AN INTRODUCTION TO THE USES OF STORIES IN HISTORY TEACHING

'Stories are far more than an engaging hook.

They should challenge students both to think historically and to deepen their knowledge.'

The idea of story-telling in the classroom conjures up a very simple image – of a class sitting enraptured as their teacher tells them a gripping story, they're concentrating, intrigued, their imaginations are on fire, they desperately want to know the ending … and they're really disappointed when the story comes to an end and the spell is broken.

It's an important way to use stories – Jackanory meets KS3 – but, in terms of helping students learn about a person, period or topic, it's only the starting point, not the end in itself. Therefore one major element in the discussion below is of the purposes of using of stories with classes all the way up to and including A level. 'Why are we telling this story?' 'What are the students going to do next?' 'How does it link into their whole course?' are just some of the questions that we need to ask to maximise the benefits of using stories.

Our second major point is that not all story-telling revolves around the single model of teacher as narrator and students as audience. Students can encounter stories through other types of story-telling, for example when students play a part in the unfolding of a story, prompted by the teacher's questions to make choices that develop the narrative. Such activities might not be instantly recognised as story-telling but, in our experience, these activities are very much about telling stories and have an even more profound impact on learning, even if there's a less continuous narration than in the traditional form.

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Cherishing students' engagement with stories

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Section A

1. Building your confidence as a story-teller

First we'll return to the traditional idea of the story and an important question that's often in the minds of new teachers – do you have to be a born story-teller to use stories in the classroom successfully?

The answer's simple. No, you just have to be a normal teacher who has thought about how to go about the task of story-telling. Confidence is also an important part but that comes with spending your days in classrooms, managing students, discovering that you can judge the passage of time in lessons to the minute without thinking about it, trusting yourself as a teacher as your experience builds.

However you do need to plan your story-telling so here's some suggestions for getting started:

a) Start small. Think about how long your story will take to tell – better a good short story than a long one that you're not confident of telling without forgetting something crucial! Take the Norman Conquest (for no better reason than everybody teaches it) – don't start by trying to tell the story of Edward the Confessor or of the whole of 1066 or even of the battle of Hastings. Start small and pick an incident within an event – Harold taking that oath or William crossing the Channel – these are scenes to be conjured up in students' imaginations and have the great advantage of being about individuals and you can talk about what might have been in their minds, what questions they must have pondered – so there's uncertainty, they don't know what will happen next.

(As an aside to that paragraph, you don't have to start a new topic at the beginning or with the question 'why did x happen?' – it's often a good strategy to start with a story from the middle of an event, prompting students to wonder 'what had been happening beforehand?' Their curiosity gives you the cue to explore those beginnings.)

b) Consider involving students to help you get started – use an image as a prompt and to help visualisation – in the example of 1066 use a single scene from the Bayeux Tapestry and begin by asking students 'What can you see in this picture?' [description] 'what do you think is happening in this picture? [interpretation]. This sets them wondering 'Are we right?' 'What is happening?'

c) And most importantly, there's the preparation beforehand. As we gain experience, we find ourselves able to tell impromptu stories if needed but good preparation always helps. So, for example:

- write out your script but remember it's a story to be told orally. It's not an essay for a tutor! This affects the rhythms of the language you use. You probably won't use the script to tell the story but it's really helpful in planning to have one to rethink and keep for next time.
- paint the scene and keep it multi-sensory – colours, sounds, smells, the weather, what someone looks like and is wearing
- note on your script the words or phrases that you'll emphasise and don't play safe with language – students will enjoy more dramatic 'harder' language if it fits the story
- note the places in your story where you'll pause for effect

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- annotate your script where you'll change pace, slowing down for effect, for example
- think about if you'll stand or sit, how you might use your hands for emphasis
- do you want music playing quietly in the background?
- overall, think about story-telling as like going on stage – if you want students to put aside their own thoughts, forget they're in a classroom on a Thursday afternoon and immerse themselves in the story, then you have to do that too. Your sense of drama, of immersion in the story, leads them into the past with you. For a few minutes you are on stage!

All this will help build confidence and speed up the process of these things becoming natural, along with so many other aspects of teaching.

2. An introductory example: What can students learn from the story of Frank Bright?

The story of Frank Bright is one that Dale has told regularly told and then built on with his Y9 classes. It's the beginning of an enquiry into the Holocaust, the riveting and emotional story of one boy's survival but it's much more than the story of one person. This example allows us to open up our major themes – the purposes of stories and varied ways of telling stories.

Firstly, in a departure from the traditional idea of story-telling, Dale builds his students' curiosity about the story he's about to tell (and the whole enquiry) by starting with the initial stimulus of part of a photograph, the whole picture being gradually revealed to the class as they infer answers to the questions at the top of the slide (shown below). Then, as a second stage, comes the story-telling as Dale unfolds the story of one individual in the photograph, a boy called Frank Bright, and then tells of Frank's research, many years later in his retirement, to find out what happened to his classmates.

What is the story?

In brief:

This photograph was taken in a Jewish school in Prague in 1942. The faces are looking out at the camera much as any class today looks in a school photograph – many smiling, others concentrating, some distracted. The difference is that many members of this class were sent to ghettos, some were murdered by the Einsatzgruppen, others were sent to death camps such as Treblinka and Auschwitz. The fortunate ones including Frank and some other members of his class survived the Holocaust because they were chosen for slave labour.

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Why use this story and this photograph at the outset of an enquiry into the Holocaust?

History is above all about the many varied experiences of people, of individual human beings. Using this story of Frank and his classmates, all clearly individual people as shown by the photograph, enables students to develop a complex and intimate account of the tragic impact of the Holocaust on multiple lives. As a result, students gain an important opportunity to see victims of persecution not as a faceless, nameless mass of victims, as a statistic they can't comprehend, but as individuals, as real people.

This may seem an obvious point but in planning and choosing stories and lessons we always have to think carefully about the misunderstandings students may have. Many students can fail to register that the past

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is about human actions and that the events they study affected people's lives, often in devastating ways. They can struggle to see links between facts and historical narratives, unless those facts are brought absolutely to life, mediated by personality. Therefore, understanding events such as the Holocaust from the perspective of the victims is crucial.

This is why one of the uses of story (as part of a carefully planned route into an enquiry) is to show students that history is not the story of strangers, aliens from another universe; it is the story of us had we been born a little earlier. As Michael Wood has said 'History is many things, but at its most powerfully affecting it is the tale, explored with truth, clarity and feeling, of a single life through time.'

3. The purposes of story-telling

As the example of the story of Frank Bright has shown, stories are far more than an enjoyable quarter of an hour, far more even than an engaging hook which paves the way for a new topic. The power of story creates opportunities to challenge students both to think historically and to deepen their knowledge.

How can a story help students to think historically? Individual stories can prompt students to do one or more of these things:

a) ask questions about the events, actions or motives in the story. Developing the ability to ask good historical questions is a critical but sometimes undervalued skill.

b) identify and explore the ideas they already have about the topic of the story – and re-think their misconceptions.

c) link the story or event to broader themes they're about to study, perhaps a national or international context

d) link back to topics they've studied before, helping to consolidate memory of those topics

e) explore how we know about the past, the evidence that lies behind a story and how sure we can be about the details and truth of the story i.e. that a story (and history) is a construct and how that story is constructed.

f) think about how else a story could be told from other perspectives

g) think about how the past relates to events today and to their own lives, perhaps recognising themselves, their experiences and dilemmas

And finally there's the core objective of deepening knowledge – it's the nature of students' engagement with a story helps them retain details much longer than they or their teachers often expect. This is not just true of traditional story-telling but even so of other variations on story-telling described below in the introduction to Section B.

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4. Varying the focus of stories

Many varieties of story can be told. The TV series A House through Time provides a good showcase for multiple types of stories – its central theme is the story of a house but within that are the stories of individuals, both at single moments or across the trajectories of their lives. These individuals in turn reveal that different stories can be told about individual events and their stories illuminate the stories of broader themes (such as slavery), of periods (such as the Victorian era) and of a city or region.

In classroom terms, given the varied nature of schemes of work and exam specifications, it's worth thinking about opportunities to vary the range of stories you use. So you could consider stories which explore:

- A single brief event in time or a theme across centuries
- One person or groups of people of varying numbers or several generations over time
- A place, an object, a building, a memorial, a document
- The uncovering of evidence about the past – the process of discovery

Section B

5. Varieties of story-telling

We've referred above to using a range of methods of telling stories, so what other methods exist? The key difference in the methods listed below is that here students play a part in the story-telling, prompted by the teacher's questions to make choices that develop the narrative. While these inter-active types of activity might not instantly sound like story-telling, in our experience they are very much about telling stories, even if there's a less continuous narration than in the traditional form.

Crucially, such interactive approaches to story-telling have a highly beneficial impact on memory. It's really important at the end to ask students to recount the story that has emerged and their re-tellings underline that these activities are an excellent way of consolidating knowledge and building memory – and it's a challenge for all ages, including importantly at A level.

In addition these inter-active methods are at least as successful in in achieving whichever objectives (see Section A3 above) that you are focussing on.

These types of interactive story-telling include:

- Structured role-plays – students have specific roles and answer questions about what courses of action they will take, the questions being posed by the teacher who narrates the overall story, often using the room as a map around which students move. Students' choices move the story forward following the course of historical events.

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- Scripted dramas – students read or act out a script which tells a story.

- Creating a tableau – a briefer activity where the teacher builds up a scene in a story, with students taking the parts of individuals in the story. Students have to work out what the scene or story might be about.

- Decision-making activities – students work through a series of decisions so that the story emerges through their engagement with the choices. This is similar to structured-role-plays but students can work in pairs and are desk-based.

6. Some examples of story-telling

Section B brings together a range of stories to demonstrate two things – how stories can achieve the purposes discussed in Section A part 3 above and how you can tell stories in a variety of ways. These examples include inter-active story-telling and traditional forms and – a really important point – will frequently include elements of both. You can never stop a good teacher telling at least part of a good story!

Please note that each story could target two or more of the purposes of story-telling identified above – the choice is up to individual teachers.

a) Stories that provide an overview and introduce key features of an enquiry

The story of Jesse Owens

One example of an individual's story that introduces key features of an enquiry is the story of Jesse Owens, used as an introduction to an enquiry into the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Owens' life provides a lot of contextual information about what life was like for Black Americans in the 1930s, as well as the longer-term causes of discrimination. His grandparents had been slaves. Jesse's parents, like many Black Americans in the south, were sharecroppers. Being a sharecropper meant that a family rented land, and received a house, tools and sometimes seed. In return they had to give the landlord (usually a white farmer) one half or sometimes two thirds of the crop. Living conditions for Jesse and his family were very harsh. Their house was later described by Jesse as 'wooden planks thrown together'. The roof leaked and it was very cold in the winter. The family had no money for doctors or medicine. When a large lump appeared on Jesse's leg his mother cut it out with a hot kitchen knife.

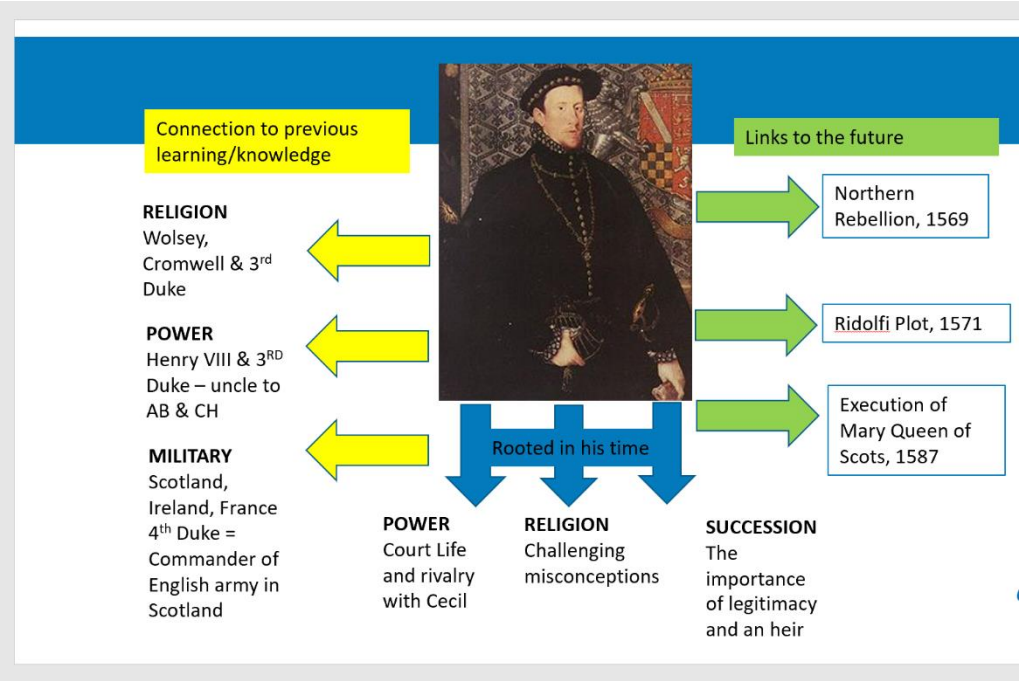
Even after becoming perhaps the most celebrated athlete on the planet, Jesse still encountered prejudice. When Jesse returned to America from the Olympics, he soon encountered discrimination again. In Germany, during the Olympics Games, Owens had been allowed to travel with and stay in the same hotels as white athletes. When he returned to America, he found that he could not ride in the front of a bus or live where he wanted. This shows students how ingrained racism was in American society at the time.

[In a British context, the story of Sir Learie Constantine provides a parallel example. Constantine was a West Indian fast bowler who came to England to play league cricket, then qualified as a lawyer but was refused a room in a London hotel during World War Two. Constantine took the hotel to court and won his case. He later became a diplomat and a member of the House of Lords.]

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The story of Thomas Howard (1536-1572)

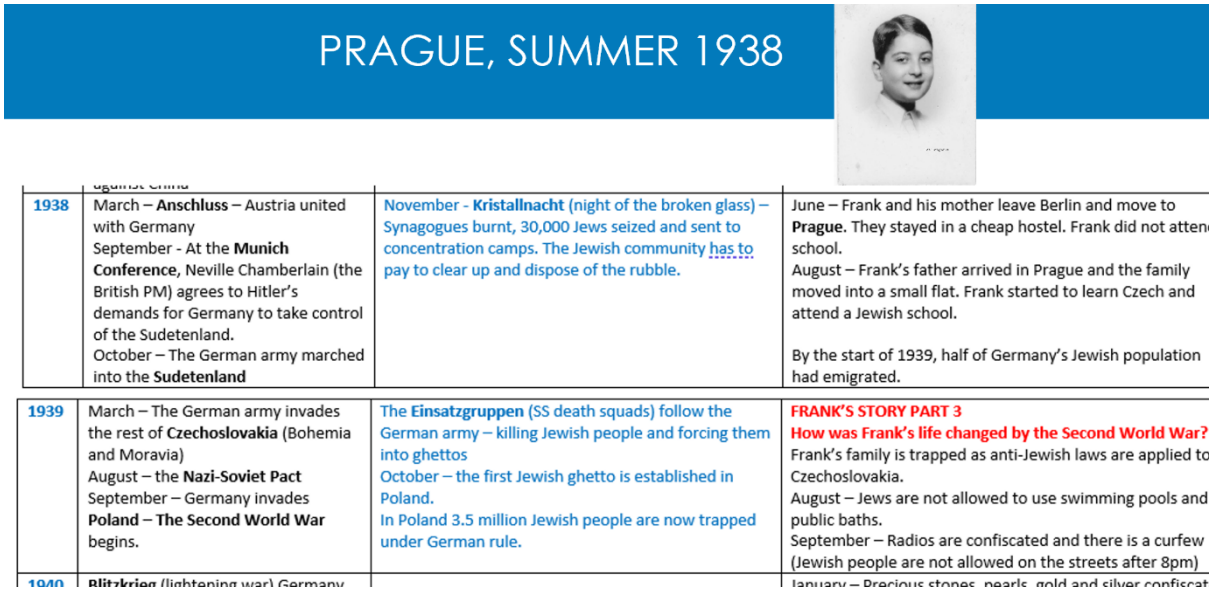
The introductory story of Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, drives an enquiry into key features of Elizabethan England. To begin with, the story of Thomas Howard provides a way of connecting to and reinforcing previous knowledge – Thomas Howard's father and grandfather were central characters during the reign of Henry VIII. Secondly, as the diagram below shows, the story of Thomas Howard provides an absorbing way of exploring some of the key features and themes of Elizabethan England, the overview issues that lurk within the depth of this individual story. These broader issues include the problems caused by rivalry within the royal court, arguments over the succession and also rebellions involving leading nobles. Howard was wealthy, ambitious and one of the most powerful nobles in England. He was angry when Elizabeth chose William Cecil as her main adviser. Norfolk felt that he was being ignored at court. However, his plan to gain greater influence backfired and helped cause a rebellion in the north of England. Norfolk even planned to marry Elizabeth's cousin, Mary Queen of Scots.



The story of Frank Bright – Parallel Timelines

We've already discussed the story of Frank Bright but it's worthwhile emphasising how this story enables students to get to grips with what can be called 'parallel timelines' that show the connections between the experiences of an individual, national developments and the international context. The exemplar diagram below places the life of Frank Bright in the context of both wider events in Germany and also developing events across Europe, helping students become familiar with these wider contexts and to appreciate that decisions taken at an international level or by national governments have a very real impact on the lives of individuals.

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The story of Frances Cooper

Frances Cooper was my (Ian's) great-great grandmother. I knew her name from census records but until I sent for her death certificate I didn't know anything else. What I found when I opened the envelope was a bombshell. Frances had died of cholera. She lived in a court in Liverpool, in one of the worst areas of the city, and died in the cholera outbreak of 1849, aged 33, leaving her husband and two very young children.

Frances' story won't take long to tell but as the way in to the broader stories of epidemic disease and public health it's unbeatable for me – because it's my story too, I can tell how I opened that envelope and how I felt, what happened next to Frances' young family. Finding your own family stories and building them into teaching to illuminate broader themes is extremely powerful – students will pick up this basic point that it's your story, not someone else's story. For this and other examples:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/UsingFamilyHistory.html#cholera

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

b) Stories that help with memory by subtly revisiting previous topics

There are so many ways of starting a new topic. Sometimes it's a really good idea to start in the middle with the story of a key moment, prompting students to ask 'why's that happening?'. But starting at the beginning has a different and subtle advantage – it gives you an opportunity to get students thinking back in time to consolidate earlier work without feeling it's 'revision' – 'but sir we've already done that!'.

For example – how about a story about Queen Elizabeth I receiving the news that her sister, Mary is dead and she is now queen? There's plenty of opportunity for a dramatic story – Elizabeth as a semi-prisoner, being watched, her fears for her life – you could tell this in the third person or the first person as Elizabeth. And then galloping hooves, a courtier kneels – that can mean only one thing …

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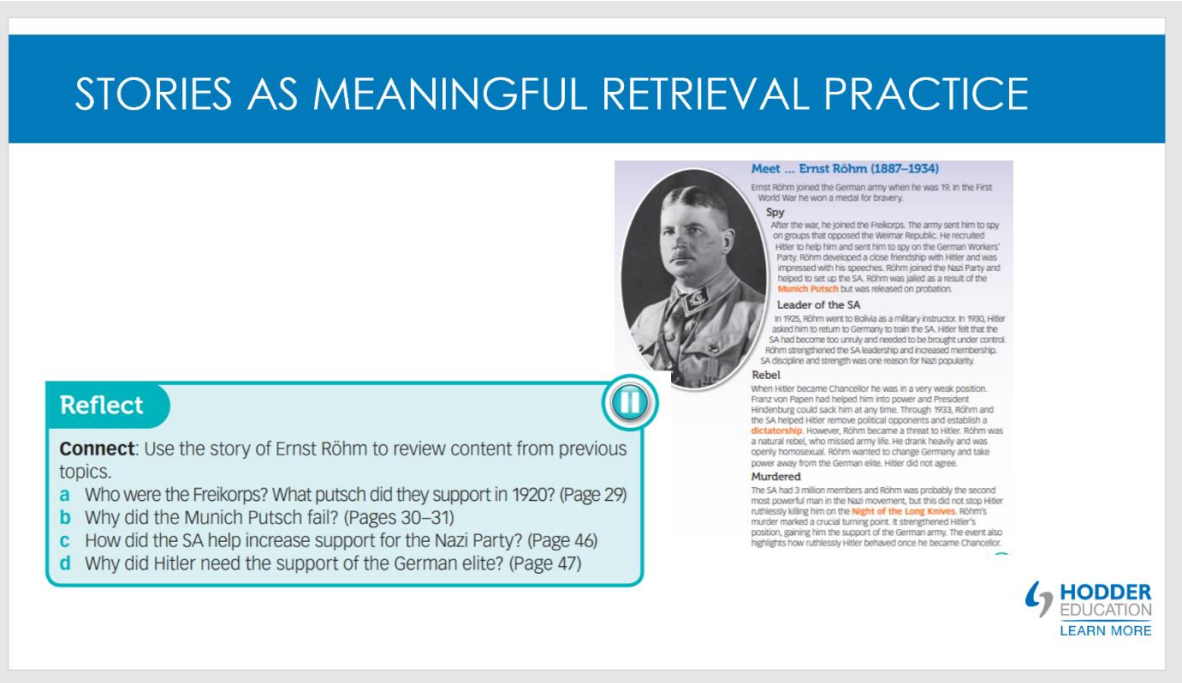
So where does the story-teller go from here? The idea is then to explore what issues Elizabeth has to think about now she's queen which is where you're recapping earlier events and issues but in the context of the story of Elizabeth's changed situation. And this is where you can draw in your students, even (especially?) at A level. What did she have to think about? What would be her priorities? What were her options? Who could she rely on and who should she be wary of? You could tell this from Elizabeth's point of view or break off your story and ask students to think through these issues – it's great way of consolidating their knowledge of material previously studied.

And there's lots of other topics where this works – William in 1066 (is he more anxious about events in England or Normandy?), Oliver Cromwell on becoming Lord Protector and lots more. For more ideas see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhatIsOnTheAgenda.html

The story of Ernst Rohm

Dale uses the story of Ernst Rohm as a way into exploring the Night of the Long Knives during an investigation into how Hitler became a dictator. However, as Rohm had previously been a member of the Freikorps and involved in the Munich Putsch, his story also provides a way to pose questions that enable students to revisit and consolidate content covered in previous units of their GCSE course. One important point here is the spacing of this retrieval practice, linking new knowledge to previous knowledge at the point when it begins to be forgotten. It also adds variety to the regular retrieval activities that are set.



c) Stories that prompt students to ask questions

Developing students' ability to ask good history questions is centrally important, challenging an unstated misconception on the part of many students that their role is always to answer questions, not ask them. Ideally, however, students at all levels should become aware that one of the tasks of the historian is to ask

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questions, to think and challenge – and stories are a great way of prompting questions. Take for example the scene where a man kneels, his head down, his shirt taken off. Where is he? In a church, can you hear the bells and the music? And who are these other men, lining up nearby. Who are they? What might they be carrying? What are they going to do? Why is this happening?

I've built up this tableau – of King Henry II about to be whipped by bishops and monks – piece by piece with music in the background, to start coverage of Becket and Henry II. The great thing about this story of King Henry being whipped is that it's so intriguing – students what to know what's happening and why and the piece by piece tableau approach both builds the story but creates the spaces between each piece of the scene being added for them to ask their questions or suggest what's going on. And then there's the big question – is it a simple story of atonement or is there more to the story? Why else might a king agree to the humiliation of being whipped? That's a much wider-ranging and helpful question at KS3 than a question about why Becket was murdered. For full details see:

> https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BecketMystery.html

Or there's the story of Margery Paston which you'll find here:

> https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/ReadMargeryPaston.html

Tell the story as Margery or as her beloved Richard Calle – or even as Margery's mother, Margaret and pause at key points – what questions do you want to ask? Is there a happy ending? Do they get married? What did the bishop decide? What happened to them in the end? Did Margaret ever speak to them again? Were all women treated like this in the Middle Ages or was Margery an exception? How much choice did women have over who they married?

Or there's the Great Cheese Mystery – here you are in your classroom, digging a hole, and then you look up:

> Hello, my name is Samuel Pepys. I live in London and this is my garden. I don't normally do any digging myself – I'm far too important for that – but I'm trying to find some things I buried the other day. It's been a terrible few days …

And so you tell your story of the Great Fire and how you buried your parmesan cheese and much else ... and have I told you everything you want to know or do you have any questions?

> https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/GreatCheeseMystery.html

d) Stories that challenge students' misconceptions and address key learning problems

Stories also play an important role in challenging misconceptions that students have at the start of an enquiry or topic. For example the story of Albert Speer and his family demonstrates that many middle-class Germans supported the Nazi party – challenging the common misconception that it was only the unemployed working class who were attracted to the party.

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A second example comes from a different type of story-telling, a scripted drama entitled Journey to the Middle Ages, one of whose central aims is explicitly to challenge students' misconceptions about the Middle Ages. Hence, in the section on the 11th century there's this exchange challenging the common idea that medieval people were less intelligent than people today:

> Roger, a royal adviser: Welcome to the eleventh century. Would you like me to speak in Latin, French or English? I'm happy to use whichever language you prefer.
>
> First rich passenger: English, please. Most of us only speak English.
>
> Roger, a royal adviser: That's strange. I thought you would be better educated in the future.
>
> John, a chronicler: Educated people in the eleventh century speak Latin, French or English, whichever is needed.

Other key misconceptions that this story challenges are that there was no change in the Middle Ages, that people were helpless victims of events, that no-one travelled or tried to improve their lives and numerous others. The full story in the form of a scripted drama can be found here:

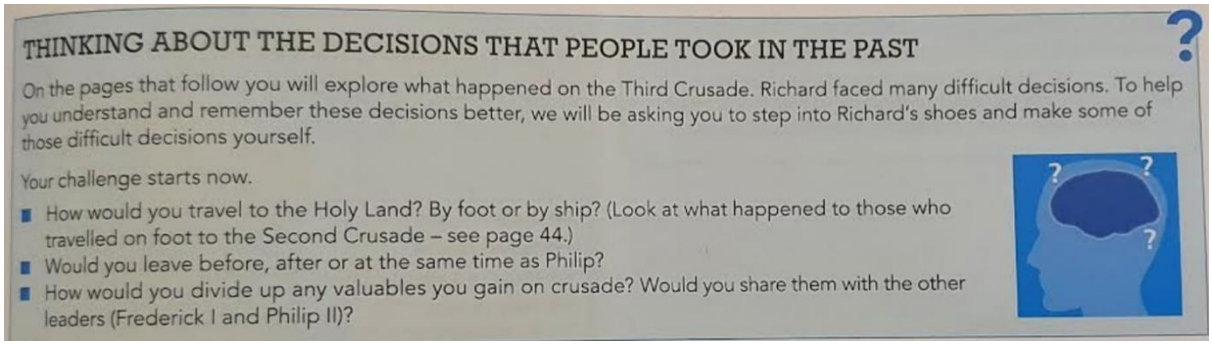
> https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/JourneyToMiddleAges.html

A third example is from a decision-making activity based around the Third Crusade that comes from Dale's GCSE book on The Reigns of Richard I and King John. This form of story-telling (maybe 'story-uncovering' would be a good term) is particularly helpful for helping students appreciate the difficulties of the decisions faced by individuals, the options they faced and why they took the decisions they did – it directly tackles the assumption that there was often only one obvious choice available and that people did not have to

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think hard about the choices. The decision-making process is also extremely good for retaining knowledge over a long period.

Dale's aim was to help students 'think from the inside' about the difficult decisions that Richard I had to take as a military commander. Students are invited to step into Richard's shoes and make some of these decisions themselves (such as planning a route to the Holy Land and how to deal with Philip II's demands) before finding out about the decisions that Richard actually took. It is important to note that the decisions that students take are based on prior contextual understanding (for example, learning from some of the mistakes that were made on the Second Crusade).



THINKING ABOUT THE DECISIONS THAT PEOPLE TOOK IN THE PAST

On the pages that follow you will explore what happened on the Third Crusade. Richard faced many difficult decisions. To help you understand and remember these decisions better, we will be asking you to step into Richard's shoes and make some of those difficult decisions yourself.

Your challenge starts now.

- How would you travel to the Holy Land? By foot or by ship? (Look at what happened to those who travelled on foot to the Second Crusade – see page 44.)
- Would you leave before, after or at the same time as Philip?
- How would you divide up any valuables you gain on crusade? Would you share them with the other leaders (Frederick I and Philip II)?

Other examples of varied forms of story-telling which tackle misconceptions and particular learning problems are:

1381: the decisions of a Kentish villager – focusses on the loyalty and careful planning by the protesters/rebels

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DecisionsKentish1381.html

1066: could it have happened differently? – challenges assumptions that William was bound to become king because that's how events turned out.

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/Eventsof1066.html

1646-9: Who was to blame for the execution of the King? – this scripted drama/role-play by Jen Thornton helps A level students understand the big picture of events but also 'goes deep with the knowledge' in Jen's words.

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/1646WhoWasToBlame.html

1452-55: the beginnings of the Wars of the Roses – a structured role play that tells the story of the events leading to war in 1455, helping A level students over several important hurdles i.e. becoming familiar with who's who, understanding the sequence of events and getting to groups with the motives behind actions.

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WarsofRoses5255.html

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Conclusions

Cherishing students' engagement with stories

Have I ever told you the story of how I cut the ear off a teddy bear in cold blood?

It's the story of how we can help students understand in much more depth the events of 1066-1069 by involving them as Normans and Saxons, hearing William speaking in French, his desire to rule peacefully but then driven to desperate measures by constant rebellion and finally ordering wholesale destruction in the north, how in cold blood (or was it anger?) he cut the ear off that bear to symbolise the harrying of the North.

Have I told you about the students who remember this story five years later because of the power of the story and of the way it was told?

We could happily continue to add examples and explore the many uses of stories but we hope that this has been sufficient to stimulate those starting out in teaching to think creatively about the roles of story in their teaching. Some takeaways to finish with:

a) There are various forms of story-telling – which include stories wholly narrated by the teacher but also include more inter-active story-telling.

b) Telling stories can achieve many objectives so it's crucial to identify your objectives. We have exemplified some of these possible objectives but you could also think about:

- Stories that help students think across long periods of time and long distances
- Stories that help students recognise people like themselves and their concerns in the past
- Stories that explore other cultures
- Stories that emphasise similarities as well as differences between people in the past and ourselves
- Stories that relate historical discoveries and how historians have developed interpretations

And as we said earlier, but is really important to re-state, asking students to recount the story that they have heard or which emerges from activities is a very powerful and effective way of consolidating knowledge and building memory. Don't just leave the story after its first telling but ask students to revisit it, it's a challenge but if they can re-tell it effectively (individually or, often more helpfully, in pairs) then this is a great confidence boost for them. Or ask them to re-tell the story from the point of view of a different person involved in the events – there's an even greater challenge but one from which there's a huge amount to learn about why their story would be different.

And finally – History can be a difficult subject for some students to study. Effort and hard thinking are required for a student to be successful so it's essential to generate the motivation that students need to focus on the material and the difficult concepts. Stories are an important way of creating this motivation, utilising the power of individual stories, immersive role plays, of decision-making activities. At its most

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effective, story enables students to 'think from the inside' about past events, understanding the complexity of individuals' thinking and motivation and the humanity of the people whose stories are being told.

Perhaps above all, story has the power to engage students' emotional responses – helping them care about the people they're hearing and learning about and so caring about what happened next. That level of engagement with the stories of the people of the past must be cherished because that personal connection is the most effective means of stimulating memory, recall and, above all, understanding.

And if you do want to tell the story of 1066 to 1069 in your own classroom it's here – Je Suis le Roi

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/JeSuisleRoi.html

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