

ME MOVE ON

THE PROBLEM PAGE FOR HISTORY MENTORS

This feature of *Teaching History* is designed to build critical, informed debate about the character of teacher-training, teacher education and professional development. It is also designed to offer practical help to all involved in training new history teachers. Each issue presents a situation in initial teacher education/training with an emphasis upon a particular, history-specific issue.

Mentors or others involved in the training of student history teachers are invited to be the agony aunts.

THIS ISSUE'S PROBLEM:

Tom Macaulay is having problems with his subject knowledge

Tom is a lively PGCE student, who has made an excellent first impression on staff and fellow students. He has a 2.2 in History and American Studies from the Obscure University and decided to go into teaching after two years' commercial experience. He has, however, always had an interest in working with young people, coaching at a local football club and working on several holiday play-schemes.

Tom has been going into school two days a week for the past month on a serial placement. When first observing lessons he quickly took the initiative, circulating to talk to pupils about their work and offering help as appropriate. He appears comfortable in the classroom and his calm, confident manner has quickly enabled him to establish positive relationships. He contributes enthusiastically within university sessions and clearly has some well-grounded insights into the lives of young people.

Although Tom has not raised any doubts himself about the level of his subject knowledge, the audit conducted at the start of the course suggested areas of concern. Beyond regular review of these audits, and the compilation of a list of 'experts' in different areas of the curriculum, the PGCE programme has no separate provision for improving subject knowledge. However, many sessions deliberately draw on examples from curriculum areas where trainees' subject knowledge has been identified as weaker. In these sessions, and others, including a recent presentation by Tom on teaching the feudal system, the curriculum tutor has been struck by his apparent failure to grasp the significance of certain fundamental issues.

In school, as he teaches more whole lessons, Tom is beginning to struggle with planning. He describes the problem as a lack of good ideas for activities. He always asks for suggestions and tends to seize on the most 'exciting', for which he then produces lavish resources and interesting analogies that fail to connect with the central historical questions. In recent lessons on the English Civil War, an extensive card sort and an elaborate 'road to war' diagram resulted in essentially mechanistic categorization – 'If it mentions money it must be an economic cause' – and beautiful copying, without any real consideration of how specific events or issues acted as *causes*, or of how significant they were.

An extract from Tom's pre-course subject knowledge audit

He was asked to complete this during the summer, and to use it as a way of identifying the gaps in his knowledge base that he could work on both before and during the course.

Key stage 3 National Curriculum history (for 11-14 year olds)

The titles of the areas of study are specified by the national curriculum but not the specific topics.

We have listed some topics that are commonly included.

Topic	Level at which studied				Confidence with subject matter		
	GCSE	A	Uni	Other	Very	OK	Not
Britain 1066 – 1500							
The Norman Conquest				✓	✓		
Life in the Middle ages				✓	✓		
Relations between church, crown, people				✓	✓		
Relations with other countries				✓	✓		
Britain 1500 - 1750							
The English Reformation				✓	✓		
The English Civil War				✓	✓		
The Restoration				✓	✓		
Formation of the United Kingdom				✓	✓		
Life and death in the 16 th century				✓	✓		

Areas to develop here: Although I have only studied these subjects at school, pre GCSE, I am confident that what I know (or don't know) will be the least of my problems in teaching! I'm sure I can mug up by using the pupils' textbook. It's more important that I make sure I know about the GCSE topics I am likely to be teaching.

Tom's presentation on teaching an historical concept

Trainees have to make a presentation to other members of the PGCE group about a strategy that could be used to teach an historical concept of their choice. They have been encouraged to draw on their observations in school and briefly describe an example that they have seen in action and say why they thought it effective. Tom's notes for the presentation are shown below, and his tutor's comments on them.

Concept: feudal system

- I saw this with a mixed ability Y7 group: a lively lot who find it hard to focus!
- Teacher had a block of chocolate that he told pupils represented England. He was the king.
- His task was to give some of the land to his new tenants-in-chief who would in turn give some of their bits to knights who would in turn give (or rather lend) some of their bits to the villains or peasants.
- He worked through this, with all the pupils getting some – larger or smaller – bits of chocolate.
- Effective because the kids were really engaged: they were really interested in who was going to get the 'chocolate' and could see the way the large bit got carved up, with the king keeping some and so on down the line.

Tutor's comments

- Two key questions:
 - How did the teacher introduce the activity? How did he enable the pupils to see why the division of land was necessary and how it contributed to William's gaining of control in England?
 - How did the teacher show the fact that as well as receiving land, each 'rung' of society then had obligations in return?

Extract from mentor's lesson notes following observation of the Y8 lesson on the causes of the English Civil War

Areas for development in relation to focus: clarity of learning objectives

Although the lesson began well, you quickly lost sight of what you were trying to do. The worksheet (great title: War! How on earth did we end up here?) looked really exciting, but the road diagram didn't help kids to see any differences between developments before and after 1640. The textbook doesn't achieve this very well either – how can you have *several* 'triggers'? - but these are trying to show that war was not inevitable in 1640. Your idea of a road certainly got the chronology set out clearly but I think it can only have reinforced the idea of inevitability: we expect roads to lead somewhere. The result I'm afraid was, like last time, another kind of mechanistic labelling: 'after 1640 = short term; anything before that = long term'. It doesn't help the pupils to grasp any ideas about how the situation *changed* in those years or how the long and short term might be related.

I know these ideas are new to you – and they are pretty dense. I also know that there's a lot of factual detail here and it's much easier to give the kids simple identifiers (like dates) rather than have to consider with them how exactly each development *changed* the situation. You certainly need more subject knowledge in this area; but I'm aware we've got nothing between our Year 8 texts and the A2 books - pretty daunting on a topic like this!

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Tom seems to have assumed that confidence with young people in the classroom automatically means competence in teaching. It is impressive that he is at ease with pupils and able to relate to them positively – a great asset when so many student teachers worry about classroom management. I would want to encourage him in that. He seems to love producing resources that engage pupils' interest - another success worth encouraging - but does he just want to keep pupils busy? Tom is asking for help but not the right kind of help. He is hiding behind exciting ideas and resources. A good mentor would want to encourage all the positive aspects of Tom's teaching but would need to challenge his lack of focus. As these are still early days I would not want to frighten him but I would want him to take on board the urgency of the situation.

IF I WERE TOM'S MENTOR I WOULD SUGGEST THE FOLLOWING:

1. You have a confident manner in the classroom and you have established very positive relationships with students. It's now time to look at other aspects of your teaching. Let's discuss your planning for Year 8 in some detail and make this the focus of our next few mentor meetings. Your priority should be to identify clear questions and learning outcomes. In our next mentor meeting, let's go over the main characteristics of good planning together. I know you've covered this at university and you've had a go at planning 'real' lessons now, so it would be a good moment to step back and reconsider what you actually *do* when you plan. Where do you start? What factors do you take into account? I'll bring along some of my own lesson plans and talk through the process of creating them. I'll also plan a lesson in front of you and 'think aloud' so you can see what thought processes I go through.
2. Watch Roland teach his Year 8 class. He explains very clearly what pupils should know by the end of the lesson and like you, is lively, enthusiastic and confident. Think about the main *historical* learning outcomes of the lesson. What key historical ideas underpinned it? Make notes about what happens in the lesson and how effectively you think Roland gets these ideas across to the class. Analyse why some things worked well. Talk with Roland afterwards about how he planned his lesson and what *he* thought was important. We can then discuss any differences between what you and he thought. Do make sure that your notes include more detail than on your presentation notes on the feudal system.
3. Talk to Sara about how she would build up knowledge about 'Life and death in the 16th century'. Ask her what the key ideas are. She studied this at Oxford and will be able to recommend some good but accessible books. For our next meeting, summarise the main issues and concepts on an A3 sheet. What might be the big questions that could shape your lessons? Highlight the most important ones and suggest some ideas about how *you* might want to teach them. We can then work together on the detail.
4. As you know, I was somewhat concerned after your last Year 8 lesson. I have yet to teach that same topic to my class. I would like you to observe me teach and to put yourself in my shoes. Focus on how I get key ideas across to the students. How do I present the concepts of causation and inevitability? How do I structure the lesson? How do I enable students to categorise long and short-term causes? What exactly do I want students to understand about the Civil War? How far do I succeed? After the lesson we can discuss my plan and evaluate the lesson together.
5. Read two *Teaching History* articles. The whole of *TH 99* is devoted to curriculum planning. Look in particular at Michael Riley's article ('Into the Key Stage 3 history garden: choosing and planting your enquiry questions') about the importance of choosing enquiry questions carefully. Why not apply it to your planning on the 16th century? In *TH 110*, there is an excellent article about teaching difficult substantive concepts ('Developing conceptual understanding through talk and mapping' by van Drie and van Boxtel). Let's talk about them both next week.

Tom seems to have good interpersonal skills which will help him enormously in his future teaching career. He appears genuinely to like working with young people and should be praised for developing positive relationships within school so quickly. Tom does not have strong subject knowledge of the National Curriculum topics he is teaching, however, and within the time constraints of the PGCE this will be a difficult challenge to take on. Nonetheless, it can be done. Tom also needs to address his planning and delivery. It is fantastic that he tries to make his lessons exciting and that students' enjoyment of his lessons is important to him. When advising Tom on ways to move on, we need to be careful not to kill off that enthusiasm.

IF I WERE TOM'S MENTOR I WOULD SUGGEST THE FOLLOWING:

1. Identify a Key Stage 3 topic that you will be teaching at the start of block placement. Make it a topic on which you feel less secure and that would take roughly 3-4 lessons to teach. What I'd like you to do next week is to identify what knowledge and understanding students should develop as a result of learning this topic. Make a list of learning outcomes, thinking about what you would expect most learners to have achieved by the end of the topic. In order to do this properly, you will need to talk to teachers (including me!), read textbooks, read appropriate articles and think really hard about the historical ideas that are most important. You might find mind-mapping helps you. Don't look at the departmental scheme of work please - I'd like you to take a fresh, personal look at this. We can compare your ideas with the scheme of work later on.
2. Let's discuss your initial thoughts at the end of next week. Once we've discussed it thoroughly and are confident that you have identified the right kinds of learning outcomes, you can start to plan the sequence of 3 or 4 lessons in more detail. You will need to identify a key question that will help you to direct this planning and which has a clear conceptual slant (e.g. a causation question). I will ensure you have enough time and space to do this. You will need to write the sequence up and give it to me in time for me to look at it before the next meeting. Do attempt to look at a range of learning resources in these lessons. You may even wish to think about using ICT.
3. I will provide you with feedback on your sequence of lessons, but I shall also want you to evaluate it critically yourself. Remember that it is more important that you can evaluate your own planning and teaching than it is that I can! I will then teach your lessons so that you can observe them closely. You are more likely to gain a better idea of how the lessons work if you take a step back. Being in the role of an observer will encourage you to evaluate more critically. A follow up mentor session will discuss the merits and limitations of the lessons. On the basis of this discussion, you will have an opportunity to refine and adapt the sequence before teaching it yourself.
4. Meanwhile, don't forget more general strategies for improving your subject knowledge. There are some useful videos in the department, for a start. The series on Britain 1500-1750 helped me develop different ways of teaching the Civil War. Watch it over the weekend and we'll compare notes about the approach it takes. In the longer-term, I shall timetable two regular observation slots for your block placement as this is one of the best ways to develop your subject knowledge.

NEXT ISSUE'S PROBLEM:

Ronnie Wedgewood is struggling to get pupils really to *care* about what happened in the past. For full details of Ronnie's Mentor's Problem contact Alison Kitson, Institute of Education, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL. E-mail: a.kitson@warwick.ac.uk Responses are invited from mentors and trainers of trainee teachers. Responses for the December edition must be received by 25 October 2003.

Tom and Ronnie are fictional characters. Thanks to Anna Pendry and Katharine Burn, Oxford University Department of Educational Studies, for devising the Move Me On problem.

Moral History In a Nutshell

