

Working with sources: scepticism or cynicism? Putting the story back together again

Many history teachers will remember the feature on Jamie Byrom's teaching in *Times Educational Supplement* of July 1996 where he attacked the recent fashion of history textbooks for encouraging only short (and usually formulaic) responses about reliability of sources. He demonstrated the systematic teaching that pupils need if they are to find the techniques and confidence to produce extended accounts. *TES* journalists missed the point and billed it as the return of 'the essay', but to the history teacher, well-schooled in debates about progression, it was obvious that these techniques had a much greater significance. Jamie Byrom's work with pupils of all abilities has consistently shown that many pupils need structured help if they are to hang on to an idea in their heads for long enough to do anything with it. Such scaffolding is all too often absent in work with historical sources that seeks only to explore the status of the source *as evidence* as opposed to the status of one piece of information *vis à vis* another in the child's working memory. Jamie Byrom's pedagogy systematically breaks down these learning points, precisely so that pupils can, ultimately, put together a developed case of their own. His chief concern is with helping the majority of pupils to gain access to the sophisticated, abstract discourse that is still the privileged preserve of that minority of pupils currently capable of gaining a C or above at GCSE. For here lies the real *intellectual* challenge for teachers: helping the so-called 'lower-attainer' to find the keys to unlock high status knowledge and academic success. In this short account of work with historical sources on the Peasants' Revolt, Jamie illustrates some of the 'can do' mentality that has made his seminal inset so popular and influential in raising standards.

Over recent years, history teachers have grown adept at opening pupils' eyes to the dangers of taking any historical source at face value. This has been just one of history's valuable contributions to educating young people for life in a democratic society. However, some teachers have become increasingly concerned that a healthy scepticism about sources may easily turn into a lazy cynicism. Expending great efforts in training pupils to detect limitations of the reliability of any source may lead to an unhealthy world view where the absence of a 'reliable' source makes them give up on the endeavour of suggesting a conclusion. Equally, the absence of 'right answers' is taken to mean that any answer is as truthful or worthwhile as another.

In order to balance this, we need to put an equal effort into helping pupils to wrestle with the difficulties of constructing tentative accounts on the basis of the fragmentary and imperfect sources available to them. This requires a set of skills that need to be taught directly to many pupils if they are to make any progress at all.¹ Ultimately, of course, we hope that they will integrate such text construction skills with reflection upon source 'reliability', but sometimes the mere act of 'joined-up thinking' involved in the construction of a text needs a discrete and systematic teaching focus, all of its own.

In the case study which follows, pupils were asked to consider how historians construct a narrative from a range of sources. Naturally, there is more to history than constructing narratives (and similar issues would arise in the construction of a more abstract, detached analysis) but this exercise serves to remind us that writing a narrative is not necessarily a lower-order historical 'skill'.

The activity took place within a scheme of work for the 'Medieval Realms' unit that history departments in England and Wales normally carry out in Year 7. It was part of our

study of the Peasants' Revolt. I was working with a mixed ability class which had quite recently addressed the issue of 'bias' and source reliability as part of their work on the Roman Empire. In a quick review at the start of the lesson the class was able to recall the way in which sources may mislead historians.

I then showed the class about five minutes of a video programme in which the death of Wat Tyler is reconstructed by actors.² I asked several pupils to summarise what they had seen in a single, short sentence. Naturally, there were differences between their accounts. I also asked pupils how the script writer knew what to include in this scene. They quickly suggested that he or she must have used some primary source material.

At this point I issued the documents reproduced here (see figure 1), suggesting that the script writer may have used some or all of these when writing the scene. I explained that these were some of the earliest written accounts of the peasants' leader and that the chronicles - like the pupils' versions - differed in what they said.³

At this point I could have taken the lesson along the lines of establishing why the accounts differed and whether we should trust them. Instead, I dealt with these important issues directly and quickly and then left them behind. At this stage, I simply told them that the first account is the one that most historians feel is most reliable, but that the others should not be ignored. I also pointed out that we are not at all sure whether any of the sources were written by an eye witness and I helped the pupils quickly to work out for themselves that all the writers take the side of the king. It was important at least to raise these 'reliability' issues so that pupils gradually built up a rich understanding of the full range of considerations that pertain when we evaluate sources. But, for *this lesson*, I had to steer their limited concentration into another, complementary,

area. The focus of the lesson was not to be on the reliability of the sources. This was not the main teaching point. Plenty of other lessons addressed these issues both earlier and later in the workscheme. I had to build their skill and confidence with handling a much more rudimentary building block of competence.

The challenge for me was to devise a strategy that would meet three learning objectives. First, I wanted to help all pupils to hold enough pieces of data in their short term memories to be able to discern the contradictions and similarities between the sources in the first place. Second, the pupils had to be motivated by the strategy. I wanted them to be so absorbed that the task would create a momentum of fascination and determination to puzzle it out. Third, I wanted the task to be constructive. To allow pupils simply to spot some problems with the sources was to risk encouraging cynical defeatism that the less able can so easily drift into in source-based work. I therefore wanted them to create something, to put things back together, to 'transform', self-consciously, the data in front of them.

The challenge I set the pupils was to establish a common core of facts which they felt sufficiently sure about to use as the basis for a short narrative answer to the question: 'How was the peasants' leader killed?'. We read the first source together and agreed to use it as the starting point for our source study. I gave the pupils highlighter pens which they then used in pairs to mark parts of the other sources which definitely agreed with the first source. They marked obvious contradictions in a second colour.

As they set to work I made a point of helping lower attainers by giving them a list of specific issues to look for. For example, I asked them to look for:

the place where these events happened;
the name of the peasants' leader;
how he behaved in front of the king;
how many men killed him.

With this type of support, the volume of material was not a problem for the 'lower-attainers'. They liked the way in which the sources followed a broadly similar pattern and were all about the same event. They grew to feel at home with the task and enjoyed the puzzle element.

The higher attainers were quickly establishing similarities and differences on many issues and instinctively began to suggest reasons why apparently contradictory accounts may not actually be at odds with each other. With some

prompting, they also began to invent phrases that cleverly summed up aspects of the story without turning a blind eye to inconvenient differences.

After 20 minutes of highlighting similarities and differences, we gathered some of the main points of agreement on the board. This led to an interesting discussion about whether a 'fact' had to appear in all the sources to be accepted. The pupils then began to show how apparent contradictions could be resolved, especially concerning the leader's name. One pair of pupils suggested that we could say that Tyler 'acted in an insulting fashion' before the king. Here they were learning about what it means to stay faithful to the sources. They were producing broad, inclusive summaries but avoiding conclusions that suggested more than the evidence would bear. They were pleased if they managed to formulate a phrase that fitted five of the six accounts and covered a range of statements in the sources.

Others, however, were sad to lose colourful details such as the way in which Tyler is said to have thrown his knife from hand to hand. I gathered the class and asked them how we could have our cake and eat it on this issue. Soon pupils were suggesting that we could include such detail if we used words such as 'may have' or 'some sources suggest'. Moreover, I knew that later I had the option of integrating the reliability issues and so could refine further their self-conscious use of such tentative, conditional language.

In the final minutes of the lesson we just had time to watch the television scene again. Now pupil engagement was at its height: the pupils thoroughly enjoyed commenting on the details which they could now tell had been drawn from the sources. Their memories were active and fully warmed up. They were then ready to go away and summarise in no more than 60 words their account of how the leader died. To jump too quickly to the summary task is to allow most of the pupils to miss out on the learning point. The task of narrative synthesis became self-consciously problematic for them. They could articulate the problems of synthesis because the spotlight had been shone on structured, analytical stages. The stages that we went through made their analysis transparent. There was a direct interplay between this skill and their working 'knowledge', the management of the detail in their working memories.

Above all, these pupils were building an account that they felt was fair and legitimate despite the imperfections of the raw material. They were being, in a word, constructive.

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¹ In National Curriculum terms this means that teachers need to think about the interplay of Key Elements 4a and 5a. Too often these are seen as separate 'skills' perhaps even suggesting separate exercises. In fact, one is a dimension of the other. Pupils cannot do any extended thinking with sources (Key Element 4a) without doing some simple selecting or organising (Key Element 5a). The latter often needs as much explicit teaching focus as the former.

² BBC video, The Middle Ages, History 11-13

³ I have also adapted this activity for the first book in the Longman 'Think Through History' series, *Medieval Minds* (Longman 1997)

⁴ The practice of organising and arranging data in self-conscious, reflective composition is described as 'knowledge transforming' (as opposed to 'knowledge telling') in Bereiter C., and Scardamalia, M., *The psychology of written composition* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 1987)

Chronicle 1 - Anonimalle

WRITTEN IN 1381 IN YORK BY AN UNKNOWN MONK WHO MAY HAVE
BEEN WITH THE KING WHEN THE EVENTS HAPPENED.

Wat Tyler approached the King at Smithfield on a little horse. He dismounted, holding a dagger, and shook the King roughly by the hand. He swore, with a great oath, that he would not leave until the King granted their wishes. The King said Wat could have all he wanted and ordered him to go home.

Tyler sent for a jug of water and rinsed his mouth in a rude manner in front of the King before climbing on his horse again. One of the King's men called out that Tyler was the greatest robber in Kent. Wat wanted to strike the man with his dagger, but the mayor stopped him. Wat stabbed the mayor but he was wearing armour and was not harmed. He drew his own dagger and cut Wat deeply in the neck with a great blow on his head. Another of the King's men ran his sword through Wat's body two or three times. Wat rode towards the commons and then fell to the ground half dead.

Meanwhile Wat had been carried to a hospital. The mayor went there. He told some men to carry Tyler back to Smithfield and to cut off his head when they got there.

Chronicle 2 - The Monk of Westminster's chronicle

WRITTEN BY AN UNKNOWN MONK IN WESTMINSTER, VERY NEAR
LONDON, POSSIBLY QUITE SOON AFTER THE EVENTS.

On Saturday at the 'Plain Field' the King met Walter, the tiler, who was the rebels' leader. This man did not show respect to his majesty. He spoke strong words to the King with his head still covered and with a threatening look on his face.

The mayor tried to arrest the tiler why drew his knife and tried to stab him. The mayor wounded him with his sword and another man grabbed his head and threw him off his horse. The whole mob of countrymen cried out 'Our chief is killed!'

Chronicle 3 - Eulogium

WRITTEN BY AN UNKNOWN MONK.
NO ONE IS SURE WHO HE WAS OR WHERE AND
WHEN HE WROTE HIS CHRONICLE BUT
IT WAS BEFORE 1410.

The King arrived at Smithfield. He was approached by Walter the tiler who failed to uncover his head. The mayor said to him 'Why are you speaking to the King in that way? Take off your cap'. Tyler replied 'You are a traitor!' A royal servant immediately stabbed Tyler with a dagger. Then the mayor and another man did the same. And so the tiler died.

All that pupils need are these sources and a set of coloured pens, preferably highlighter pens.

There are lots of different ways in which pupils could be asked to highlight the text. What matters is that the activity helps them to see the similarities and differences between the different accounts. Weak readers will increase their capacity to cope with text if there is a clear and motivating purpose that is evident in structured, achievable stages.

Chronicle 4 - Walsingham's chronicle

WRITTEN BY A MONK AT ST ALBANS. DATE UNCERTAIN.

Tyler arrived at Smithfield and one of the King's knights came up to him on a horse. Tyler was cross that the man did not approach him on foot. He pulled out a knife and prepared to attack the knight.

The King saw the knight was in danger and ordered the Mayor of London to arrest Tyler. The Mayor was a very brave man and he struck Tyler a blow on the head. He was soon surrounded by other servants of the King and was wounded by swords in several parts of his body. He died as he fell from his horse to the ground.

Chronicle 5 - Knighton

WRITTEN BY A PRIEST IN LEICESTER AROUND 1395. HE PROBABLY GATHERED HIS INFORMATION FROM SOME OF THE KING'S SUPPORTERS.

At Smithfield the King was approached by the rebels' leader. His proper name was Wat Tyler but he is now known by a different name, Jack Straw. Tyler drew close to the King. He threw his knife from hand to hand like a boy playing a game.

Jack Straw spoke threateningly to the King and grabbed the bridle of his horse. When the Mayor saw this, he feared the King might be killed. He knocked Jack Straw into the gutter with his sword. Another man pierced his side with his sword. So he fell on his back and died while his hands and feet quivered for some time.

Chronicle 6 - Froissart

WRITTEN BEFORE 1419 BY A FRENCHMAN WHO WAS NOT IN ENGLAND AT THIS TIME.

When Wat Tyler saw the King, he said to his men: 'There is then King. I will go and speak with him. Wait here until I give a sign. Then come and slay every man except the King. We will lead him all around England with us, and we shall be lords of all this country'.

He rode up to the King who promised to give the commons all they wanted. Then Tyler saw one of the King's men who had upset him once before. 'Give me your sword' said Tyler. But the King grew angry and called to the may 'Set hands on him!'

'You false and stinking knave' cried the mayor and struck Tyler's head hard with his sword so that he fell from his horse. One of the King's men drew out a sword and put it into Wat Tyler's belly, and so he died.

N.B. MOST MONKS HATED THE PEASANTS FOR ATTACKING CHURCHES AND KILLING THE ARCHBISHOP!

TASK 1: Highlight in red all the details in sources 2 to 6 that definitely agreed with the details in Source 1.

TASK 2: Highlight in blue all the obvious contradictions.

Pupils might then be helped to use further colours to highlight similarities and consistencies within sources 2 to 6, but don't ask them to do this if it simply confuses them. For weaker pupils tasks 1 and 2 might be the optimum package to advance their learning.