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Web 5.1

Supporting Sixth Formers in their historical learning

Developing the skills students need for transition to university

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The A2 year is the time to be thinking clearly about how to develop the skills that students will need for the transition to Higher Education. This is the time to focus students' minds on the next stage of their education and how they can best prepare for it, at the same time as reaching the entry level qualifications they will need. The sort of skills which need to be developed are of use to all students, whether or not they will go on to study history or some other subject in higher education, or go into employment.

Increasingly teachers have to address the idea of personalised learning, with teaching directed towards the needs of individual students. It may actually be useful to reverse this idea, with students being persuaded to take control of their own learning, in preparation for the greater independence they are going to need once they leave school. By the sixth form, students should be aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners and be ready to address these. All the skills which have been developed and scaffolded through their secondary career should now be coming to fruition and the teacher's role should be less one of direct intervention and more one of guide and mentor, teaching students how to learn rather than simply imparting facts. Largely this is what good teachers have always done, but it is always useful to re-examine good practice and consider how it might be further developed, especially in the light of recent technological advances and opportunities.

The obvious place to start is Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) which can empower both teachers and students in ways which were unimaginable only a few years ago. Nevertheless what follows should not dishearten those teachers who are less comfortable with the world of web 2.0 and VLEs. They

should remember that what students value is relationships and that technology is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. The ideas can be delivered in a variety of other ways, and the technology can be used at simple as well as sophisticated levels. Indeed it could strongly be argued that using new technology with which a teacher was not comfortable or in which they did not have confidence, would actually be detrimental to the learning process. It should always be remembered that technology is the servant not the master and has no virtue in its own right.

History is a knowledge based subject and the internet provides access to knowledge on an unprecedented scale. It also allows communication between individuals in an easy and speedy way. These are the things which can be utilised to enhance the study of History in the sixth form, and empower students in their learning, so that they can achieve things which would previously not have been possible. The more experience students have of this before they get to university the easier they will find the transition.

What this section will not do is recommend any particular software or hardware or format, as technology moves on so quickly that it will probably be outdated before it is published. What can be done also depends on what systems a particular institution has bought into and this will need to be discussed with those responsible.

Start small – and use what is already out there!

You may well be inspired by the potential of VLEs to think that you will put all your sixth form courses online, with exercises to complete, links to other sites, places for students to hand in work and all the other bells and whistles that are available. This could lead to fantastic results, or, perhaps more likely, to exhaustion and a half-finished product which never gets used properly by staff or students.

Better to start with a less ambitious project and develop it organically as it becomes clear what works and what is less successful for you and your students. The most fantastic product, which impresses senior management, will not improve learning if students and teachers are alienated by it and do not access it.

What can you usefully achieve?

- **Information.** Your department may provide a handbook for students with the basic course information that they need – but how many of your students still have this by the end of the year? How many still feel the need to ask what Board and what specification they are doing? If you were looking for a hotel or a gift you would probably expect to check suppliers and prices on the internet rather than have dozens of brochures and a long walk round the shops, and this is what your students should be able to expect from their course. It is better for them, and you, if they can check technical details easily without enraging (or depressing) you by asking the same thing a dozen times. You can include links to the exam board, the specification

and even past papers and mark schemes online, to guide both students' preparation and revision. How much further you take this depends on you. Some teachers would want to put all their teaching notes online, others would see this as deskilling themselves and even removing their usefulness. It might be useful to draw a clear distinction between what would be done in a class meeting and what can be achieved through online facilities so that it is clear in what ways the teacher is essential, especially in terms of relationships.

- **Calendar.** It could be useful, at the beginning of the year, to put a list of important dates on the site so that students know from the beginning what they will be expected to produce over the year and when the deadlines will be. This can be added to and adjusted as time goes on, but does provide a baseline. Those students arguing about excessive workloads at various times of the year lose some of the moral high ground if it can be proved to them that they had clear advance warning and should be taking control of time management as part of their studies.
- **Research.** There is a wealth of useful, accessible information on the web. There is also a lot of rubbish, including websites put up by US high school students to publicise their latest class paper, as well as the deliberately mendacious and misleading. Holocaust denial sites might be seen as among the leading contenders in the latter category, although even they can lead to very constructive historical discussion about evidence and reliability. Some information is freely available; some things have to be paid for. It is worth looking at subscription sites and deciding which will help your students and then linking both free sites and sites for which you have a subscription through your VLE. That way your students only have to learn to go to one entry point but they will be able to access multiple sites. Sixth formers can be very conservative creatures and making it easy for them to be adventurous is the key here. The sort of sites which you might want to subscribe to include History Today, which gives access to the full archive of both *History Today* and *History Review*, its sister magazine, produced for A level history students. This means that you can ask students to read specific articles without having to go to the expense and trouble of duplicating them, and students can research more widely, particularly when they are starting a historical investigation for A2 coursework. In addition to articles by academics on particular topics there are book reviews, skills supplements and other advice and help for students. It is likely that students will find advice and help from someone more expert than their teacher on at least some subjects they might be having difficulty with! They might even read articles, for interest, on topics which are not part of their A level studies! Another site designed for the study of A level History is www.history-ontheweb.co.uk which promotes e-learning and publishes the magazine *new perspective*. Their site contains particularly valuable advice for teachers wanting to set up a VLE. Access to websites such as these is also invaluable for teachers researching new topics for their own teaching.
- **Study skills.** It is possible for teachers to put up their own guidance on the various study skills which their students need, or to put up links to the many

websites available. This means that students can be guided towards what is relevant to them without time being wasted for students who have already mastered a particular skill. A variety of useful websites are available, including ones designed for undergraduates at various institutions of higher education, which are open access, and should cater for just about every sixth form need imaginable. One of the major skills is, of course, the use of the internet itself and help with this can be found at www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/. Intute are a consortium of seven universities working with various partners who bring together the expertise of various people to evaluate web resources and provide a structured approach to help people find and use them. While their main target is university students, the resources they provide are accessible enough to be used by sixth formers and provide a valuable learning tool. Again this is a learning tool which may be valuable to teachers as well as students.

- **Communication.** For me the most useful aspect of the new technology has been the creation of an emailing group so that I can send messages to my students at any time. This may perhaps become less successful as email becomes 'old' technology to them and they move towards the use of social networking sites as their main method of keeping in touch, but I still find it an extremely useful tool. It is possible to post messages on VLEs but these rely on students logging in to receive them. I think that this is much less effective than messages which pop into their inboxes regularly. The effort put into creating the emailing group is well worthwhile and I have found no abuse of the system by students. Any teacher concerned about giving out their personal email address could create one to be used only for this purpose. Any student who did abuse the system can easily be removed from the group. The type of messages which I send out include alerts to TV or radio programmes which might be of interest to students. With the advent of BBC iPlayer they can even time their viewing and listening to suit their social lives! I also send links to newspaper articles and book reviews, reminders of essay deadlines, details of competitions, open days and anything else which I forgot to mention in class or which will take up too much time, or which I want students to have a record of having been told! Students need encouragement to email back and to put up comments for themselves but we can get a good exchange of views going on certain topics and many of our former students prove reluctant to leave the group once at university, with some still posting comments or replies into their second year and others saying that it just gives them comfort to still be receiving regular communications while away from home!
- **Essays/deadlines/homework tasks.** These can be posted on the site along with suggested bibliographies, outline guides to new topics, suggestions for structuring notemaking and any tricky points to watch out for. Links to relevant websites for more information will also be useful to the student.
- **Information on choice of Higher Education.** It is impossible for any A level teacher to be up-to-date with all the changes in Higher Education and it is difficult to avoid passing prejudices on to students, but one use for a VLE is to link to various university websites and newspaper guides to encourage students to investigate further without the need for a grand tour of the country through open days. This means less expense and time out of class for students and a clearer focus to the visits which are undertaken. The

sixth form journals include articles on how to choose a university and what is involved in different courses and links can be made to internet forums such as The Student Room, where information can be swapped with other students from around the country who are making similar choices.

That completes a round-up of the basic uses of a VLE for a History department, and there should be nothing there which is too challenging for historians! For bright young things, and for the more adventurous mature teacher, there is much more to be achieved however.

For the more advanced or adventurous

- **Online debates.** The easiest way to get involved in something like this is through a website which is already established. Oxford University Faculty of History led the way some years ago with History Off the Shelf (HOTS) <http://hots.modhist.ox.ac.uk/boards/invboard/index.php>.¹ The site is moderated by Oxford students, and sixth formers can sign in and start debates on any topic which interests them (perhaps the issues raised in their next essay?). Perhaps inevitably many of those who post on the site are students hoping to go to Oxford, but this is not an exclusive site and it would be good to encourage more students to use it. The Historical Association (HA) has also pioneered online debates with their 'Centenary Debates'. These were moderated by an historian and the intention is that there will be further debates for all key stages in the future. Once teachers are confident in using external sites they can begin to develop 'in-house' debates. This can involve setting a question before a seminar is held in class and obliging all members of the class to post a contribution before the lesson. This can help students overcome nervousness at speaking in front of their peers, by enabling them to try out ideas and respond to others before the actual seminar. Face-to-face discussion then improves because the groundwork is completed before the seminar. One consideration is the need to provide feedback to students on the quality and usefulness of their posts. This encourages participation and helps to develop skills further, as well as being part of the traditional role of teachers.
- **Preparation for roleplay or class debates.** Prior posting on the site can be developed further as preparation for roleplay or a formal debate in class. Students could be asked to post a biography and character assessment of whichever historical person they are to play. Others can comment on their accuracy and add material. The teacher can post sources, including cartoons, speeches, or photographs which relate to the characters, to start students off, or they can be asked to find their own. Anything which makes students use and transform material rather than just regurgitating it develops higher order thinking skills. A further step can be taken by making links with other schools doing the same courses and holding debates across the internet, either in real time if the logistics allow or over a set period of time, with

¹ A very useful and impressive new site, The History Faculty, has recently launched and provides resources – for example, historians' podcasts and opportunities for online discussion. It is available at: www.thehistoryfaculty.com/.

moderation by the teachers. This can be very motivating as no student wants to see their school as inferior.

- **Source work.** This can be developed in the same way as debate by posting various sources and asking students to comment on them online before they are used in class. Students can also be asked to find and post their own sources and justify their usefulness to the rest of the group. The sources can also be used to answer questions or create narratives of various kinds.
- **Wikis and websites.** Students will probably have more facility in developing these than some of their teachers. On a VLE they can be viewed by the rest of the group in a way which is impossible with paper resources and the resources produced one year can be used critically by next year's students.
- **Contact with historians and local universities.** Most institutions of Higher Education are keen to develop links with the local community and VLE makes it easier. It might be possible to post podcasts of relevant lectures for sixth formers to use. Historians could moderate and judge web-based debates either within a school or between two or more schools. They might be willing to be on the end of email for a fixed period of time to answer questions about particular topics being studied.
- **Groupwork.** Many of the activities described can be undertaken either in groups or individually, with all the advantages of groupwork for developing team skills as well as providing encouragement and challenge. Some of the disadvantages of groupwork, such as the need to find times and places to meet can also be overcome in a virtual environment. Debates and mock trials can be prepared in groups and then take place either in class or online.
- **Assessment.** There are huge possibilities here for students to engage in peer assessment and group activities to help them understand the requirements of the exam and how to meet them. Essays can be posted for students to mark and comment on, they can be annotated, answers can be prepared in groups with different students taking responsibility for different parts of the answer. Commentary can then be provided by the teacher or by an examiner and ways to improve an answer can be highlighted.

Overall the advantages of VLEs will become more apparent as time progresses, as students and teachers become more familiar with the technology and as technical support in schools develops. It is vital that they are seen as supplementing and enhancing the role of the teacher, not supplanting it. Class meetings are still the place where most learning will take place but with careful use of a VLE that learning can be more productive and the role of the teacher should be more clearly focused on ensuring that each student's learning needs are being met, rather than just providing notes. Students will still need to make notes, they will still need to produce written work, they will still need to be monitored and guided through face-to-face contact with their teachers. A VLE can provide space to prepare for oral work, but mock trials, debates, question and answer sessions and discussions are more likely to take place productively in class situations rather than videoconferencing.

VLEs should not replace relationships between teacher and student but should help to make the requirements of courses more transparent. They

provide the opportunity for students to collaborate and communicate, to access learning materials and to engage in productive and meaningful discussion with each other and with those outside the immediate school environment. They can be initially accessed in a relatively low-level way and then develop as the confidence and familiarity of the teacher with them grows. VLEs are only useful if students and teachers are engaged by them; they are also only as useful as the content put in and have no virtue in themselves. It is pointless to put a lot of effort into producing one if it is just there because senior management have demanded it, if no productive use is made of it. Students have to believe in it, which means that they have to be constantly directed to it, until its use becomes second nature, and the material and links provided have to be of real use to the students.

The personal or individual study

This is something about which my department feels passionately as it is the main opportunity for sixth form students to engage in 'real' history, from finding a topic and setting a question, to constructing a bibliography, researching, reaching a judgement and writing it up in a scholarly way, avoiding plagiarism and correctly referencing all sources.

It is the point in the study of A level History when all the skills and knowledge which have been developed over the course come together and students have to consolidate and use them for themselves. They have to go beyond information provided by the teacher and the basic text book and become familiar with different ways of accessing information: school and local libraries, websites, journals etc. Some may even engage in original research using primary sources.

To access the top levels in the mark scheme students also have to engage in historiography and produce a critical evaluation of historians' interpretations.

The thought of this can be intimidating at the start of an A2 course and the tasks need to be broken down into a manageable process, starting with the choice of topic.

Some students have a clear idea of what topic they want to focus on for their personal study. It might be something which has always interested them or something which they have never had the chance to study formally before. Others are completely overwhelmed by the vastness of the possibilities. Both types of student need close supervision and support at this stage, as the quality of the final study and the ease with which it is completed is very dependent on the suitability of the initial choice of subject and the precise question chosen. Students need to be shown the marking criteria at this stage to ensure that they choose a topic which enables them to meet those criteria. They also need to see a selection of studies produced by previous students to give them a model to work towards. If they are to show how historians can hold different views on a topic then it makes sense to choose something about which there is a clear argument or debate and readily accessible historiography; if they need to focus on significance,

then how well a topic can exemplify that must be considered at this stage.

Once students have a topic in mind they need to explore the availability of sources through school and local libraries and the use of electronic resources. There is no point in pursuing a topic, however intrinsically worthwhile, if the resources are difficult to access.

Next students need to form an appropriate question. Guidance is available from the examination boards on this and often takes the form of advice on the use of appropriate stems so that the question will enable the student to meet the assessment criteria. It is useful if a department keeps a list of questions tackled by students in the past; a section of the department's VLE could be devoted to this.

Then the hard work starts. Students need to read and make notes in a more sophisticated and independent way than they have usually done before. If they develop these skills properly it will make the transition to university study much easier as well as enabling the production of a high quality individual study.

Reading

One of the issues to be considered is students' existing conception of the purpose and practice of reading. Wineburg (2001) has repeatedly remarked on the differences in the ways that professional historians and students of history in North America approach historical texts. He believes it is necessary for historians to 'share their mental habits' with students, showing them 'how to get started when they lack necessary information, how to prepare their minds to deal with new topics, how to develop a hunch'. Teachers need to demonstrate to their students the importance of reading critically, for interpretation rather than the accumulation of facts. Students who are only used to using photocopies, handouts or a single textbook are ill-served when it comes to the production of an individual study and will certainly struggle with the requirements of reading at university. Sources need to be more than the short gobbets often encountered, which can be seen as illustrative or as alternative repositories of information, rather than offering insights into different interpretations. The skills of skim reading, 'gutting' texts and sorting the relevant from the irrelevant may not have been essential up to this point in the study of history at school, but they are vital at university and invaluable in the production of the individual study. Increasingly A level textbooks dispose of contested knowledge and present history as a series of facts to be learned, often closely targeted on potential examination questions. They become something akin to 'set' texts. Such 'badged' books are liked by both students and teachers because they seem to contain everything needed for success in a particular course, but history as higher level study cannot be comprehended adequately from such a 'core' text. The great benefit of the personal study is that it is impossible to construct a good one from such sources; reading and notemaking have to be much more sophisticated activities than such sources allow.

Teachers need to provide challenge for students and guide them in their reading. Rather than being provided with pre-digested summaries, students should be pointed towards whole chapters, whole articles, 'difficult' texts. In order to prepare AS students for the construction of the personal study at A2, the expectation should be that from the start of the course each essay should have a bibliography of at least three items and proper referencing should be demonstrated and encouraged. Teachers should be trying to introduce students to the idea of history as a discipline. Specialist sixth form magazines are often the easiest way to quickly get hold of some 'real' historians' ideas and start this process.

Teachers should share their own reading and developing understanding of topics with students, so that they can see that our understanding changes over time and with further reading and research. Each generation creates its own interpretations and a teacher is likely to have a different view of topics after 20 or more years teaching than they had as an undergraduate. Students need to be taught to think about what they are reading for: is it information or interpretation and is there any conflict between the two?

The skills of historical reading must be constantly reinforced; it needs to be recognised that for many 16 and 17 year olds the written word is no longer the main medium of communication, and they need to be taught the skills of reading. Students have a tendency to read unselectively and uncritically and this is something which needs to be addressed if they are to achieve higher levels of thinking. They will not necessarily recognise different genres of writing or focus on the motivation of the writer or the purpose of the piece ... There is a tendency to think that if a historian wrote something it either must be true, or that it is less reliable than an account by an eye-witness because the historian was not there at the time. There is a place for reading fiction, which can be a way into a period for students, to help them get a 'feel' for a time or a place which might otherwise be very alien to them, but they must understand the difference between this and 'historical' writing.

Teachers increasingly need to be aware of the possibilities of electronic media as a powerful research tool for students. Subscriptions to websites such as that of History Today can be very cost effective compared to equipping a library or having a full range of textbooks and using such sites develops important research skills for students. Equally there are many excellent television programmes available now and access to these on video or DVD can help students. They do need to understand however that such programmes are also 'authored' and need to be approached with the same skills and caution as a written text.

Notemaking and the construction of an historical narrative

Once the skills of reading have been mastered, students need to think about writing, both in terms of notemaking and in terms of constructing an historical narrative. Notemaking is a skill which students need to develop independently both in preparation for the production of an individual

study and for further study at university. Early in their A level course they can be provided with choices, for example being expected to summarise the main points of a chapter or article, but to do so in their preferred format, be it flow chart, mindmap or linear notes. Notes should focus on the transformation rather than the acquisition of knowledge, so that rather than being provided with comprehensive handouts, students are expected to create notes from a range of sources and in a variety of forms. There are many ways to help students with notemaking in the early days of their A level course: from textbooks, guided by handouts which give them page references; for homework, sometimes with frameworks given by the teacher and in class, from the teacher explaining things to them. Even notemaking from the teacher talking can be an active and engaging activity as long as students feel comfortable in interjecting comments and questions which are welcomed and encouraged by the teacher.

Thoughtful teachers should ask what notes students need, and why, and not just use the production of notes as a comfort blanket for student and teacher. They need to consider whether notes are a record of a lesson, or a topic, whether they will be used for revision, or to write an essay. They also need to consider whether different purposes require different forms of notemaking. If students can make good notes at AS, this should help them when they have to research a topic for their individual study. They will then have to make notes independently without guidance and frameworks provided by the teacher and this is a skill which needs to be developed throughout their studies.

Most of the work students do will end in the construction of an historical narrative, whether for the personal study, or in exam answers, or in an oral presentation. Students who have been taught to think critically about reading and notemaking should find the final step of constructing an historical narrative much easier. Thinking critically about what is involved and the criteria for judging the worth of a piece of historical writing is yet another skill which needs to be developed throughout the sixth form.

It can be seen, therefore, that there are many ways to encourage students in their 'struggle' for independence during their sixth form years. It is a challenge for both teachers and students to let go of the more passive ways of teaching and learning which can lead to success in terms of achieving grades, but which do not help students to develop their potential intellectually and are less satisfying professionally for teachers. Students who do develop higher level thinking skills, who can read critically and with understanding, who can transform knowledge rather than merely receiving it, are the sort of students who will be welcomed into institutions of higher education and who will have a headstart towards success.