Developing Chronological Understanding: A Brief Introduction

Teaching to develop chronological knowledge and understanding can appear both a vague and a complex task, much less straightforward than teaching about a historical individual, topic or period. So one aim of these brief notes is to be helpful and reassuring.

Children will learn most effectively if their school has undertaken long-term planning of work on chronology across KS1 and KS2 so that several teachers at least are building on the layers of understanding laid down by their colleagues. These notes therefore set out some of the issues involved in effective learning and teaching in relation to chronological understanding. In addition they provide a context for the activities on this site.

1. The components of chronological knowledge and understanding

'Chronology' is one of those words that's used very generally (and unhelpfully) to cover a range of skills and understandings – there's no single objective called 'chronology'. Instead we need to think about developing several different but closely related understandings:

a) **Language and terminology** – from words such as 'before' and 'after' to AD, BC, century, Roman, Tudor to sequence, duration, chronology etc.

b) **The big picture of events across time** – also referred to in the National Curriculum as 'a chronological framework' and 'the long arc of development'. This means that children gradually build up a sense of how periods and events fit together in sequence.

c) **Sequence** – not simply knowing that the Tudors came before the Stuarts but also understanding why putting events in the correct sequence is important for explaining why events took place.

d) **Duration** – developing a sense of the length of time, for example that the era of Roman Britain was nearly six times longer than the Victorian period.

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e) **Sense of period** – understanding what's special and distinctive about a period of history, not simply what happened during that period.

It's these individual facets of chronology that need to be the focus for teaching and learning. It's through them that pupils build their overall chronological knowledge and understanding. None of this happens quickly, hence the importance of both long-term planning and revisiting of these understandings at regular intervals.

2. Targeting the particular problems children have with chronological understanding

Chronological understanding doesn't just happen because events are covered in order. It develops because teachers identify the component understandings (listed in 1 above) and teach explicitly to develop them – and, just as importantly, identify the specific problems children have with learning and then create activities that tackle those problems directly.

The classic example of a 'learning problem' related to chronological understanding is the issue of centuries and their mis-matched numerical dates e.g. that 1450 is in the 15th century, not the 14th century as many children think. Diagnosis may suggest that one reason is a lack of understanding of how this dating system of 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries starts and that there's also a need to make this dating system more concrete, visual and practical. Therefore an activity such as the BC/AD timeline activity on ThinkingHistory may well children although it will need repeating and reinforcing a number of times.

See: https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/MakingSenseofBCAD.html

3. Chronology activities can be lively, enjoyable and memorable

It's possible that teaching for chronological understanding feels to have less potential for enjoyable and memorable lessons than, for example, teaching about the Romans or Vikings. Folk-memories of lines of children chanting the dates of kings and queens may still affect our perceptions of what's involved in teaching about chronology but there's no reason why such teaching should be any less involving – on the contrary there's every reason why it needs to be made just as enjoyable as it's the enjoyable lessons that children remember best. [Though

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it's always worth remembering that some children do enjoy learning names and dates – often same ones who can remember the names of all the players in a Cup Final for example.]

Therefore activities which are physically engaging, that involve hats or other elements of costume, which have a genuine puzzle at their heart and through which children can see exactly what they are learning will be most helpful.

As an example see the Big Human Timeline activity in the Chronology section of this website.

4. Establishing why dates are important

This is an obvious but perhaps neglected issue – dates are central to chronological understanding but can be seen as the historical equivalents of push-ups, irregular verbs and other things apparently inflicted upon students for no obvious reason. So maybe pupils of all ages would be helped if they understand why knowing and using dates does help.

Put simply, dates are important for two reasons:

a) They give us a common language that helps us locate an event in time – try explaining when your birthday is without using dates (or use the medieval system of relating events to saints' days – e.g. the Wednesday next after St. Andrew's Day).

b) Dates are critical for explaining events because they help us identify the sequence of events and the duration of the period involved. In many ways dates are like the letters of the alphabet – not much use individually, it's forming them into patterns that's important.

5. Go beyond 1066

Although the main focus of National Curriculum history from 2014 is on the period before 1066 it's vital for children's overall development of chronological understanding that they have the opportunity to work on the whole sweep of British history. Fortunately the National Curriculum does require work that moves beyond 1066 e.g. at KS2 through a local history study and 'a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological

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knowledge beyond 1066.' Remember that the National Curriculum document is a helpful framework, not a document that limits you to its contents.

Therefore timeline work of various kinds should enable children to see the whole of the framework of the past and understand where key events and periods post-1066 fit in. More importantly, thematic studies from pre-history to today of topics such as 'how people enjoyed themselves' or 'continuities and changes in food and home-life' will play a big part in building children's chronological knowledge and understanding. So too will a study of your locality over time, from the earliest period possible to the present. Enjoyable though studies of individual periods (such as the Tudors) can be these overview studies will do far more to build up core chronological knowledge and understanding.

In conclusion …

Some core points:

a) Developing chronological understanding is centrally important in History

b) Focus teaching and learning on the individual components of chronology

c) Create activities to tackle the problems students have in learning

d) Effective long-term understanding requires repetition – Regular Rapid Reinforcement

e) Make it memorable by using lively, physical, involving activities

f) Go beyond 1066 – don't be limited by what you think the National Curriculum says.

Other issues will be addressed through activities on this site which help to develop chronological knowledge and understanding.

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