

# What's the wisdom on...



## consequence

### The purpose of this guide

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

Consequence easily becomes 'causation's forgotten sibling', as Fordham noted, in the title of a workshop presented at the 2012 Historical Association conference. The choice to treat consequence separately from causation in this series of articles is, therefore, a very deliberate one. Yet an emphasis on the importance of consequences should not be seen as requiring *new* kinds of historical thinking or new ways of evaluating young people's understanding of the connections between past events.

### Indirect analysis of consequence within many kinds of enquiry questions

The idea of consequence is so deeply embedded in historical narratives and so closely entwined with other second-order concepts that any history teacher inviting students to examine the causes of a particular event, or to describe patterns of change over time, will inevitably be asking their students to engage – albeit indirectly – with the concept of consequence. Putting forward any kind of causal argument means making a claim about the nature of the *relationship* between one event (or action or development) and another that followed it. Identifying a particular event as the consequence of one that preceded it represents a similar kind of claim about the relationship between the two. When students are asked to map out patterns of change and continuity over time, it is often with reference to the consequences of a particular event: charting the impact of the Norman Conquest on people in different sections of society or different parts of the country, for example; or determining whether particular discoveries, such as Harvey's theory of blood circulation or Pasteur's germ theory of disease, led to such new ways of thinking or different practices that they constituted turning points.

Thinking about consequence is necessarily implicated in other kind of enquiry questions too. The consequences of a particular event, considered over time, also feature among the criteria that may be used in ascribing historical significance to that event. Some of the differences that students are asked to explain between competing interpretations of the past, are essentially concerned with contrasting judgements about the impact of particular events.

This interplay between consequences and other second-order concepts is richly illustrated, for example, in Foster's explanation of an enquiry question designed to help her Year 9 to explore the cultural legacies of the First World War (*TH 155*). The question 'Did the Great War really end civilisation?' requires students to evaluate a particular claim about the consequences of the war. Explored through a focus on poetry and art, the question also requires students to engage with two competing interpretations advanced by cultural historians: the view that the war led to an entirely 'new language of truth-telling' (represented by Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*), set against Jay Winter's emphasis on the endurance of 'traditional' language and symbols.<sup>1</sup> As Foster acknowledges, the question is also clearly linked to issues of historical significance, and most obviously, it is about change and continuity; asking students to make a judgement about the nature and extent of the change wrought by the war, determining whether or not it constituted a fundamental discontinuity or rupture. Yet, while change and continuity was ultimately chosen as Foster's central conceptual focus, the argument about consequences remains implicit within it.

The fact that thinking about consequences is actually so prevalent within a wide variety of historical questions also demonstrates that attending to consequence does not mean that students should be required to work out for

themselves the consequences of every event that they study. In most cases, they will be using knowledge about consequences that they have developed (through teacher exposition or directed reading, for example) to tackle other kinds of historical analysis.

## Direct analysis of historical consequence

Occasionally, however, it is entirely appropriate to devote time and attention to the process of working out the consequences of a particular action or event. Where students have developed secure knowledge of a particular society within a particular period – such as a medieval English village or a nineteenth-century Caribbean sugar plantation – it can be very valuable (and serve as a good check on their period knowledge) to encourage them to use that knowledge to formulate hypotheses about the likely impact of a major event, such as the Black Death or the formal abolition of slavery within parts of the British Empire. The students can then be given the opportunity to test those hypotheses as they are provided with further information or directed to relevant sources.

Navey, who wrote one of the few *Teaching History* articles (*TH 172*) specifically devoted to consideration of consequences, offers a valuable model in her own approach to designing such an enquiry, by examining the characteristics of two works of historical scholarship that deal with the Black Death. One was an international study by Ole Benedictow drawing on a wealth of local studies across Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East and North Africa, to construct a ‘complete history’ in which the two final sections are devoted to consequences: the mortality rate and the plague’s ‘impact on history’.<sup>2</sup> The other, very different in scale, was John Hatcher’s intimate account of what happened when the plague hit the village of Walsham in Sussex.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, Navey concludes that their analysis of consequences was:

- characterised by a focus on defining the *relationship* between an event and its subsequent consequences;
- dependent on the use of colligatory concepts or generalisations – abstract terms that serve to *group together* particular developments, allowing for ‘the thematic organisation of historical knowledge’; and
- concerned with the *characterisation* of different kinds of effect and judgements about their *relative importance*.

### The parallels with causal reasoning

In all these respects, a focus on consequence can clearly be seen as mirroring the demands of causal explanation or argument. Causal questions ask students not merely to identify but to *explain* the nature of the relationship between one event, making clear the process or mechanism by which one followed from the other. Effective explanation – as Carroll has shown using historians’ causal arguments as models for his own students’ writing (*TH 162*) – depends on *grouping similar kinds of development together*, looking beyond single actions or events to broader themes or patterns of behaviour. The characterisation of consequences (in terms of their timescale or the different arenas in which they played out, for example) and assessment of their impact in comparison

to, or in conjunction with, others also reflect the kinds of classification and evaluation involved in causal reasoning.

Given these parallels, many of the lessons learned in the context of causation about avoiding reductive approaches or formulaic ‘skill’ ladders can also be applied to enquiries into consequences. A mechanistic assumption that identifying multiple consequences is *necessarily* better than a developed explanation of the process by which one particular outcome was actually created or shaped by the event in question is unlikely to strengthen students’ thinking about the relationship between past events. The idea of an interlinked web of outcomes, some of them mutually reinforcing, is a powerful one, but only becomes meaningful if students have sufficient knowledge of the specific contexts in which those effects played out to be able to identify and explain their interaction.

### The distinctive features of consequential reasoning

It is also helpful to acknowledge clearly – as Navey (*TH 172*) did – where a focus on consequences becomes clearly distinct from concerns with other second-order concepts. Navey explored John Hatcher’s judgements about the interplay between the changes wrought by the Black Death to identify where and how his work prioritised questions of consequence as opposed to analysing the processes of historical change. When the conceptual focus is on change, the questions tend to ‘problematise the nature, speed or extent’ of the process of change within a particular temporal frame. When the conceptual focus is on consequences, as it is when Hatcher points to the way in which some consequences ‘multiplied’ the effects of others, historians are more concerned with the ‘out-workings of a particular event’.

This means that they are likely to pursue those out-workings over time and perhaps across different aspects of human life, drawing on different kinds of historical study. The possible scope and breadth of such studies can be seen, for example, in *The Long Shadow*, David Reynolds’s exploration of the impact of the Great War across the whole of the twentieth century. In the first section of the book, ‘Legacies’, which deals only with the first two ‘post-war’ decades, the work ranges across a number of different themes, examining in turn the new geography of Europe, challenges to liberal democracy, empires, economics, culture and the overarching problem of international peace – all before he considers how the experience came to be refracted through the lens of a second global conflict!<sup>4</sup>

A similar sense of how historians pursue the direct and indirect out-workings of particular developments across time and space is conveyed by Catherine Hall and her colleagues in their explanation of how they used the term ‘legacies’ to trace the outcomes of colonial slavery in the formation of Victorian Britain. They consider first the direct causal relationships between slave ownership and those who received slave compensation; then a looser sense in which slave ownership shaped, but did not directly cause, the activities of nineteenth-century Britons; and finally they focus on the descendants of slave-owners in later centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Recognising the potential for a consequences enquiry to expand across time and space is both enormously exciting

and undeniably daunting. It offers students, probably at the end of an academic year or key stage, a brilliant opportunity to step back and think big, using knowledge that they have built over time to track the different influences set in motion by a particular event or development: the fall of the Roman Empire; the civil wars and regicide of the 1640s; the establishment of British rule in India; the achievement of women's suffrage. Students' curiosity about such questions and their capacity to tackle them with confidence serve as powerful indicators of a richly detailed, ambitious and well-structured curriculum. But their scale and potential scope also indicate the need for careful planning in terms of their position within the curriculum as a whole and consideration of the parameters that need to be imposed to make the task feasible and genuinely productive. The following principles offer guidance as to how that potential can be achieved.

## A summary of the wisdom

### 1) Make clear the focus on consequences and specify the scope of the enquiry

This principle follows directly from Navey's (*TH 172*) observation that when historians focus on consequences they are primarily concerned with the 'out-workings' of a particular event rather than the processes of change. The temporal and spatial frame within which they explore the developments that resulted, directly or indirectly, from the event in question may vary considerably, but it is the outcomes with which they are concerned, as they unfolded over time.

On rare occasions – such as the end of Key Stage 3 – it might be appropriate to invite students to engage in an open-ended exploration of outcomes, ranging as widely as Reynolds did in examining the Great War's long shadow. But in most cases, especially when students are getting to grips with explaining the relationship between an event and its outcomes, it is important to specify precisely the contexts in which students are expected to identify, and to explain or characterise, those effects. Paula Worth used the work of historian Sarah Badcock to prepare her Year 9 students for a tightly focused question about the immediate impact of the First World War on Russia.<sup>6</sup> This focus made the question manageable, given the limited time that Worth had been able to devote to study of the Eastern Front.

### 2) Build visual models to support thinking about how consequences interact

This principle applies as much to your own thinking about the design and structure of a consequences enquiry as to the tasks that you design for students. In some cases, such as the link between mortality and the drop in population caused by the Black Death, the lines of connection between an event and a particular outcome are clear and direct. The subsequent chains of cause and effect that led to the ability of skilled labourers to demand higher wages, and so to the increased purchasing power of those labourers, stimulating a significant boom in manufacturing industries, involve a number of further intermediate steps. As Claire Kennan noted, in her succinct summary of recent scholarship on the effects of the Black Death (*TH 180*), some of those steps resulted not from the initial impact of the plague, but from its successive outbreaks over the next 30 years. It was only a generation or two after the Black Death had first laid waste to England's population that living standards really improved. Still more

steps are needed to make the link between that boom and the introduction of craft ordinances to control the entry to particular trades, in an attempt to restrict competition from workers arriving from Europe.

Diagrammatic representation makes these chains of direct and indirect consequences easier to map. It also makes it possible to explore the connections between one kind of effect – in this case, economic – and others, such as the social and political consequences associated with a wealthier workforce and an influx of newcomers to many English towns. As Navey's (*TH 172*) account illustrates, mapping the range of possible outcomes and the nature of the relationships between them, is an essential first step in identifying those that you specifically want students to consider and in planning the structure and sequence of lessons through which you will introduce students to them; balancing the narrative and chronological sequence with scope for effective analysis.

### 3) Go deep and stay real

The skilful distillation of historians' current thinking that Kennan presents in *TH 180* illustrates the importance of this principle. It is precisely because she has identified a specific focus for her account of 'What historians have been arguing about...' – the long-term impact of the Black Death on English towns – that Kennan can provide such an effective explanation of the network of interlinked consequences, paying close attention to the timescale on which they played out. Moving from the immediate impact to trace the knock-on effects over several generations is much easier to handle when the focus is sufficiently narrow – dealing, as Kennan did, primarily with the economic impacts as they played out for members of particular trades and in particular towns. Unless students can trace each link in the chain and explain its operation in relation to specific groups of people, the counter-intuitive idea that a dramatic fall in England's population subsequently resulted in opposition to the arrival of skilled migrants is unlikely to make much sense. Diagrammatic representations, valuable as they are, cannot be made meaningful to students if the effects that they summarise and the relationships that they represent are only ever addressed at a level of abstraction.

### 4) Classify and categorise

The dangers of operating *purely* at a level of abstraction should not prevent us from moving students beyond the detailed and the particular, enabling them to handle the more abstract categories that make it possible to group different consequences together, and to characterise different kinds of impact. Kennan highlighted the importance of distinguishing between short-term and long-term effects, while the mapping of consequences that underpinned Navey's planning began with her delineation of economic, social and political outcomes. Another distinction that became important in her students' analysis was that between direct and indirect consequences. Show students the kinds of categories that historians use. Young people don't need to *start* by generating their own (though eventually they need to be given scope to do this). Model the thinking involved in distinguishing between one category and another and in determining where particular consequences best fit. Use students' uncertainty and debates about potential overlaps to demonstrate the interconnections.

## 5) Provide scope to think about scale

Along with characterising different kinds of effect, historians are interested in making judgements about their relative importance. Give students the opportunity to explore the scale and scope of the consequences that resulted from particular events. Partington, in reflecting on the kinds of criteria that might inform teachers' decisions about what events to include within their curriculum, identified three criteria concerned with the scale of their consequences:

- profundity: how deeply people's lives were affected
- quantity: how many lives were affected
- durability: for how long people's lives were affected<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these considerations of depth, number and time, we can add geographical reach and diversity: the range of different types of effect, and the different sorts of people that were affected by them. As Navey (*TH 172*) found, weighing any one of these against another is no easy task. While grief or trauma may be more readily understood than the mechanisms of the market, we need to select the sources and the stories that will make both of them accessible.

## 6) Get creative

Once students have sufficient knowledge to work with, and appropriate criteria to support their judgements about size and scale, ask them to think creatively, as Worth did, when she invited her students to draw the shape of the consequences of the First World War in Russia.<sup>8</sup> As the sorts of questions that she posed illustrate, it is important to provide support and structure for the task – and to keep prompting students to justify their decisions, through annotations.

- Is it big or small? Wide or narrow? Thick or thin? Why?
- Is it one big shape or lots of tiny interconnected shapes? Why?
- Is it angular and spiky or soft and spongy? Why?
- Are the outlines clearly defined or hazy? Why?
- What colour is the shape? Why?

Navey (*TH 172*) turned such questions into a visual summary to support her students, while Worth shared her own initial attempt as a model to help her class get started. Asking students to move from one medium to another, and from the literal to the metaphorical – and back again as they provide verbal explanations for their artistic decisions – demonstrates the necessity and the power of well-chosen adjectives and precise vocabulary. Reynolds's title, *The Long Shadow*, gives the reader an immediate insight into the scale and colour or mood of the Great War's effects. Worth's list of questions illustrates the scope to extend the metaphor as a method of prompting students both to expand their thinking and to distil the conclusions that they reach.

## 7) Construct narratives (not just diagrams)

Annotations attached to particular features of a shape, or used to explain the relationship represented by particular links in an interconnected diagram, serve as an important and relatively accessible step as students learn to articulate their thinking. On occasion, an annotated diagram may be an appropriate outcome activity. But build on this first step. Move from the visual back to the verbal, modelling the process by which historians weave their understanding of particular relationships between event

and outcome – and between one outcome and another – back into the narratives that they construct. Get students highlighting the particular verbs selected and the connective phrases crafted by historians that transform a chronological account of what happened next into an explanation of unfolding consequences. Then practise that process of transformation with them, experimenting with the effects of different choices. Exactly *how* did X lead to Y? What alternative verb or qualifying adverb might more clearly depict that relationship?

## 8) Engage with historians' arguments

This principle is, of course, embedded in the preceding ones. Historians' work provides models for us and for our students. It also provides stimulus and provocation: an invitation to join the debate. How accurate is Simon Schama in his claim that the Norman Conquest brought a 'truckload of trouble' to the Anglo-Saxons?<sup>9</sup> Did it really 'wipe out everything' that gave them their 'bearings in the world: law, custom, loyalty and language'? How quickly were the benefits of the Black Death actually felt? With labour at a premium, were women (as Kennan suggests, in *TH 180*) particular beneficiaries?

## 9) Choose the most logical point for considering consequences

The fact that consequences have to be tracked over time implies that the best place for substantial enquiry questions devoted to the out-workings of a particular event is at the end of an academic year or key stage. That is obviously true of those ambitious enquiries that invite students to look *back* over a substantial period of time, revisiting and reviewing the range of topics that they have studied with reference to a particular development, now framed as a starting point or stimulus.

But including one or two wide-ranging enquiries of this kind at the end of a particular curriculum phase does not preclude asking other, more restricted, questions at relevant points. Given the chaos in its wake, it makes more sense to devote precious curriculum time to the consequences of the Norman Conquest rather than to its causes. Nor should the fact that students need secure knowledge to *answer* a question about consequences, preclude the opportunity to speculate in advance about them. It is important in developing students' understanding of how the discipline works that they learn how to frame hypotheses, rooted in their contextualised knowledge of a particular event, and then to test the validity of their assumptions by investigating how things actually played out.

### REFERENCES

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