

# **THINKING SKILLS AND THE LEARNING OF PRIMARY HISTORY**

**Thinking Chronologically**

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**March 2004**

Of all the concepts associated with the learning of history, time remains an enduring and respected yardstick for measuring understanding. Recent research can resurrect old conceptual theories that many contemporary educationists are now inclined to view with suspicion. Cooper (2000 pp29, 30) cites an example of Year 3 children using size as a determinant of age with tallest students being the oldest. As she comments, 'pure Piaget'! (ref Piaget, 1956 on p30). From the researches of Jahoda (1963) to the recent work of William Stow and Terry Hadyn (2000), an ability to 'think chronologically' plays a key role in helping children conceptualise the past. However, in Key Stage 2 the role of chronology is often reduced to little more than the occasional time line in a unit of study or a list of events with dates and places. There is very little evidence of schools adopting specific strategies to link people and events **between** historical topics, apart from the inevitable time line decorating the school hall, threading its way between wall bars and light fittings with intermittent representations of Elizabeth 1, the Santa Maria and Stevenson's Rocket. This is a sad state of affairs for not only is some notion of historical time essential to understanding the historical past, it also provides a matrix upon which children can place historical people, places and events in a way that is personal and particular to their own level of understanding. More than that, it provides a significant mode of thinking vital for their future historical development. As Stow and Haydn state " The concept of historical time and its associated skills and links to other concepts, is one of the essential aspects of understanding for the primary child to take forward into secondary education" (2000, p96).

### **Getting the big picture**

In our project my researchers and I decided that, in order to make chronology more explicit, we should link chronology activities with those of 'determining significance' and 'making narratives' to give the children clearer ideas about the role of historians in the organising of the past. Therefore, in the first session, our intention was to devise a structure whereby the children could relate the major events of the war in terms of order and sequence. For their first homework they had been asked to seek out the key events of the war and discover when and where they took place. It was this information that provided the material for the 'significance' task (see Determining Historical Significance paper). Once this task had been completed we then had the raw material for the central chronology exercise. This was centred on two time lines. The first line, in the form of a string hung along the far end of the classroom, would show the major events of the war from September 1939 to August 1945 in chronological order. The children had discovered a great many events and dates, some recorded with impressive accuracy – D-Day, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944, atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, August 6<sup>th</sup> 1945 – they now needed a system for placing them in order on the time line.

They decided that each event should be recorded on separate cards and attached to the time line by pegs. Each card would have the precise date or dates of the event and be accompanied by a suitable illustration that was symbolic of it. Two problems arose from this decision. How could events be shown sequentially when so many overlapped and how could events of a longer duration be represented? For example, an event marked out as being 'most significant', the Holocaust, began before the war started and its effects were being felt for many years afterwards whilst others, like D-Day and the death of Hitler, could be affixed to a precise moment in time and place.

The children suggested dividing them up into 'long' and 'short' events. Long events would stretch the length of the time line with arrows at either end to emphasise its longevity, whilst the shorter events would be placed in front of them. This activity not only chronologised the war for the children, thus giving them 'the big picture, but also served as a device to help them relate the key features of it. Moreover it was represented in a form of their own invention and was particular to their understanding of the war. However, and perhaps more significantly, the making of the time line aroused questions and debate at a factual and higher level. 'Did the Germans surrender after D-Day?' one boy asked his group. 'No', replied another 'only after Hitler died'. 'Did evacuation end before or after the war?' asked a girl. 'Were we still in the war after Hitler died?' 'Why didn't Japan surrender the same time Germany did?' and one of the most interesting questions 'When was the war really over?'. For the children in our project the chronology activity was not merely a matter of putting the events 'in the right order' but an opportunity to think about their chronology as a way of enquiring into the metanarrative. It became clear to them that some events were merely features of the war whilst others determined and shaped its ultimate outcome.

Whether this activity contributed directly in the children's understanding of causation is a matter for debate. Sequencing is a skill which depends on the child's ability to 'put things in the right order' but also recognise that, as new knowledge of the context is acquired, more information must be included and accommodated which might well alter the way we think about it. An understanding of causation requires children to appreciate that events do, to a greater or lesser extent, impact upon others and bring new ones about. In my experience it is rare for primary aged children to gain sufficient depth in their historical knowledge for them to make serious judgements about cause. They can, of course, understand binary relationships – the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 precipitating the surrender of Japan – but when the requirement is to make more layered decisions based on weighing the significance of some historical events over others, they are usually limited by a lack of historical knowledge and understanding.

### **Chronology, Narrative and Significance**

In his article on the development of an understanding of time in children Wood (1995) places some emphasis on children making sense of the broader sweep of history and placing times and events in relation to the durations of time between them. I suppose, in an ideal world where history is placed at the centre of the curriculum, we could focus our attentions on building up gradually and incrementally children's awareness of historical periods. However, we do not and, as Wood recognises, "the very limited amount of time available for history makes this issue of framework knowledge and detailed understanding a difficult one to resolve" (1995 p12). Time spent on structuring the curriculum according to a precise chronological order is time wasted. As Cooper firmly states "There is no evidence that children learn a sense of time or chronology through learning about periods in sequence, and it seems likely that the reverse is true" (1992, p45). This does not imply that historical topics should not feature chronology as a structuring element but this does not have to be the case. An alternative might be to recognise that within topics there are considerable number of skills in thinking about time and we need to capitalise on opportunities to explore it.

Such an opportunity arose in the narrative activities that we devised for our research project. I have described the outcomes in more detail in the ‘Thinking Historically through Stories’ paper but, in terms of chronology, the basic requirement was to think of a historical narrative as a linked series of events taking place over a finite period of time. We wished the children to grasp the idea that history as narrative is made up of events selected by the writer, often an historian, and put it in a form that can be easily understood by the reader. When composed by historians the narrative can be defined as a collection of historical events that have been perceived as significant. This will result in gaps in the chronology where those events that have been perceived as less significant have been omitted. This convention can be perplexing for children. I was in a school recently where Year 2 children were studying the story of Florence Nightingale. The early narrative dealt largely with the young Nightingale bandaging teddies and applying splints to dolls but the story then leapt forward to her early twenties when she was showing a more mature interest in nursing. An astute six-year old commented, “Why isn’t there any story of Florence between the time she was six and the time she was twenty? Did nothing happen to her then?” Nothing of significance, or so the writer perceived!

### **Filling the Gaps**

The selecting of significant events to build historical stories can be used to help children appreciate the conventions of narrative writing. However, they also provide insights into how historical stories manipulate time. In Session Two we asked the children to construct their own event frame from a story they had devised from a contemporary artefact (see Thinking Historically through Stories). When discussing their narratives they drew attention to the fact that they had found the process of framing difficult because they had to choose between “what was important and what wasn’t so”. More than that the “leaving out left gaps” and “sometimes the gaps took up a lot of time” and “I had to leave some good bits out”. Therefore, in order to make the sequence clearer we asked the children to mark on the event frames how much time had elapsed between the events. This led to a realisation that time is often spread unevenly through a story. For example, Emma’s frame showed a minute passing between events one and two, another minute passing between two and three and a week passing between events three and four! As she commented, “a lot of stuff went on then but as it wasn’t too important so I had to leave it out”. This is a good example of the child ‘thinking like an historian’ and becoming aware of the conventions that apply to writing historical narrative.

The question of time in narrative arose again when we asked the children event frame the aftermath to the air-raid on Bethnal Green (see Note 1). This time we structured the frame around six ‘moments’ after the initial event and required children to imagine what might have taken place at those times (see Appendix 1). In terms of relating chronology to narrative, the children became aware that the story could vary considerably if different times were chosen. They recognised that it was the narrative that was giving order to the events, those that linked and developed the story were included, those that were idiosyncratic or were cul-de-sacs in the plot were left out. As one child said “ I could have worked out six different stories if you’d have chosen six different times. It’s not just about deciding what happened, it’s about the story making sense”. As Wood (1995, p11) reminds us, “ the ability to sequence is a fundamental feature of historical understanding, indeed it could be argued that the past is chaos – until sequenced.”

## Notes

1. For a fuller account of the Bethnal Green story see Determining Historical Significance, Appendix i.

## References

Cooper H. (1992) *The Teaching of History*. David Fulton.

Cooper H. (2000 3<sup>rd</sup>. edn.) *The Teaching of History in Primary Schools*. David Fulton.

Jahoda J. (1963) 'Children's concepts of time and history'. *Educational Review* 15(2)

Stow W. and Haydn T (2000) Issues in the Teaching of Chronology in *Arthur J. and Phillips R. (eds) Issues in History Teaching*. Routledge.

Wood S. (1995). Developing an Understanding of Time. *Teaching History* 79. April 1995.

## Bethnal Green Event Frame

5 minutes later

20 minutes later

1 hour later

1 day later

1 year later

30 years later