

# Denis Shemilt's four stages of adolescent ideas about historical methods in a nutshell



So who is this Denis Shemilt then?



A very important thinker whose research and resulting theoretical models were influential in shaping our thinking about how children understand historical evidence.

And what on earth does that have to do with teaching 9Z on a Thursday afternoon?



Just about everything. You may be using his models without knowing it. You may be critical of textbook patterns or exam syllabuses that derive from his models (or that don't derive from his models)...

...Yes but I teach 9Z. I don't use any 'models'.



Yes you do. You're not telling me that what you teach 9Z is just random bits and bobs.

Of course it isn't. But I start by thinking about Milly and Billy in 9Z I don't start with theories and models.



Neither did Denis Shemilt. He started with Milly and Billy too.

You've lost me there, Nutshell.



Denis Shemilt studied data from, interviews with one hundred and sixty-seven 15-year-olds. He grouped it to show stages in the natural history of adolescent ideas about evidence and about how historians work.

Stages?

His four stages looked something like this



## **Stage 1: Knowledge of the Past is Taken-for-Granted**

Here, pupils think that evidence and knowledge are the same thing. They use primary sources in the same way as textbook narratives. They think that historians know all about the past. There are no problems in finding out about it.

So the historian is a kind of memory man?

Just so. Now for Stage 2...



## **Stage 2: Evidence is Privileged Information about the Past**

Here, pupils are aware that 'How do we know?' is a sensible question. They have some awareness that historical knowledge rests on something called, 'evidence', but they often think that authenticity and reliability are the same thing.

## **Stage 3: Evidence is a Basis for Inference about the Past**

Pupils are now aware that evidence and information are different things. They also understand some of the ways in which the evidence is problematic. They realise that historians are not just searching the evidence in the hope that 'the answer' or 'the truth' will pop out, but rather that the historian has a method. He or she works things out.

## **Stage 4: Awareness of the Historicity of Evidence**

Typically these adolescents understand something of the historian's method and are aware that what the historian produces is no more than an attempted reconstruction of past events.

That's all very fascinating, but what if I don't think that Milly and Billy make progress in that way?



Denis Shemilt wasn't saying that they do. Pupils who are taught differently may well make progress very differently. But we need some starting points for trying to define what we want pupils to achieve. Understanding pupils' misconceptions gives us further starting points for deciding how to teach them.

*Does all this make any difference to anything in the end?*



Yes, a lot. GCSE assessment objectives, National Curriculum attainment targets, textbooks and other curriculum materials have all been hugely influenced by research of this type. Some might say that the research has not influenced policy enough; others might say that some types of research have over-influenced it. Whatever your position, you need to know where the systems and language have come from, so that you can take part in future debates.

So that I can take part in future debates?



**Yes, you.** Unless, of course, you want to go on leaving it all to the curriculum policy-makers...