



# Timelines in teaching history

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John Fines quote, 'History is about time, it subsists in time, time is the medium by which it happens' (*Primary History* 59, 2011). Yet the fact that time is fundamental to the study of history does not make it any easier to teach (Hoodless, 2008). The abstract nature of time as a concept is complex and takes years for children, or indeed adults, to develop into big pictures, mental frameworks or schema.

## Abstract thinking and concrete representations

Timelines are one tool we can use to help make the abstract more concrete. A timeline is a visual way of representing events in chronological order. At their most basic they simply sequence events in order. As they become more sophisticated they show

the spaces between events and may layer multiple types of events onto each other, such as events from different places, or types of events such as changes in transport. As teachers our own sense of time is highly developed over a lifetime, but we need to remember that knowledge about time is not innate to us and must be learnt gradually with layer upon layer of understanding. Mathematical concepts of time need to be overlaid with understanding of temporal language and the substantive concepts that historical vocabulary demands of learners.

## Timelines and cognitive science

Although little or none of the cognitive science that informs current teaching as well as the Core Content Framework or Early Career Framework is based on

research into history, let alone primary history, there are aspects of it that can be applied to practice. In order to be effective, timelines need to be referred to regularly to help embed knowledge in pupils' long-term memories. By asking pupils where new events in their learning sit in relation to prior knowledge, we can help pupils to retrieve knowledge and secure new knowledge within a framework or schema. Advice from I CAN (Speech and Language UK) – the speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) charity – suggests that children with SLCN need to hear new vocabulary at least 12 times to start to be able to retrieve it. If this is the case, then revisiting events and their place in history using strong visual prompts such as timelines is likely to be helpful in securing knowledge in their long-term memory. Adapting teaching for children with special needs will benefit all pupils.



## Powerful use of timelines

The timelines that a teacher uses may be linked to a particular topic such as toys, the Romans, or the Tudors. It may be that a class has a more general timeline of British and world history. My concern on entering classrooms when visiting student teachers on placement is that often timelines are used mainly as decoration. Sometimes this decoration is very well done but often the timeline is not used as a teaching tool over a period of time. Retrieval of information where children are encouraged to see the links between events, their sequence, the space between them and their duration is key to understanding chronology using timelines.

Commercial timelines are often used in school corridors. If you have one of these in your school, stop and watch sometime how many children take time to look at it or just walk past.

Timelines as teaching tools should be accessible and visually rich. Consider where they are located and how they will be presented to children. Are they going to be static and set in stone or can they be moved around and added to as new events are discussed? As a good teaching tool, when the class is reading a book in English with an historical theme or looking at a discovery in science, the teacher can locate the event on the timeline and ask the class to comment on what was going on before or after the topic in hand. Expert teachers use questioning to open up thinking. Timelines find their place in the disciplinary concept

of chronology and a timeline can inform discussion on cause and consequence or similarity and difference. A look at a timeline linked to transport can show the impact of the industrial revolution in terms of types of transport. Pupils can link this to who was on the throne for most of this period. Timelines can also help us to consider duration. With a new monarch on the throne we can use this as a chance to look at how long a sovereign such as Elizabeth II ruled and what changed during her reign.

Big timelines can be an effective way of bringing a timeline to life and helping children see scale. I use a long piece of string with markers on it to show the centuries. The children can go into the hall or the school field and stretch out the string and then stand in the timeline as characters or events. Putting big pieces of sugar paper tabards over their heads means you can mark eras on the timeline such as when the Romans were. If each child represents a century, you can give them each a piece of homework to find out some things about their century. They could bring props in to represent what they have found out. The children can be photographed in situ on the timeline and then these pictures can be hung on the wall as the class timeline. They can then see where they are in relation to each other. They become the mini-experts in this situation and the timeline has helped remove some of the abstract nature of chronology.

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