

# What's the wisdom on...



## What's the wisdom on change and continuity?

### 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.

### A sample of the wisdom

When it comes to historical change and continuity, what are history teachers asking pupils to think about and do?

For new history teachers, this can seem hard to answer. If we go to a different concept, historical causation, the answers feel much more obvious. Pupils have to think about how causes might be connected and how one cause drives or enables another. They may attempt to classify causes according to type, to play with their relationships, to weigh their importance. But what are they supposed to be doing when arguing about change and continuity? What does a change/continuity argument even look like? And why does any of this matter?

Let us answer these questions with one real example. On the excellent history website, 'Another History Is Possible', one head of history generously explains how his enquiry into change and continuity was built.<sup>1</sup> The enquiry question is: Was there more continuity than change in British-Jamaican relations between 1760 and 1870?

Underneath this lurks a question with great power: how much **really** changed with abolition and emancipation? Let's think about why this matters. The events that pupils are often taught – Britain's abolition of slavery in 1807 and the emancipation of slaves in Britain's dominions in 1833 – feel like great big moments, moments of relief, moments to rush in a new era. There they are sitting on the timeline, screaming... CHANGE! It is easy for such big events to shut down pupils' questions rather than open them up. What changed? Slavery abolished! Wow. So that's a big change then.

If we just take the change for granted and funnel our enquiry into the *causes*, we miss

so much. We fail to problematise a key thing that needs problematising – just what kind of change was going on and how extensive was it? The head of history who authored the enquiry explains how 'British-Jamaican relations' broadens the focus:

*But what about its economics? Or its ideas of race? What followed the emancipation in 1833? ... the term 'relations' allows students to ... discuss the totality of the system – its logic, contradictions, changes and continuities over 100 years.*

And why 1760 to 1870? In 1760, hundreds of black slaves took part in 'Tacky's Revolt' and were initially successful prior to brutal suppression. A hundred years' later, in the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion, nominally free black workers rose up against injustice and poverty, only to be violently suppressed. The similarities of these two events, a hundred years apart, instantly invite a change-continuity question.... How much **really** changed?

Notice what the force of this question does. It points the pupil very directly to change itself. It asks: what kind of change was this? How big a change was this? What continuities were going on (e.g. in trade)? What kinds of new developments are occurring (e.g. intensifying racialisation, in language, legal systems and attitudes)? Change/continuity itself becomes the problem to be solved.

The author is precise about these change/continuity issues. Historical scholarship is used to frame a problem about the **nature** of the change and the nature of the continuities (are they economic? linguistic? structural?) and about the **pace** of change (how quickly did certain things happen? when were the turning points?).<sup>2</sup>

In the author's breakdown into separate lessons, we see facets of the change/continuity problem surfacing. Pupils judge *when*

resistance to colonial rule reached its peak, how far emancipation brought the change it promised, how ideas of race changed during and after slavery, how British public attitudes were formed and how far they were sustained.

Overall, this change/continuity enquiry uncovers a much messier and more disturbing story than the events of 1807 and 1833 would suggest. It invites the pupil to tell different stories. In doing so, it uncovers silences and it shows pupils how uncovering silences works. This is what a focus on change/continuity achieves.

These silences occur not just after 1807 and 1833, but in what happened before. What often gets omitted from the wider stories of abolition is the story of Haitians freeing themselves of slavery, decades before 1833. The Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls this 'formulas of erasure'. A story is a formula. When we ask pupils to argue with change/continuity, we ask them to question the shape of stories, including where stories 'begin' and 'end'.<sup>3</sup>

This rich, recent example shows what an experienced history teacher can do with change/continuity. How does this relate to the wider practices of history teachers? How do history teachers continue to challenge themselves and renew the change/continuity tradition? Let's do a whirlwind tour of the wisdom.

## A summary of the wisdom

In 1980, Shemilt attempted a summary of goals for pupils' understanding of change. He noted that change can be continuous and evolutionary, or discontinuous and revolutionary, that change usually involves gradual transformations (in a given situation only a few things change at any one time), that history sees uneven rates of change, that there is never simply one line of development (many traditions of change and continuity interact), and that change, development and continuity do not necessarily mean 'progress'.<sup>4</sup>

Shemilt also gave us the handy summary of types of historical change which history teachers now use for pinpointing the focus of an enquiry question:

- pace or rate of change
- degree or extent of change
- nature or type of change

Later, in his work on children's ideas about change, Lee emphasised also the *process* of change.<sup>5</sup> History teachers have to work hard to stop pupils treating change like a volcano erupting – an illusion of sudden destruction.

Much of the research into children's ideas about change and continuity is drawn together in Blow (*TH 145*). She captures what maturity in discussing historical change/continuity looks like:

*Once students are used to constructing and evaluating change and continuity over extended spans of time, they may be taught to discern patterns of changes and continuities that are themselves objects of change and*

*continuity. A series of changes exhibiting continuity in rate and direction are trends. A change from one trend to another is a turning point. Major discontinuities in history occur when long-standing patterns of change and continuity neither persist nor mutate, but simply break down, and new sorts of history – those of catastrophe, collapse or revolution – need to be written.*

What have teachers done with all this? In the past decade history teachers have been extending and challenging one another's work, at a rate of knots.<sup>6</sup>

Three big themes characterise this work. You'll see them crop up frequently in the practical suggestions that follow.

- A) Keep an eye on how historians write about change, for example, see how Foster analysed two historians' writing about civil rights in America (*TH 151*).<sup>7</sup>
- B) Keep asking the question, 'What do we want pupils to be arguing about?' This shapes discussions about enquiry questions, activities, final outcome tasks, everything.
- C) Find practical tasks that allow pupils to 'see' their own thinking about historical change and continuity. These are often highly visual, but keep checking that they really are doing this. Overly elaborate tasks sometimes get in the way!

## 1) Polish those enquiry questions

Experienced history teachers get the wording of their EQs highly focused, so that pupils really do argue about change/continuity. Being clear about which aspect of change/continuity you are problematising is our main tip here. For example:

### *Rate/pace/speed of change*

- How quickly did Islam spread through north Africa in the eighth century?
- When did Parliament develop most rapidly during the thirteenth century? (Carr and Counsell, *TH 157*)
- When did abolitionism gain momentum?<sup>8</sup>
- Why do you think Britain was able to build an empire from the 1500s (but not before)? (Powell, *TH 170*)
- When was Britain closest to a revolution in the nineteenth century?

### *Degree/extent of change (change versus continuity):*

- How far did Anglo-Saxon England survive the Norman Conquest? (Hackett, *TH 178*)
- How far did Edwardian society survive the Great War? (Foster, *TH151*)
- How far have attitudes towards mental illness changed over time? (Murray, Burney and Stacey-Chapman, *TH 151*)
- How much changed and how much stayed the same in Russia between 1850 and 1950?
- What difference did the Black Death really make?

### *Nature/type of change*

- What kind of change was the French Revolution for the people who lived through it?
- What kind of change was the Reformation?
- What was changing in X: culture or economy?

- How far was the sixteenth-century religious change in Morebath/Lincolnshire/Scotland also a *social* change?
- *What* changed and *what* stayed the same in Russia between 1850 and 1950? (Spot the difference from the Russia question above.)

### Process of change

Enquiries about process of change can be beautifully open-ended. Try these:

- *How* did attitudes towards the treatment of mental health change though time? (Spot the difference from the question on mental illness above.)
- *What happened* in Morebath between 1520 and 1574?
- *How* did colonialism develop between 1650 and 1800?
- *How* did radical ideas and resistance develop between 1780 and 1850?

As pupils get used to each of the above, you can get more and more open-ended. The trick here is to use the idea of story, and show pupils that when they find or challenge patterns of change and continuity, they are creating new stories. The question: ‘What stories can be told about...?’ works a treat. Think about how this could be applied to the example we began with: What stories can be told about Jamaican–British relations between 1760 and 1870?

For a full account of how and why ‘What stories can be told...?’ works as a question, see Fordham in **TH 147** for his enquiry: What stories can be told of early medieval Britain?

## 2) Use timelines, charts and graphs

Change and continuity are temporal. We need to *see* them. We need to play about with arranging things on charts showing time, so that patterns of change can be used. There are so many ways of doing this! Here are some worth checking out.

At the end of a year or key stage, take a series of events or developments across the timespan covered. Then ask pupils to position them on a timeline either closer or further away from the timeline according to whether they fostered say unity and disunity for the British Isles, harmony or discord in a particular territory, nationalism or imperial hegemony, and so on. Usually the activity will throw up more problems than it solves and will get pupils to question the question. Then you can move pupils into improving and refining the change/continuity focus.

For a practical account of how to do this simply, using a much shorter timescale, see Jenner **TH 139** who had Year 7 positioning the heads of Becket and Henry II closer together or further apart depending on degree of rapprochement or falling out. Jenner used the activity to foster discussion about the relationship between the detailed story of Becket’s quarrel with Henry II and more abstract, longer-term shifts in relationships between Church and state.

Another big tip with using timelines and charts: use colour. Vella’s (**TH144**) pupils used colour to depict changing Muslim and Christian presence in Malta, over time: ‘Like historical periods, colour can fade in and fade out, producing

a spectrum of dark colours which slowly wane, weaken and transfigure into another colour’ (p. 19). Why was this so helpful? Vella wanted to tackle pupils’ misconceptions that each successive coloniser of Malta (Carthaginian, then Arab, then suddenly Christian again with the Normans...) brought immediate and total change. This, of course, is nonsense. Using two historians who differ on continuities in Maltese Christianity, Vella’s students used their colour shading to develop and show arguments about whether Christianity died out completely between the ninth and eleventh centuries and then revived, or whether it stayed throughout Muslim rule.

## 3) Use metaphor and analogy

When Foster (**TH 151**) was studying how historians use the language of change/continuity in their arguments, she noticed their use of metaphor. Metaphors from physical geography figure strongly here. It turns out that oceans figure a great deal in historians’ writing – yielding wonderful ways of enabling pupils to depict change. Braudel compared the history of mere events to ‘surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs.’<sup>9</sup>

Physical geography helps pupils see the difference between change perceptible at the time (the volcano erupts, a coastline falls into the sea) and enduring and profound change, often imperceptible to those at the time (glacial erosion changes the landscape forever). Foster used lots of landscape images to get pupils thinking about how historians’ words are constantly echoing the slow workings of deep time on the landscape (‘erodes’, ‘ebbs’, ‘flows’).

These geographical metaphors used by historians encouraged Foster to make her enquiry questions clear about the distinction between perceptible and imperceptible change, for example: How much change could African-Americans see in the 1950s? (**TH 151**)

How can teachers use such physical metaphors to initiate student discussion? Using a car journey analogy (**TH 131**), this is how Foster got pupils thinking and talking. First, they suggested things that could affect the speed, nature and direction of a car journey (traffic lights, destinations, speed cameras, accidents, tight bends, narrow roads, landslides). Then they recalled as much as they could about factors that affected the speed, nature and direction of the civil rights movement (for example, white violence, federal government intervention, media attention, leadership, non-violent tactics) and discussed ways of matching these to the features of the car journey on the board. Pupils were quick to make connections. Was Martin Luther King the driver, the engine, the fuel, or the ‘Google map’ of the campaigns? Students then decided how far each campaign had ‘travelled’ towards civil rights and how fast the change was.

## 4) Teach the vocabulary of change

Historians’ language for describing change is intensely creative and remarkably precise. Consider: rejuvenate, intensify, escalate, mutate, transform, adapt, sprout, bloom, mature, swell, shrink, shrivel, reverse, retreat, decay.

Big warning here! Watch out with this vocabulary business. Supplying word mats and vocabulary lists without doing the world-building and the careful setting up of thinking, just leads to pupils plonking words, with little understanding or properly



owned argument. Rehearsing model paragraphs with the right words just bypasses all this important historical training.

A good tip to avoid that danger is to follow Hackett's example (*TH 178*) and link vocabulary training to specific historical scholarship. See how she used extracts from Marc Morris to teach pupils to use 'transformed', 'twisted', 'remained' and 'hybrid' within a real context.<sup>10</sup> Jarman (*TH 136*) shows the opportunities and pitfalls of using change vocabulary in: When were medieval Jews in England most in danger?

## 5) Write narratives

It's such a simple thing: ask pupils to narrate the past. But it achieves a great deal. If pupils use only charts, graphs and analytic timelines, the problem can stay very abstract and pupils can lose interest. Mastin found that when he got pupils to narrate the blend of protest and compliance found in the tiny Devon village of Morebath, they began developing and demonstrating a sharper understanding of how change and continuity interacted.<sup>11</sup>

In his account of teaching Year 9 about change in Stalin's Russia, Ellis (*TH 178*) gave the following practical advice:

- Show pupils how to link small stories into big ones.
- Make pupils think about knowledge selection as they shape their stories.
- As they plan, help pupils to see the connection between the knowledge they are selecting and the change argument that they are making.

Alternatively, supply two parallel stories (say, Britain and India) and have pupils weave them as one (*Gadd TH 136*).

## 6) Go large!

Blow (*TH 145*) emphasises the importance of doing history on really big timescales if pupils are to understand the slow, often imperceptible workings of change and continuity. This isn't easy with limited curriculum time! But practical experiments in making this work well exist, and the enquiry questions that result are instantly engaging. See Powell (*TH 170*) for a very detailed, practical account of how to teach using her enquiry question, 'Why do you think Britain was able to build an empire from the 1500s (but not before)?' She gave pupils enough big-picture knowledge of city-states, empires and globalisation, for them to place 'smaller' stories of transatlantic slavery and empire in context.

## 7) Go small!

OK, this sounds mad, but if you take time to get pupils describing a place and its stories in depth, learning about the day-to-day realities of material culture, of how petty officials worked or of how ordinary people negotiated problems (such as what to do with your candles when you are really annoyed by Edward VI's injunctions), pupils understand processes of change much better. When Mastin taught his pupils to 'see' the Reformation through the strange blend of resistance and compliance shown by the villagers in the little village of Morebath, he taught them tiny, incidental, fascinating details. When they wrote their narratives of change, covering the period 1520 to 1574, knowing how things worked on this micro scale seemed to have the effect of stopping pupils from writing crass generalisations about the wider, larger processes of change.<sup>12</sup>

## 8) Make periodisation into a problem

This is so simple to do, and so rich in possibility. Any period label an historian uses (Victorians, Palaeolithic, the Age of...) is an interpretation based on what is deemed to be a chunk of time separated from what preceded and followed, either by its own continuities and/or by its remarkable changes. Such 'periods' have beginnings and endings (as well as 'high points', 'watersheds' and 'turning points'). This is why they are 'stories' – ways in which people have emplotted the past. They are therefore up for reinterpretation. So, both in your enquiry questions and in general discussion, try:

- When did the Renaissance begin?
- How shall we rename 'the Dark Ages'/'the Middle Ages'?
- When did the 1960s end? (think about that one...)

This is why Seixas advocates teaching pupils 'that periodisation is an interpretive accomplishment of the historian and that it varies according to historians' themes and questions'.<sup>13</sup>

## 8) Examine change/continuity across shifting interpretations

Show pupils how changing interpretations do or don't match with changing values, prejudices or methods of the times. This teaches pupils that interpretations are limited by the questions being asked. In Mohamud and Whitburn's 'How did interpretations of Great Zimbabwe change during the twentieth century?', the ruins of the ancient city of Great Zimbabwe are presented in three interpretations: the 1930s (a travel poster), the 1950s (a Mortimer Wheeler film clip) and the 1980s (Henry Louis Gates's account of Africans' engineering feats and his exposure of the paternalism and inappropriateness of earlier, European interpretations).<sup>14</sup> The Gates interpretation not only starts with different assumptions and questions, it affirms the agency of black people through a black film-maker and black archaeologist. What, then, is the nature of the change that has taken place?

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Explanation and resources can be found in <https://anotherhistoryispossible.com/a-level-enquiry/>. The sequence of lessons was produced as a response to a 2019 fellowship co-ordinated by the Justice2History, the Historical Association and the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership.
- <sup>2</sup> Olusaga, D. (2017) *Black and British: a forgotten history*, Pan Macmillan; Hochschild, A. (2012) *Bury the Chains: prophets and rebels in the fight to free an empire's slaves*, Boston MA: Mariner Books; Trouillot, M.-R. (2015) *Silencing the Past: power and the production of history*, Boston MA: Beacon Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Trouillot, *op.cit.*
- <sup>4</sup> Shemilt, D. (1980) *History 13–16 Evaluation Study: Schools Council History 13–16 Project*, Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall.
- <sup>5</sup> Lee, P. (2005) 'Putting principles into practice: understanding history' in M.S. Donovan and J.D. Bransford (eds.) *How Students Learn: history in the classroom*, Washington DC: National Academies Press, pp. 28–78.
- <sup>6</sup> Counsell, C. (2017) 'Historical change and continuity: how history teachers are advancing the field' in I. Davies (ed.) *Debates in History Teaching*, London: Routledge, pp. 113–139.<sup>7</sup> For a much fuller account of Foster's curricular work on this, see Foster, R. (2016) 'Historical change: in search of argument' in C. Counsell, K. Burn and A. Chapman (eds.) *Masterclass in History Education*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 5–22.
- <sup>8</sup> Make use of Olusaga, *op.cit.*
- <sup>9</sup> Braudel, F. (1972) *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Reynolds, S. New York: Harper and Row.
- <sup>10</sup> Morris, M. (2012) *The Norman Conquest*, London: Pegasus.
- <sup>11</sup> Counsell, C. and Mastin, S. (2015) 'Narrating continuity: investigating knowledge and narrative in a lower secondary school study of sixteenth-century change' in A. Chapman and A. Wilschut (eds.) *International Review of History Education: joined-up history*, Vol. 8, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, pp. 317–50; Duffy, E. (2003) *The Voices of Morebath: reformation and rebellion in an English village*, Yale: Yale University Press.
- <sup>12</sup> Counsell and Mastin, *op.cit.*
- <sup>13</sup> Seixas, P. (2015) 'Looking for history' in A. Chapman and A. Wilschut (eds.) *International Review of History Education: joined-up history*, Vol. 8, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, p. 264.
- <sup>14</sup> Mohamud, A. and Whitburn, R. (2016) *Doing Justice to History: transforming black history in secondary schools*, London: UCL Institute of Education Press.