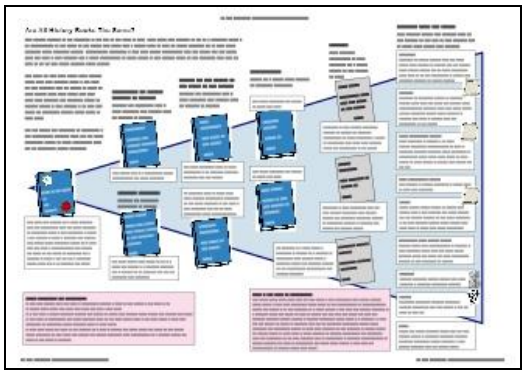
Are All History Books the Same, Miss?

Helping students differentiate between different types of books and develop their ability to work independently

This discussion is based on a diagram HERE that I designed for an A level book in 2011, aiming to help students understand the different types of books and other materials that lay behind the textbooks they were using.



This diagram never appeared in the book as there wasn't enough space but the idea behind it still seems really important, hence this discussion. The example used in the diagram is the reign of Henry VI (The Wars of the Roses) but the ideas apply to any topic in any period.

The broad idea behind the diagram is that students should have the chance to learn more than 'just' the content in their A level specification, building up a clearer sense of what's involved in studying history independently so that if they go on to university the much greater emphasis on independent study won't be such a shock. The diagram therefore tries to show students:

- that there are different 'types' of history books' beyond' their A level textbooks, from 'popular' histories to academic monographs to detailed analyses in articles
- the major kinds of sources that historians use in writing their books and articles
- how to organise their work on a new topic by starting with general books and then moving onto books and articles which are increasingly detailed
- that it's important to know when a book was written so that you can relate its arguments to those in other books

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Developing these ideas

This diagram is offered as a model which teachers can adapt to other topics but there are a number of other ways of using the idea:

a) Create a physical version of the diagram in your classroom by using real books and articles – set them out in discussion with students at the beginning of their A level course so they're engaged in thinking about the pattern of materials. Photograph the resulting physical diagram and keep it on display or ask students to annotate their own versions to cement the ideas in their minds.

b) Later in the course, when they're studying a different topic, give students a pile of books, articles and sources and ask them to arrange them according to the logic in this diagram

c) Give students this diagram and ask them to create their own for the period they are studying.

d) Use the ideas in the diagram to create guidance for students' independent studies at A level. I've attached a chart HERE devised by Simon Beale of Vyners School (@SPBeale) who's done just this – I'm grateful to Simon for sharing his ideas and for his enthusiasm for the potential of my diagram.

Building across KS3 and GCSE

Aspects of these ideas apply just as much to GCSE and KS3 as they do to A level. Throughout their school experiences of history students should be aware of how history is studied, not just by learning to use sources, analyse causation etc but by building awareness of the different 'products' that historians create. This means exploring:

a) different types of history books and the work of historians

b) the value or otherwise of websites, TV documentaries, podcasts etc

c) the nature of the sources that survive from different periods rather than focussing solely on generic work as if the same kinds of sources exist for all periods.

Again this is aimed at helping students develop the ability to work independently with confidence, that they're not just picking up the first book or looking at the first website that comes to hand.

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One variant I developed for a GCSE book is attached HERE, a book spread called '*Moving from knowing a little to knowing a lot*' – it was written for the Edexcel enquiry into Medicine on the Western Front but sets out the key questions to be asking as you approach any new topic.

From Y7 onwards (and ideally before) students should be developing the ability to chart their own way through an enquiry in an organized way and this is very much the forerunner to independent study at A level and beyond. This is all discussed in detail HERE

Analysing Websites, TV documentaries and other media

The focus above on books does not mean that students shouldn't be thinking about how to approach and use websites, TV programmes, historical novels and other forms of communication. Students need to develop the ability to judge the value of such forms of history rather than accepting them 'because they're there'.

One example of the issues involved comes from my experience of being involved in four programmes on The Wars of the Roses and another on Henry VII for the History Channel c2004. They featured a number of top-notch historians – Steve Gunn, John Watts, Christine Carpenter, Rosemary Horrox etc … and me. I think was there to provide pithy, brief explanations as a counterpoint to the far more learned contributions of the historians. In the end I was in the programmes more than I expected!

However it was the way the films were made that was problematical and understanding this would help any viewers appreciate their limitations. All the interviewees were sent the same set of questions and they were recorded separately, then the editors chose which answers to include from each historian. But the really important point is that the voiceover script had already been written and recorded and that presented a very different interpretation of the period from the one provided by the historians in their answers. The voiceover was deeply negative about the period – every skirmish became a battle, every individual was motivated by rampant personal ambition. It was the story of a 35 year-long bloodbath - so everything said in the interviews that was positive about the period and its people was cut out. I wasn't at all happy with the resulting films but I had learned a lot about how these programmes are made. Therefore it's well-worth students thinking about the nature of documentaries, especially about who wrote the script – was it the presenter or was it someone else? Do a variety of views emerge from the programme or is there only one interpretation?

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In case it's of use see HERE for a page from an A level book on Elizabeth I that tried to help students develop a critical approach to websites.

Related articles

For further thoughts on the development of 'Independent learning in History at A level' see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueIndependentLearning.html

Timelines, Time-Stories and Developing Confidence at A level

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueTimelinesTimeStory.html

What do we want students to learn about medieval sources?

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/ETMHSources.pdf

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