for Keatinge, unusually, it was through pursuit of the intellectual integrity of the discipline, that classroom history would foster moral development. Keatinge saw respect for evidence and a capacity to reason historically as signs of moral maturity.

Keatinge's approaches did not catch on widely. It took until the 1960s for large numbers of history teachers to consider teaching pupils about sources, let alone to teach any historical method such as evidential thinking.

In the 1960s, pressure for change came from various quarters, but the realisation of an impending collapse of history as a school subject in non-selective state secondary schools was a key catalyst. The Schools Council History Project (SCHP, later renamed SHP), founded in 1972, took up the challenge of rethinking school history.

The SCHP was fired by a dual concern. First, the project's architects wanted to find strong intellectual justification for history as a discrete school subject. They wanted to teach pupils the distinctive nature and purpose of the discipline, as a rational means for seeking truth. Second, they sought fresh ways of making history immediately relevant to pupils. The teaching of historical method, using primary sources, was deemed central to both goals: for pupils to

learn how rational claims about the past could be reached and tested was of pressing relevance to education for an open and democratic society. Every citizen needed to know the grounds on which any claim to knowledge rests.

During the 1970s, the project grew. Hundreds of history teachers were engaged in trialling and evaluating new resources, methods and assessments.

Central to the project's work was the development of children's understanding of evidence as a concept. The project saw the beginning of a research tradition examining how children's ideas about evidence can be shifted. The major evaluation study conducted by Denis Shemilt in 1980, together with later studies, revealed the huge challenge of tackling pupils' misconceptions.<sup>1</sup>

A common misconception – one that novice history teachers can inadvertently encourage – is that the problem faced by someone trying to write a historical account is finding the missing bits of a jigsaw. If only historians had access to all the best bits, they could fill in all the gaps! But as Keatinge realised decades earlier, the source itself doesn't 'speak'; nor can it be considered 'reliable' or 'unreliable' in and of itself. What it yields is entirely dependent on questions asked of it.

A key reason why SHP took off is that it was successful in developing its own examinations, and when new criteria for the first GCSE examination were developed in 1985, they were heavily influenced by key aspects of the SHP model.

## So what began to go wrong?

The very use of an examination was the beginning of a problem. Any attempt to reduce maturity of thought to a set of criteria is bound to herald trouble. How well can something as sophisticated as evidential thinking be tested in a high-stakes examination? It is easy to award marks for spotting this or referencing that and, before you know it, short cuts to a semblance of security are rewarded, and, worse, are deliberately taught. McAleavy (*TH91*) charts this well:

*While the Project directors were right to link their innovations to public examinations, the connection brought some difficulties in its wake and these difficulties are still with us today.*

These difficulties were further compounded by trends in project materials themselves. As McAleavy (*TH91*) put it, 'Project materials tended to put a marked stress on the need for pupils to hunt for indicators of bias, distortion and gaps in the evidence base'. Pupils increasingly produced 'off the peg' all-purpose answers on the strengths and limitations of different types of sources.

When, in the 1980s and 1990s, textbooks started to encourage pupils in the mistaken view that a source could be 'reliable' in itself, the idea of 'evidence' got lost. Worse, in some textbook exercises, the notion of reliability was reduced to the truthfulness of the testimony. Instead of asking what might be inferred from the bias of the author, 'bias' was deemed bad, and instead of learning how to establish evidence for a particular enquiry, pupils were trained to spot a so-called 'unreliable source'. Where pupils were asked to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, they were even encouraged in the cardinal error of assuming that because the source was close to the thing it described (eye-witness testimony) it was

therefore especially reliable! The lazy assumption, 'he wasn't there, so he wouldn't know' became ubiquitous.

By 1990, a senior HMI reported that some teachers were setting 'mechanical tasks rehearsing formulaic responses to snippets from sources'.<sup>2</sup> But the problems were much more serious than 'source work' becoming dry and routine. Serious conceptual confusions were being encouraged, many rooted in what Ashby describes as a 'serious category mistake' of conflating 'source' and 'evidence'.<sup>3</sup>

Further unintended consequences arose from efforts to make sources accessible to low attainers. The assumption that low attainers were helped by having less to read led to the worrying use of tiny, decontextualized gobbets, sometimes as short as two sentences. This actually made it harder still for lower attainers to understand what evidential thinking was all about.

Perhaps most serious of all, that all-important contextual understanding that makes it possible to appraise a source as evidence – a sense of period and knowledge of context, an awareness of what the source meant to those by and for whom it was produced – was often lost.

Good, thoughtful guidance existed, and none of these problems were intended, but good practice has never travelled well. It certainly could not travel where teachers were allowed to bypass deep engagement with history or placed under pressure to produce a 'quick fix'.

These problems were undoubtedly worsened by the effects of assessment structures in the first National Curriculum (1991). A tick-box culture emerged of seeking out surface requirements which undermined the very thinking it was designed to encourage. See, for example, Level 7 of the original Attainment Target 3:

*(Pupils) make judgements about the reliability and value of historical sources by reference to the circumstances in which they were produced.*

The statement reinforces the misconception that a source can be reliable, in and of itself, rather than putting the focus on the practice of interrogating a source in order to establish evidence for a specific enquiry.

To worsen the tale of woe, these problems were compounded by pressures outside of history. Increasingly encouraged by senior leaders to over-assess with level ladders that had been designed *only* for summative assessment (end-of-key-stage or GCSE), a problem which became much worse in the 2000s, teachers found themselves encouraging compliance with the superficial features of a process, rather than proper evidential thinking.

The problem of absent contextual knowledge was certainly noted by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, resulting in a new kind of GCSE question in 1995, 'Using the sources and your own knowledge...'. But it was scarcely successful in solving the problem. It just resulted in a new kind of formula, a jigsawing of two kinds of information in response to a particular exam demand.

This depressing tale, however, has a positive ending. Among the most thoughtful critics of what was going wrong were history teachers themselves. If the 1990s saw a worsening of formulaic approaches hardened by assessment rubrics, they also saw the

beginning of a remarkable renaissance of teacher-led curricular thinking, frequently published in this journal. Such work explicitly addresses the above problems and openly resists the distortions of assessment. The teaching of evidential reasoning can indeed be purposeful, scholarly and powerful. Keatinge lives.

Here are eight practical precepts to help you join that renaissance.

## A summary of the wisdom

### 1 Actively prevent the default demonising of 'bias'

Teach pupils that where a source betrays an angle, position, assumption or bias, while this may reduce its value in reporting of certain states of affairs, it will yield countless uses in answering questions about attitudes, beliefs, conventions or customs. Here, a classic from the early 1990s, Sean Lang's 'What is bias?' (*TH73*) is a must read. Lang shows how any testimony – written, oral or visual – carries an author's positioning. What may be unreliable evidence for certain material facts, will be reliable for questions about the world of ideas, whether personal or collective. It's all about the concept of 'unwitting evidence'. Teach that.

Numerous history teachers have built on Lang. LeCocq's article 'Beyond bias' (*TH99*) famously tackled the problem at the start of Year 7 by deliberately delaying the introduction of the word 'bias' until long after pupils had realised that the bias in the sources they had been interrogating was *the most important thing* helping them answer their enquiry question.

But what if your pupils are still harbouring this misconception in Year 10? Don't give up! Hinks (*TH155*) inverted LeCocq's approach. He chose a factually misleading source written by one of the official reporters that the British government allowed to report from the front line during the First World War. He deliberately let his Year 10s dismiss it as biased and therefore useless. A piece written just two weeks into the Somme offensive drew the response, 'It's a lie!' But Hinks's enquiry question was 'What *can* Philip Gibbs tell us about the First World War?'. With a carefully staged series of questions, Year 10 could interrogate the source to support claims concerning the extent to which government used the media to control public opinion, the degree of knowledge people at home would have held at particular times and the restrictive censorship conditions under which journalists worked.

### 2 Use relics as well as records

The fastest way to break the naïve habit of assuming that the only way to know about the past is through a truthful eyewitness, is to ensure that pupils use relics as often as records. As Ashby notes, objects and artefacts have advantages over written sources, not because they avoid problems of literacy, but because they often carry no conscious testimony: 'Medieval rubbish tips ... were not created to fool the historian, and castles don't present simplistic problems of bias.'<sup>4</sup> Archaeology rocks.

Relics are everywhere. Think bus tickets, railway timetables, maps (see Sweerts and Cavanagh's terrific piece on maps in *TH116*), Offa's Dyke, an ancient grain barn, landscape shapes and place names. Model the way historians ask questions of them.

Then when it comes to shaping a lesson sequence, follow the example of Podesta (*TH 149*). Shape an entire enquiry around sources that do not speak directly, and teach pupils to question those sources. Podesta created an enquiry question that focused on an archaeological site: 'How might a skeleton

end up in a field near Reading?' This steered the pupils not only to interrogate the finds, but where they were found and what they were found with. By directly teaching vocabulary such as 'certain', 'probable', 'possible' and 'impossible', Podesta taught his pupils how to make defensible historical claims. He explicitly taught the probative language of evidence, advancing and testing degrees of certainty and uncertainty.

### 3 Teach pupils to establish evidence for a particular question

This is where having one enquiry question, which you stick with for something like three to six lessons, really makes a difference. When using sources to teach evidential thinking, gear everything to a single purpose. This is how pupils can be taught to avoid confusing the words 'source' and 'evidence'. If you do this, pupils are not making free-floating judgements about the 'reliability' or 'usefulness' of a source in relation to a loose topic area. Rather, they use the source to *establish* evidence, and always in response to a question, not a topic.

Unlike a source, evidence isn't just 'there'. It has to be constituted. Pupils bring it into being through an interrogation process. Essential reading on this is the beautifully clear article by Lee and Shemilt in *TH113*.

What helps pupils here is to use a single overarching question or enquiry question. Refer to it constantly across the lesson sequence. Forcing pupils to stick with it, you'll help them see how it yields a self-generating interrogation process which you can model and then gradually foster.

But get that enquiry question right! Enquiry questions set parameters for what can count as evidence in answering them. As you plan, think: given the nature of the question, what evidence would be needed? Ashby reminds us that some questions have more complex relationships with potential evidence than others. An action or event can be witnessed, but intentions behind an action can only be inferred from a range of possibilities that the context might suggest.<sup>5</sup> Resulting claims will be much less certain.

Therefore, plunging Year 7 into a really open and complex question about intention, say, why a particular person became a crusader, *when your curricular purpose at that point is to teach evidential thinking*, may not be the best place to *start*. You may even just trigger a historical helplessness, a pointless fence-sitting or, worse, 'We weren't there so we don't know.' Instead, when getting basic evidential principles off the ground, help pupils to think about what *can* be said, and with what degree of certainty.

Try a really focused enquiry question, such as 'What can we learn from what monks left behind them?' Then focus on three types of source only, say, music, buildings and illuminated manuscripts. Model the interrogation of these, so that pupils learn the satisfaction and the discipline of building, testing and weighing their own and each others' claims.

Articles abound on using music as an historical source for particular questions. In *TH108*, for example, Mastin shows how to teach pupils to interrogate Tudor and twentieth-century music as evidence. Sweerts and Grice (also in *TH108*) probe the usefulness of African-American music for historians.

### 4 Create a collection of sources, and craft a journey that goes somewhere

Sources can invariably be made to yield more when examined in relation to other sources. This is why collections of sources,

curated carefully to shape particular facets of pupils' evidential thinking, are so important. But learn from past mistakes here. In the 1980s, in a well-intentioned effort to teach pupils how to cross-reference, a vogue grew for asking the question 'How does Source A support Source B?'

The trouble with this is twofold. First, a *source* doesn't 'support' anything. Rather, human beings have to ask questions of sources to enable them to yield evidence. Such wording takes the historian – and therefore the pupil – right out of it, and fosters misconceptions. Second, such a question is typical of some of the earlier practices of classroom source use that consisted of isolated, dry exercises, as though these were free-floating skills that could be practised in isolation. Where little collections of source extracts were used in textbooks and exams, it often felt as though someone had just hunted about for five questions to ask of them, as if fishing about in a pond of sources without any sense of overall purpose. Instead, make any work on a collection of sources add up to something. Make it build. Make it go somewhere.

It was this that led to Riley's contentions around 'enquiry questions' (TH99). A single question driving pupils' work with a source collection modelled the unfolding process of evidential reasoning, and was far more motivating for the pupil because it allowed them to actually do something coherent and worthwhile with a group of sources, to arrive at an extended and constructive conclusion, when they answered the enquiry question at the end of the lesson sequence. See also Byrom in TH91 on teaching low-attaining Year 7 pupils, in particular, to 'be constructive'.

But if it's evidential thinking you want to foster, then think carefully about the wording of that enquiry question. If you want pupils to address the evidential issues directly in their concluding debate, diagram or documentary (as opposed to an enquiry where source use is more incidental), then foreground the evidential problem. Try enquiry questions such as:

- Why is it so difficult to tell whether there was a Blitz spirit?
- Why do historians disagree about the lives of married women even when they use the same sources?
- Why is it so hard to establish exactly how bad were working conditions for children?

## 5 Contextual knowledge is essential

Pupils need to know the context in which the document or artefact was produced and what purpose it was deemed to serve *at the time* (rather than for some historian poking about centuries later). Crucially, if they are to grasp the potential for any material to become evidence, pupils need to know about developments before and after the circumstances witnessed in the source.

Pushing pupils to use contextual knowledge has so often gone wrong, however. Start chasing the exam formula 'using the sources and your own knowledge' with just a GCSE mark-scheme in mind, and you won't get far. Instead, plan careful journeys for pupils in which they are steeped in a source's context.

Two contrasting recent examples, both in TH171, illustrate this superbly:

- Ormond uses woodcuts and ballads as visual clues in understanding seventeenth-century English piety. A

model of thoroughness, Ormond shows how much more pupils can do when contextual knowledge drives their questioning.

- Sellin makes this work in the context of the dreaded 'sources and own knowledge' examination question. His answer? Trampolining. His practical strategies ensure that pupils move continuously between the source and wider knowledge, rather than only in one direction.

## 6 Make a fuss of a single source... and make it long

In recent decades, history teachers have shown that giving low-attaining pupils tiny source extracts *doesn't* give them greater access to evidential thinking at all. Rather, if you take time to understand a single source properly, and also dwell on a particular source *type*, taking time to understand it as genre or cultural phenomenon, better progress is made.

This is especially the case with complex genres such as satire. See for example, some inspiring teaching by Carter and Wood (TH152) on Gillray's cartoons, the extended example supplied by Counsell on a Horace satire, or the use of Wipers Times, by Brown and Massey in TH155.<sup>6</sup>

## 7 Show pupils how historians use sources

Many of the problems encountered by pupils arise from expecting them to do something difficult, without ever actually seeing how historians do it. Counsell had pupils use the same collection of sources on medieval women that the historian Eileen Power used. They integrated source quotations into their own accounts, and then compared the results with Power's own writing.<sup>7</sup>

Massey (TH164) developed an approach to transform her Year 12s' ability to judge the power of their own claims. They asked at every stage, 'What would Figs do?'

## 8 Tackle lazy solutions: teach pupils to reason!

Pickles (TH143) explains the difference between teaching pupils just to parrot surface features and teaching them to reason. A trenchant critic of exam markschemes, she also shows how to minimise their influence on teaching.

Last but not least, we have 'supermarket evidential sweep'. This might sound like a gimmick, but it definitely isn't. Fed up with a laziness in students' tendency to garner material to support their claims without weighing it in relation to the question, Foster and Gadd (TH152) found an ingenious solution. It has been adopted widely, with and without supermarket trolleys.

We think Keatinge would have approved.

### REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> Hamer, J. (1990) 'Ofsted and history in schools' in *The Historian*, 53, pp. 24–5.
- <sup>3</sup> Ashby, R. (2017) 'Understanding historical evidence: teaching and learning challenges' in I. Davies (ed.) *Debates in History Teaching* (2nd Edition), London: Routledge.
- <sup>4</sup> Ashby, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- <sup>5</sup> Ashby, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
- <sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1 in Counsell, C. (2004) *History and Literacy in Year 7: building the lesson around the text*, London: Hodder. This is available free online. [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/media/Documents/History%20Community/History%20and%20Literacy%20in%20Y7/history\\_literacy\\_y7.pdf](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/media/Documents/History%20Community/History%20and%20Literacy%20in%20Y7/history_literacy_y7.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> Counsell, *op. cit.* Chapter 5