What's the wisdom on…

historical significance?

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.

The idea of historical significance eludes tidy answers. It doesn't thrive on the quick fix. Yet we do not need to be confused by it. It just requires some clear thinking about what it *distinctively* offers. In other words, we need to clarify overall curricular aims, and think big about how various aspects of our curricula contribute to them. That way, we avoid falling into the trap of treating historical significance as an isolated practical skill. We avoid the hunt for some formula which neatly captures or teaches it.

We'll start with some big issues, then move into the story of its evolution in the hands of history teachers, and finally set out some practical approaches for planning and teaching.

Historical significance as meaning-making

Consider the vast array of stuff that happened in the past – every single action, pronouncement, artefact or achievement that existed or took place before now. Whether clustered together as patterns, trends or movements – a Neolithic Revolution here, a French Revolution there, an artist's influence, a whole village's rebellion, a long-term fall in prices – or taken as individual things – a single worker and his/her achievement, protest, skill or bus trip – the past is everything: quite literally, *every single thing*. It is all the stuff that happens to, or is created by, billions of people. The past is so mind-bogglingly vast that the meaningful stories that could be drawn out of this are infinite.

Yet only some of this becomes *history*. How does this happen? What causes all those past states of affairs and past happenings to be divided into, on the one hand, things that don't get talked about so much and, on the other hand, things that end up (whether accurately or not, whether individually or collectively) in history books, in popular accounts, being sung about or debated across the generations, whether by governments, film-goers, bards, communities or history teachers in schools?

Things that *don't* get talked about, or recorded and retold, we could call **silences.** Things that *do*, are those that have been treated, consciously or unconsciously, at some time or other, as **significant.** Why? The answer is in the word. They are things which seem to **signify** something, to certain people, somewhere. In other words, they mean something, or have meant something, to some people, at some point. They are like **signs.** They point to something. They don't point directly. They point indirectly. They connote, rather than denote.[1] That meaning might come from their relationship with some other thing, or from some connection with the beholder. But someone, somewhere has noticed the relationship or connection. For the thing to end up as a story told, someone has to make the meaning. The Latin 'significare' is made up of two words: **signum**, a sign or mark, and **facere**, to make.

History – whether stories told or patterns noticed – is a social process of meaning-making that humans (unlike tigers or ants) distinctively do. Through that process, historical significance is made. It is how humans carry social meaning across time. In other words, historical significance arises through the workings of social or cultural memory.

And humans don't just make historical significance, they keep remaking it. Depending on where you're standing in place or time, the historical significance of some past person, event or situation will change. Something is standing out. There is an impulse to tell, a desire to hear. Yet over time or with quite different questions asked about the past, something else heaves into view, something else seems to matter. Something else acquires historical significance.

In reviewing all the work on historical significance that we could find, the thing that most commonly causes confusion for teachers is this: a failure to realise that historical significance cannot be a fixed, permanent property of the thing itself. The historical significance attached to an event, person, situation or trend is going to change depending on the questions we are asking about the past, on the particular time period we are in or on the topics under consideration.

How has the wisdom evolved among history teachers?

Historical significance as a focus for pupils' historical thinking first found its way into the National Curriculum (NC) for history in England and Wales, in 1995.[2] Since then, more and more history teachers in England and Wales have talked or written about their own and others' efforts to bring this idea to pupils' attention. Sometimes this has interacted with international work, but it has mostly acquired a dynamic of its own. History teachers have tried out approaches, debated issues and done a fair bit of pondering and puzzling about what the term could or should mean, as a curricular goal.

We need to track back a little earlier, however, to understand the different strands that have fed into this idea, and to make sense of problems that teachers have tackled along the way.

One of the earliest sets of criteria for historical significance that history teachers sometimes cite comes from Partington in 1980.[3] They are: i) importance (to people in the past); ii) profundity (how deeply lives have been affected); iii) quantity (how many lives affected); iv) durability (for how long were lives affected); and v) relevance (to the present). But Partington wasn't chiefly focusing on what pupils themselves might learn about historical significance. Partington was looking at criteria teachers might use for selecting content. The two things are quite different.

Ten years later Lomas produced a very different list (find them in full in Counsell ***TH114***).[4] Just look at these two:

- *to understand why people may hold different ideas about what has been significant*;
- *to understand that the significance of an event is determined by the nature of the historical enquiry.*

Spot the difference from Partington? Not only was Lomas trying to capture things pupils might think about, he was emphasising that historical significance is not a fixed property. He showed why events that would never make it to Partington's list often get treated as historically significant. They are *symbolically* significant.

If you look at Lomas's criteria as a whole, you get a strong sense that historical significance isn't some rational process where we can all objectively agree on the historical significance of something. It's relative. It's contingent. It's ever-shifting.

After 1995, the writing of history teachers and former history teachers on historical significance exploded into life. To navigate all this, you need some sharp antennae for who is responding to what, and what is being debated. Hunt, for example, writing in 2000, wrote about historical significance, but his chief focus was making history meaningful to pupils – how the study of the past might appear significant *to them*.[5]

The 2000s saw a spate of practical writing as teachers began to pick up and run with the ideas of Lomas. Take a look at Hammond in ***TH104.*** Her lessons on the Holocaust introduced pupils to very long-term roots of antisemitism. She had her pupils use that knowledge to consider, 'Why have some atrocities been judged more historically significant than others?' and, 'Can you only judge the significance of an event by its long-term consequences?' and, perhaps most interestingly, 'Why are WE studying THIS, NOW?' These are not enquiry questions, as such. Rather, they 'emerge as pupils move through the 11–14 curriculum'.

In 2002, Phillips used the acronym **GREAT** to show pupils the historical significance of WWI:

Groundbreaking
Remembered by all
Events that were far reaching
Affected the future
Terrifying

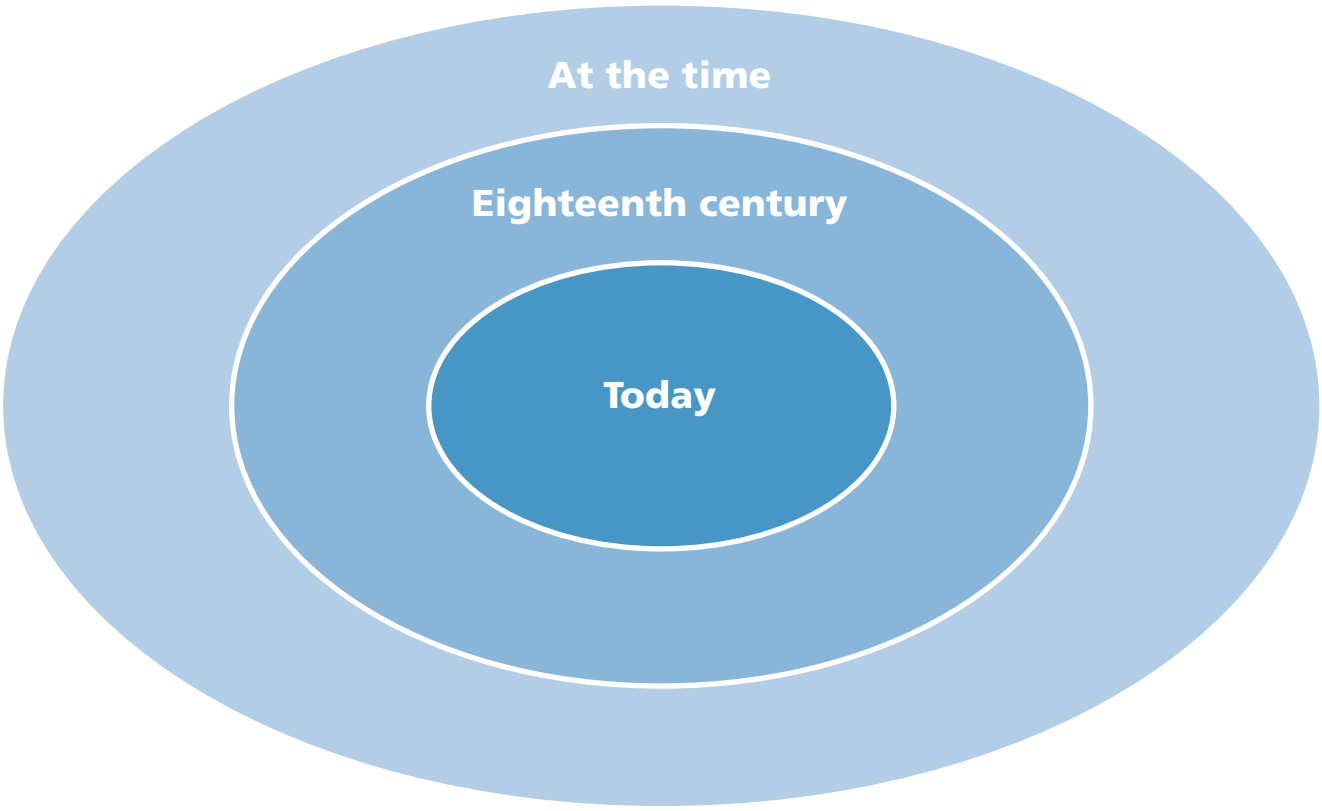
Counsell (***TH114***) was bothered by **GREAT** and its uses. She was concerned that pupils were being taught that particular events had fixed, intrinsic significance. Wanting to develop the principle that historical significance is always ascribed (it cannot be a property of the thing itself), she sought a broad range of criteria that would focus pupils on analysing the workings of collective or cultural memory.

Counsell was also concerned by a trend to reduce historical significance to the size or impact of consequences. If it was just about consequences, why have another thing called historical significance? She produced a new taxonomy as a starting point, one she hoped pupils would eventually be encouraged to challenge. It included consequences (Resulting in change), but also two criteria that related to the workings of the discipline of history (Remarked upon and Revealing) and two that captured broader social memories, ones by which people seemed to orientate themselves (Resonated) and ones actively commemorated (Remembered).

Two years later, so many practical classroom explorations and curricular reflections were emerging that an entire edition of *Teaching History* (***TH125***) was devoted to historical significance. Using aspects of Counsell's five Rs, Bradshaw examined ways of tracking pupils' growing sophistication over time. Others considered other criteria and other approaches.

In the range of ensuing approaches, it is possible to discern both rich new possibilities and some pitfalls. A key message for new history teachers is that historical significance is not best described as an historical skill, let alone a defined process that historians go through. It is, rather, a 'meta-concept' that sits above, illuminating or challenging just about every choice that gets made in the pursuit of history. Historians don't carry out some discrete, conscious exercise called historical significance. When historians or students of history are tackling *any* question (reasoning with causes,

Figure 1: Ripple diagram about significance of the witch-hunts



analysing change, interrogating sources, uncovering perspectives…) they are attributing significance. Likewise, beyond the discipline, when societies commemorate and memorialise, use past reference points or make comparisons, they work with assumptions about historical significance and continuously renew those assumptions, whether consciously or not.

Arguably, what matters is that by the time pupils drop their compulsory study of history, they have taken opportunities to notice and explore the factors that seem to be at work in causing certain past phenomena to receive attention and, conversely how some phenomena or voices are thereby concealed. In his teaching of the transatlantic slave trade Davies (***TH175***) drew such concealment to the attention of his students, by introducing them to the idea of silences, as advanced by Trouillot.[6] Davies didn't style his work as being about historical significance, and yet it was, entirely. Indeed, *everything* is about historical significance. So how does the net effect of all that we do wash up as occasional fascinating reflection on what any tradition of historical study might reveal or conceal? Ensuring pupils think about this is therefore a long-term planning exercise, not a set of discrete enquiries, tasks or skills.

All that said, as part of that effort all kinds of practical approaches, and, indeed, some discrete enquiries and tasks, can play their part. What follows is a selection of possibilities that have found their way into *Teaching History.*

A summary of the wisdom

1) Go local

Choose a local topic where something physical – mural or monument – shows, in very concrete ways, local people's meaning-making about the past. The collective determination that something should stay in collective memory thus becomes tangible. Brown and Woodcock (***TH134***) built an enquiry in which pupils worked out what the First World War *meant* to their village, both at the moment of studying it and in earlier years. How and why did this community seek to preserve that memory? Pupils explored this using the war memorial that they walked past every day, through old photographs in which pupils gradually saw their own streets, and through a database of the war dead full of surnames that their families recognised. Brown and Woodcock then linked this to pupils' realisation, in a First World War battlefields visit, that this same event had significance to the French and Belgian pupils learning about the war taking place in their own towns and villages. Why is there this impulse to keep making meaning of this particular past? How do similar events differ in different social memories? Why do slightly different local moments gain greater prominence than others?

2) Go popular

Right at the end of Key Stage 3, Allsop (***TH137***) had his Year 9s examining the music video of Billy Joel's 'We didn't start the fire'. In the song, the Suez Canal appears alongside Khrushchev, Bill Haley and the Comets, and Elvis Presley: forty years of modern history in a five-minute pop song. Some events pupils had studied; many they hadn't. After researching the events unknown to them, pupils were supported in working out why Joel might have included each. From this process, pupils built their own historical significance criteria. Pupils were then guided into discussion about why Joel was able to assume that most of these events would be known by most adults. Thus they began to see that historical significance is a human, social process, remarkably powerful in communicating across time and space.

3) Make diagrams

Historical significance is about what things signify to different people *across time*. Apps (***TH170***) used the diagram in Figure 1 for pupils to capture their thinking about changing historical significance via a study of witch-hunts. What was the historical significance of the witch-hunts in the scientific revolution of the late seventeenth century or in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, or in the historiography or the popular comedy of the twentieth century? Apps drew on Bradshaw's ideas about progression in pupils' thinking about historical significance and her goal was to ensure that pupils built on earlier studies with this more complex example of historical significance 'not as an enduring characteristic but as fluid attribution'.

Try reversing the time order of the items so that the event is like the stone in a pond, and the ripples move outwards. Such a diagram would show how one event, trend or person alters meaning in collective memory, across time. Or ask pupils to consider other diagrams or pictorial representations. An imaginary house or museum showing a person's meaning through time is another. If each room were a century, place or perspective, what pictures would be hung in that room?

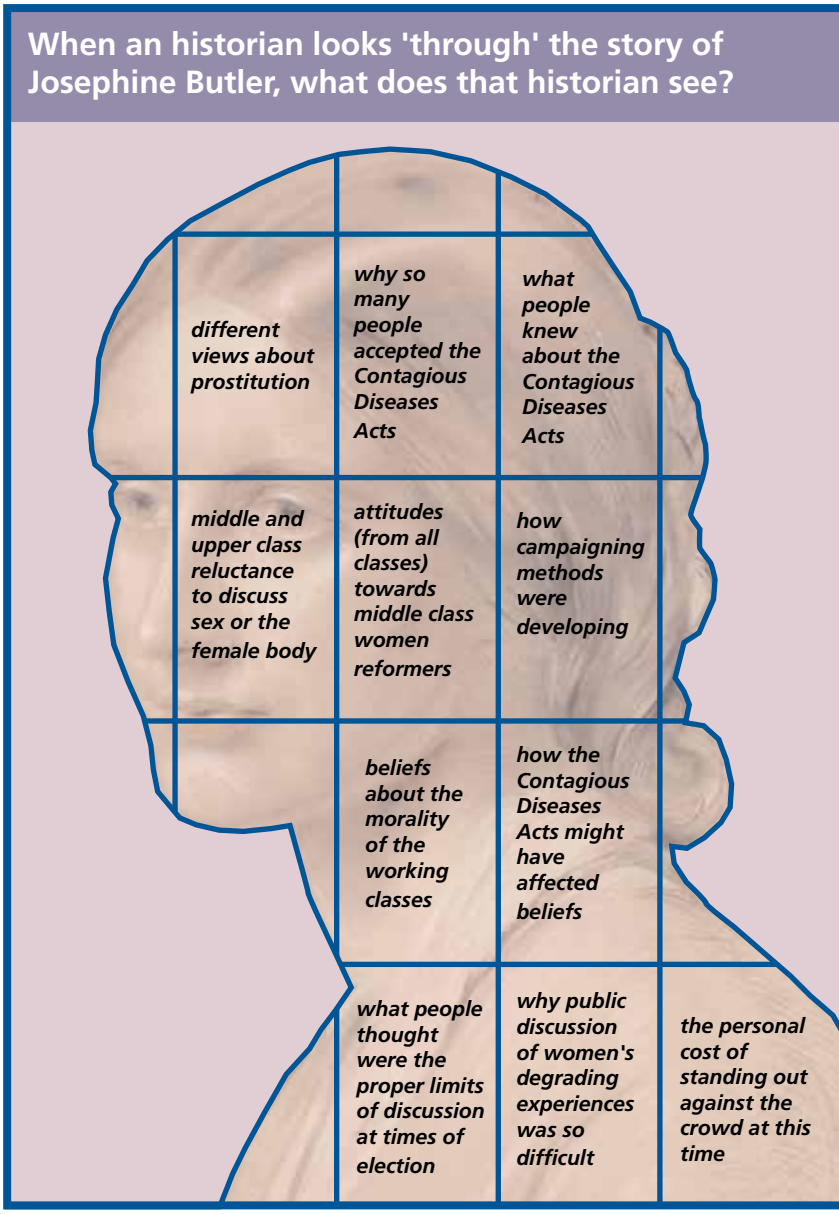
Counsell (***TH114***) used a picture-diagram for pupils to explore one of her five Rs 'revealing'. In her teaching, Counsell liked to choose figures that were not conventionally well-known. She used a window shaped like that person to show how historians had brought said person into scholarly consciousness and/or public consciousness. The window showed what this person revealed about the wider period. Figure 2 shows this device with the nineteenth-century campaigner to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, Josephine Butler. Pupils made such inferences themselves from textbook accounts, historians' works, museums or selected primary source material.

4) Get them arguing

An entirely different way to help pupils see the inner workings of social memory and/or the possibilities for much less well-known figures to become historically significant, is to set up a debate or other structured argument, such as the 'boxing match' developed by Hammond (***TH109***). Hammond used her boxing match to tackle a causation problem, but the approach can be used just as successfully with the broader issue of historical significance. Take two figures, one very prominent in popular imagination, such as Florence Nightingale, and one much less so, such as Josephine Butler. Create an imaginary scenario with an audience, such as the need to convince a publisher that there really *should* be a chapter on this person in a particular book.

During the debate, especially if you go for a stylised, structured one such as Hammond's (lots of short 'punches' that respond to each other), each team is forced to reach for better and better justifications. They can do this by retrieving existing secure knowledge and/or by digging about, in short time bursts, into further information you have supplied. Specific insights into historical significance can then be teased out afterwards in a debrief. In that debrief, ask pupils to notice what kinds of justifications they were using – such as how far-reaching or how beneficial were the effects, or the role of the person as inspiration to particular communities.

Figure 2: Using a Josephine-Butler-shaped window to comment upon what Butler's story reveals about the past



As well as noticing ways in which historians shape arguments through relationship and connection, pupils start to notice everyone's agency and potential responsibility in changing what is construed as historically significant.

5) Choose one criterion to shape an enquiry

Numerous teachers have reflected on the importance of moving very steadily into explicit reflection on significance. So start simply. Take just *one* possible criterion for historical significance, either from one of the taxonomies mentioned above, or else your own, and build a short sequence of lessons around it, with pupils answering the enquiry question in the final lesson. Osowiecki did this with her 'How remarkable was the Renaissance?' (***TH117*** and ***TH118***).

The word 'revealing' can be very useful both in an evidential enquiry or in one about similarity and difference. For example:

- What does the thirteenth-century city of Timbuktu reveal?
- What does Chartism reveal?
- What do female Chartists reveal about the attitudes of, and towards, working-class women?

6) Move from supplied criteria to generating their own

By the end of the key stage, drawing on a wide range of secure knowledge about history, plenty of practice in considering historical questions using various concepts such as change, causation or difference, and plenty of moments in which the workings of historical significance have been drawn to their attention, pupils are ready to produce well-developed sets of criteria for historical significance of their own. Bradshaw (***TH125***) wrote at length about phasing in this process. Worth, in a 'Cunning Plan' in ***TH155***, showed how she had her class develop, together, their own model for understanding historical significance, with acronym **GROMIT** which they then applied to a reflection on what is generally remembered about the First World War and what might deserve more prominent remembrance, arising from different later interests and considerations. Such an approach is particularly effective for showing pupils how the construction of history is a sustained conversation between past and present, sometimes intentional and serving particular aims, sometimes de facto and not noticed until long after something has become a tradition.

7) Find out pupils' own assumptions about historical significance

As with so many aspects of historical learning, it can be extremely useful to work out what preconceptions pupils already have. Of course, they may not know they have them, so this requires some skill, but we have plenty of examples on which to draw. This is quite an extensive research field in its own right and has a big literature internationally. Conway (***TH125***) established his pupils' preconceptions in order to understand the impact that they were having on his pupils' thinking about the historical significance of the First World War. It is worth also reflecting on international comparisons, or comparisons across groups of pupils, to see what ideas pupils might be bringing from family, community, ethnicity or national context. Cercadillo (***TH125***) compared ideas about historical significance among English and Spanish pupils. In a study of Canadian students' conceptions of historical significance, Peck established links between pupils' self-ascribed identities and the narratives they constructed. What implications might this have for setting up reflection or debate in your classroom?[7]

8) Explore significance and silence as opposites

The historian and anthropologist Trouillot writes of 'erasure' to describe how the workings of history, whether public history or scholarship, can also *silence* stories. We've already mentioned the recent work of Davies (***TH180***) on the Atlantic slave trade whose pupils examined slavery through lenses of politics, race, economics and black resistance, shaping new, less frequently told stories of long-term change and continuity that are easily lost in a focus on a single event such as the British abolition of the slave trade. Consider too, how you might use approaches such as that of Boyd (***TH175***) on gender. Boyd shapes a radical retelling of the Norman Conquest by showing female lived experience and female agency. Consider how a reflection on significance and silence might follow such a study.

9) Tie it to interpretations of the past

While a consideration of historical significance goes beyond the study of particular interpretations of the past (see ***TH177*** for a WTWO on interpretations), it is clearly very closely linked with such study. Don't see this as a problem. It's a golden opportunity! It's why interpretations and significance were placed in the same bullet point in the 2014 NC. Whenever you study a particular interpretation or a cluster of interpretations, in depth, point out to pupils clearly, or ask them to think through, what new things it has taught them about the workings of social memory, whether deliberate and planned, or unconscious and *post hoc*, whether in public history, in schools or in scholarship.

10) Think whole key stage

Remember your ultimate goals. What takeaways do you want pupils to have by the time they finish the key stage or finish compulsory study of history? How will you build this over time? This cannot be measured in the number of tasks or enquiries devoted explicitly to historical significance. Pupils might learn a great deal about historical significance with very few explicit tasks. What matters is that you consider how the range and security of diverse yet coherent content (frameworks, stories and chronologies), and the range of historical thinking and argument to which they've been exposed, adds up to an awareness that historical significance is fluid, constructed, fascinating and vitally important to understand.

Pitfalls

1. As will be clear from the above, we advise all new teachers to develop a healthy aversion to turning historical significance into some tidy, assessable hierarchy of skills!
2. Don't get bogged down with the use of the word 'significance' or 'significant' within historians' accounts. Historians use the word appropriately in all sorts of settings and for all sorts of purposes. The *curricular* focus on historical significance rises above this. It is asking about a broader cultural process, one that includes, but also transcends, particular types of historical argument.
3. Don't obsess over separating historical significance from other things! Be clear about the distinctive entitlement it offers. Make sure it is being considered, but there is really no need to worry about whether 'this is an interpretations enquiry' or 'this is a significance enquiry'. It can easily be both.

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