Washing or Continuum Lines

The great virtue of a washing line is that it converts what may, for many students, be a vague conceptual idea into a physical, visible reality in front of their eyes, with the significant additional advantage that it then encourages subtlety and nuance of thought, language and argument – it's the physicality and visibility that makes it possible for complexity to be accessible to more students. In many cases a completed washing line also creates the structure of an essay or other piece of extended writing

The other great advantage is that creating and using washing line activities in the classroom is a very un-risky, controlled, structured and valuable technique for developing complexity in students' understand and arguments.

These notes suggest some of many ways you can use 'washing lines' to deepen your students' understanding activities – and like all effective methods they work with students of all ages.

An introductory example: Did the Norman Conquest really change life in England?

I'll start with an example that starts simply but can be developed with greater complexity. Imagine students (whether at KS2, 3, GCSE or A level) are exploring the extent of change that took place as a result of the Norman Conquest.

Here's a summary sequence for a washing line activity on this enquiry

a) The starting point is to identify areas of society that may have changed, either by asking students for suggestions or by giving them a list of topics e.g. farming, government, taxes, clothes etc.

b) create a continuum or washing line on the floor of the room with 'great change' marked at one end and 'complete continuity' at the other. Mark staging posts along this line, using vocab cards to help students with the language of change and continuity.

c) ask students to hypothesise where on the line each topic goes on this continuum – e.g. if they don't expect farming to change then put a card saying 'farming' at the 'complete continuity' end of the line. This can be done on paper initially by students in pairs and then use their ideas to build up a whole-class version of the washing line.

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d) the task now is to use evidence and information to test whether each topic is in the right place on the line. This can be done simply by giving students a short piece of information about each topic or, with older students, asking them to research the topics from their books and other sources. Once this task is complete it's time to review the initial line – did we put the topics on the right place in the line? What evidence supports your final choice? Which topics are hardest to be certain about?

e) you now have a visible answer in front of the class, enabling you to discuss the question 'did the Norman Conquest really change life in England?'. The washing-line helps students avoid simple yes/no answers and instead helps them argue 'on the one hand x and y changed a great deal while a and b saw a little change but m and n didn't change at all'. And that kind of conclusion allows you to explore why some aspects of society were changed and others not.

There's other depth you could go on to build in, especially with A level students, but that's a short outline of a washing line activity – and its value is first and foremost that it turns the concept of change and continuity (which, like all concepts, can be difficult for many students to hold in the minds alone), into a physical and visual entity that they can see and even touch and therefore understand with greater clarity and, as a result, in greater complexity.

Different ways of representing washing lines

In no particular order of value or impact

a) Position cards on a line marked on the floor or on a wall

b) Position students on the line, wearing tabards or holding cards

c) Peg cards on a piece of string strung across the room

d) Draw the line and cards on your board

What can you help students understand by using washing lines?

These examples assume an approach similar that described above – first getting students to hypothesise about the pattern on the washing line and then using their reading to place topics. The

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hypothesis stage is very important as it identifies and makes visible students' preconceptions and misconceptions so they can later see what they have learned in contrast.

The examples below are only a very small number of the many you could use.

Change …. Continuity

As described above, explore the impact of a major event such as the Norman Conquest, Black Death or Industrial Revolution and place topic cards on the Change … Continuity line to develop a picture of the impact of the event. If you save an image of each completed line for major events across KS3 you can ask students to discuss and compare them at the end of KS3 to reinforce knowledge and help see your KS3 History as a united course.

For a Thematic Study in Development such as the history of Medicine place periods of history on the Change … Continuity line according to the degree of change they saw.

Success …. Failure

Examine the success or failure of Gladstone's 1868-1874 government by putting events, reforms or policies on cards/tabards and decide where they go on the Success… Failure line. Move into interpretations by looking at whether everyone at the time would agree, whether there is a difference between contemporary views and those of historians and whether the pattern explains his defeat in 1874. This could be used for any government, monarch, leader.

Use a Success … Failure line to compare 19th century Prime Ministers or the impact of protest movements. At A level these provide good revision activities and offer plentiful opportunities to look at why interpretations vary. At KS3 such activities can be carried out over a much longer span of time, comparing e.g. the success and failure of protests from the Middle Ages to the 20th century and bring cohesion to KS3 History.

Useful …. Not useful or Reliable …. Unreliable sources

Begin with a question such as 'Why did the Normans win the battle of Hastings?' Place the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, William of Jumieges, Harald's Saga etc on the 'useful' or 'reliable' line according to the information you have about them. Do this before you look at what each writer wrote so you focus on provenance first. Then review the placements after you have read their writings.

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Secondly change the question to. For example, 'Why did the Norwegians lose at Stamford Bridge?' and repeat the task. The sources clearly need to be re-evaluated and moved – a very good lesson that sources are not intrinsically reliable or useful – it all depends on the question.

Threatening …. Unthreatening

Which opponents of Henry VIII were most threatening? One extra element is to discuss what was really being threatened and whether you're making this judgement in hindsight or as the threat developed so this adds Gabrielle Reddington who taught in Co Durham asked her A level class to 'dress' a chair with the name of an opponent, a picture, relevant quotations and place the chair cum opponent on the threatening … unthreatening line.

Extend the above to provide an overview comparing the degree of threats (to ???) posed by protests against the Tudors or 19th century protests and campaigns.

Harm …. Good

Did the Roman Empire do more harm than good? This enables students to build up a complex sense of the impact of an empire. Cards/tabards can represent people e.g. Boudica, Cogidumnus or aspects of society such as the home, transport and towns. Other possibilities include the Industrial Revolution, Norman Conquest, totalitarian regimes or could be applied to decisions, policies or reforms.

Significant …. Insignificant

Explore the factors involved in explaining Germany's collapse in 1918 and place the factors on the Significance … Insignificance line in terms of their significance in explanation. Would historians, contemporaries, people from different backgrounds or countries agree? This can be used for all kinds of causal questions.

Place individuals or events within a period or over a long span of time on the Significance … Insignificance line. This makes a good synoptic activity at all levels and can create overall cohesion when used at the end of KS3.

Strongest evidence for …. Strongest evidence against

Begin with a statement e.g. 'Queen Elizabeth I was a highly successful monarch.' Place events, quotations or other evidence on the 'Strongest evidence for' ….. 'Strongest evidence against' line to build up a picture of the complexity of the case – this helps students choose which evidence to use

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in arguing a case and building an essay. This works at all levels and is a good introduction to a topic with the line being amended by further study.

Certainty … Uncertainty

Use a certainty … uncertainty continuum to chart students' progress during an enquiry to help them feel comfortable with the idea that uncertainty is part of studying history and with using words such as probably and possibly. Ask students to position themselves on the Certainty … Uncertainty line after looking at some initial evidence. Later ask them to rethink their position after looking at more evidence and finally at the end of the investigation. This is very helpful in getting students used to the idea that uncertainty is a normal part of studying history and not a failure on their part.

Another use for this washing line is for plotting the development of an answer to a question such as 'How certain can we be about Richard III's motives for taking the throne?'

In conclusion

What washing lines offer, in a nutshell, is a simplicity and directness of approach leading to complex and nuanced thinking and understanding. Washing lines work in aiding students' understanding because they make aspects of conceptual understanding concrete and because they can address classic problems of learning e.g. students tend to assume a source is reliable for everything but the physical movement of sources on a washing line when a question changes makes it very clear that this is not the case. Another major advantage of washing lines is that they physically demonstrate that it's part of studying history to change your mind e.g. when more evidence or information becomes available

The physical construction of a line can also aid essay planning and construction. In some cases, sections of the line become paragraphs and students can see this manifested physically. Many students struggle with essays simply because they cannot 'see' essay structure and they are helped by grouping points physically, using people as paragraphs.

Finally it's important to stress that washing lines are effective with all age groups including A level. For example you can give A level students a completed washing line and ask them to research and assess its accuracy – an activity that's good for stimulating individual and group research at A level. Washing lines may look a simple teaching device but they can lead to much more complex understanding and help students make good sense of complex questions and history.

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Some examples of washing line activities on ThinkingHistory

Change and continuity: the impact of the Norman Conquest

The Riccall Mystery: how do we carry out an historical enquiry?

The impact of the Black Death: changes and continuities

1471: why did Edward IV win the crown back?

See the activities HERE ...

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