

# Historical significance

## – the forgotten ‘Key Element’?

Robert Phillips is Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Wales, Swansea.  
r.phillips@swansea.ac.uk

Robert Phillips

How many history departments regularly discuss the quality of their enquiries and teaching processes that relate to historical significance? It would not be unusual, in 2002, for a history department to spend time in a department meeting reflecting upon pupils' learning about causation or to explore the connection between pupils' evidential understanding and their growing historical knowledge. Yet the prescribed curriculum for 11 to 14 year-olds in England and Wales gives almost equal attention to the concept of 'historical significance' and has done since 1991. Rob Phillips argues that historical significance has been wrongly neglected as a key aspect of the conceptual structure that informs the discipline. Exemplifying the principles through practical activities he offers models for teaching pupils to explore the idea of significance and argues for its connection with citizenship education. In citizenship, as in other current areas of curriculum development commonly linked with history, such as 'thinking skills', history teachers now need to be clearer than ever when debating with non-history colleagues and managers what constitutes a legitimate historical focus or a valid historical question. Rob Phillips' work on the under-represented concept of significance provides history departments with fresh criteria to support such experimentation and debate.

### Introduction

This is the second of two articles describing findings from a small-scale research project entitled the *Total History Experience*, based at the University of Wales Swansea (UWS).<sup>1</sup> The major aim of the project has been to demonstrate effective ways in which research can be used to improve the quality of history teaching and learning. Specifically, the project has considered the implications of the following for history education:

1. The theory of multiple intelligences
2. Historical outline
3. Extended writing
4. Initial stimulus material
5. Historical significance<sup>2</sup>

The research was undertaken through the secondary history PGCE partnership between UWS and local schools; student teachers on the course were involved in preparing and teaching the material used during the research, and in conjunction with tutors and mentors, evaluated its effectiveness. The research is currently being disseminated via INSET throughout the country, as well as through publications.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses upon the fifth area of analysis, namely the teaching of historical significance and its usefulness for promoting citizenship education through history.

### Defining historical significance

I want to suggest that historical significance has not received the attention that it merits in history teaching.

If one considers the current National Curriculum in England and Wales, as well as the current criteria for GCSE and A/S, although there are references to the need to teach the significance of key events and personalities in history, these are not given as much prominence as, say, historical interpretations.

This is rather odd because historical significance or resonance lies at the very heart of the subject. If history teaching is not about demonstrating the importance and significance of our subject, then what is it about? A number of reasons can be suggested for this lack of attention, but two are particularly relevant. First, during a period when debates about historical selection (i.e. what history to teach?) were at their height, almost inevitably, historical significance was relegated in terms of priority behind (again) historical interpretations. Second, the notion of historical significance has not been theorised adequately - consequently, the practical potential and usefulness of historical significance has not been properly evaluated. Drawing upon the older work of Geoffrey Partington and a more recent contribution by Martin Hunt, this article attempts to redress the balance.

Partington is probably best known for launching a bitter attack on new history in the mid-1980s.<sup>4</sup> This is a shame because before he was misguidedly influenced by the New Right discourse of derision against history teaching<sup>5</sup> he actually produced one of the finest books on history teaching, namely *The Idea of a Historical Education*, which I still recommend to my students as a fine read. The book evaluates a wide range of issues,

including the aims, nature and purposes of history teaching and, in the process, cleverly draws not only upon historical but also philosophical work. Partington was justifiably concerned that new history promoted historical skills at the expense of historical knowledge; but the book adds another twist to a familiar discussion by suggesting that there was a corresponding danger that pupils would not see the importance and resonance of the subject, as part of a wider liberal education. Part of his discussion, therefore, focused upon articulating a justification for seeing the study of history as an important purpose in itself. In the process Partington offered a powerful justification for the teaching of the subject.

Partington argued that significance was a vital element of historical education but that in order to understand what it meant, it was vital to understand what made an event significant, which was dependent upon the following factors:

1. Importance – to the people living at the time
2. Profundity – how deeply people’s lives have been affected by the event
3. Quantity – how many lives were affected
4. Durability – for how long people’s lives have been affected
5. Relevance – the extent to which the event has contributed to an increased understanding of present life.

Hunt has used Partington’s criteria to show how historical significance can invigorate the teaching of a wide range of topics. Drawing also upon more recent work on history teaching,<sup>6</sup> Hunt argues that ‘an emphasis upon significance of events, changes and people will enhance the quality of learning and generally clarify in the minds of the pupils the value of studying history’.<sup>7</sup> One of the aims of our *Total History Experience* research, therefore, was to interrogate the validity of this claim.

### ***If You Tolerate This!? World War I as a study in historical significance***

In the *Total History Experience* research, drawing also upon the work of Counsell and Riley, we applied Partington’s criteria to the study of World War I by focusing upon the big enquiry question of *Why was the First World War called the Great War?* (see below). We found that the design and structure of the study of the war was greatly enhanced when we considered some of the following ‘little questions’ based around each of Partington’s criteria:

1. Importance – an overview of the main events of WWI led to the question: *Who was affected by the War?*
2. Profundity – by analysing a diverse range of contemporary accounts from WWI, we asked: *How were people’s lives changed?*
3. Quantity – by analysing both The Western Front and the Home Front, we considered: *How many*

*people were affected by WWI?*

4. Durability – by studying newspaper accounts of the annual commemoration of the armistice (including the 1998 anniversary of the armistice, which attracted massive press interest) and by analysing local memorial stones to the soldiers who died during the war, we asked: *Why is it important to remember WWI?*
5. Relevance – by considering the long-term effects of WWI, we asked pupils to reflect even further by considering: *Why is it important to study WWI?*

Indeed, this last question provided the primary motivation behind another aspect of our *Total History Experience* research.<sup>8</sup> Given that significance had been an under-represented concept in history teaching, a primary aim was to find ways of teaching the concept more effectively. We therefore devised a teaching pack based upon the study of the Battle of Mametz Wood, July, 1916, a vital element of the Somme offensive. Whereas WWI and the Somme has been taught for many years in schools in Wales, it has only been since the introduction of the history National Curriculum in Wales that important events like Mametz have been taught systematically.

After teaching an overview of WWI, newspaper articles describing the 80th anniversary of the armistice were used as initial stimulus material (ISM) to demonstrate the contemporary resonance of WWI today. A further (particularly oblique) ISM – a pack of jelly babies, and the song *If You Tolerate This* by the Manic Street Preachers – was used as a concrete way of encouraging pupils to see the meaning, importance and relevance of commemoration. Jelly babies actually derive from ‘peace babies’, which were given in schools at the time to mark the armistice in 1918; the Manics song, of course, is about the Spanish Civil War of 1936 but is useful nevertheless for generating pupil interest about the need ‘never to forget’.<sup>9</sup>

As indicated earlier, we decided upon: *Why was World War I called the Great War?* to guide our enquiry and analysis. After evaluating the origins of WWI, studying Mametz in detail, and then going on to analyse other aspects of WWI, including the impact upon the Home Front, pupils were given the final group work exercise shown in Figure 1, which helped them answer the ‘big question’ directly. Note how its design was influenced – very explicitly – by Partington’s criteria, as well as the use of an acronym to help pupils appreciate the concept.

### ***The Industrial Revolution is NOT boring: Using historical significance to make ‘dull and difficult’ topics relevant***

Evaluations undertaken with pupils and teachers who piloted the materials were extremely positive. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the *Total History Experience* research was the way in which it showed

**The song *If You Tolerate This* by the Manic Street Preachers encouraged pupils to see the meaning, importance and relevance of commemoration.**

Figure 1: A group work exercise concluding the enquiry, *Why was the First World War called the Great War?*

# Why was the First World War called the Great War?

In order to answer this question you need to analyse the **significance** of the war. To start with, you might like to consider what we mean by the word **GREAT**:

<b>G</b>	Groundbreaking
<b>R</b>	Remembered by all
<b>E</b>	Events that were far reaching
<b>A</b>	Affected the future
<b>T</b>	Terrifying

## Task 1

On your table you will find a set of cards describing and illustrating aspects of the First World War, and four cards with headings:

Military, Political, Economic & Social Significance

Your first task is to place each card under one of the 4 headings.

## Task 2

Now look at the cards in more detail.

Decide whether each had **long term or short term** consequences.

(Pupils were then given a writing frame to help them answer the big question).

the usefulness and effectiveness of significance for really sharpening up the study of certain topics. We therefore decided to extend this aspect of the research by devising a range of significance-related tasks on topics that teachers have traditionally perceived either to be dull, difficult or both!

The Industrial Revolution has had a press from some teachers who argue that it is difficult and rather arid for pupils. Perhaps this is because not enough attention has been placed upon the long-term significance of industrialisation on Britain today. As Hunt argues it is important to help 'pupils understand the wider perspective and the long term themes to which an individual topic contributes',<sup>10</sup> thus making it meaningful and relevant. Our big enquiry question here, therefore, was: *How important is the Industrial Revolution to our*

*lives today?* Pupils were encouraged to answer this question through a four-stage process:

**1. ISM: Queen Victoria's commemorative plate:** Pupils were shown a copy of this plate which was designed to celebrate the 1887 jubilee. This was what I like to call a 'quality' ISM because it contained so many issues relevant to the Industrial Revolution, namely empire, trade, imports, exports, 'workshop of the world' etc. The whole class were given opportunities to raise questions about it, using techniques described by me elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

**2. The Industrial Revolution 'bidding game':** This was an interesting and innovative overview on the Industrial Revolution, similar to Riley's 'interlocking stories' outline.<sup>12</sup> In order for pupils to see the significance of the Industrial

Revolution, it was vital not only to demonstrate the nature of the industrial changes in Wales but also to show their connections with the 'bigger picture' of Britain and the rest of the world. Our outline involved having half the pupils in a class around a big table with, initially, two big pictures in the middle, one of Merthyr Tydfil in about 1700 (rural, idyllic) and the other, a contrasting image of the same town in 1800 (industrial, polluted). After a brief discussion, pupils were clear that this 'big change' was called the Industrial Revolution and that the purpose of the task was to explore the major features of it.

'Big headings' were then put on the table, in a circle around the central images: population, agricultural revolution, inventors, factory system/industry, transport, urbanisation, poverty and disease, wealth and finally, empire. Each pupil was then given about three small pictures each, with a label on the back describing what each of them was. They were then asked to 'bid' to place their pictures next to the appropriate big heading; in order to do this, they had to justify their choice to the rest of the class. The end result was a fascinating and detailed illustrative summary of the major features of the Industrial

Figure 2: Cards for sorting into military, political, economic and social significance

Cards for sorting into military, political, economic and social significance			
ECONOMIC		POLITICAL	
The German economy was ruined by the war. Inflation made people's life savings worthless.	The USA became a major economic power but the economy grew at a pace that could not be sustained. In 1929 the Wall Street Crash occurred and caused the Great Depression of the 1930s around the world.	In Britain, all men over 21 and women over 30 received the vote. This made Britain a mass democracy.	The League of Nations was formed to allow countries to solve arguments without any more wars. However, it lacked power and was often ignored. It failed to stop WWII.
During the war there was full employment in Britain, including many jobs for women in traditionally male industries.	New businesses grew all over Europe and the USA, with the money they made from supplying the war effort.	Many Germans were unhappy with the post war settlement. One of them was an ex-soldier, Adolf Hitler. He set up the Nazi Party, with the aim of recovering the land Germany had lost. This was to eventually lead to WWII,	The map of Europe was redrawn at the Treaty of Versailles. The old empires which had ruled for hundreds of years fell and were replaced by new countries like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary.
Britain lost much of its overseas trade during the war. After the war, this meant that many jobs were lost, especially in the coal industry.	Ordinary soldiers were angry at the economic conditions they discovered in Britain when they returned.	Winston Churchill became unhappy with the post war settlement, and warned of another war. He was to be Prime Minister of Britain during WWII.	The pressures of WWI were a major factor in the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks seized power from the Tzar. Russia remained communist until 1991.
MILITARY		SOCIAL	
This was the first war in which air combat, tanks and gas were used.	Machine guns and artillery had shown their effectiveness.	Many soldiers coped with their experiences by writing poetry. Several, such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, became famous poets.	Women worked in munitions factories to help the war effort. They kept their sense of independence after the war.
WWI had shown that in order to raise large armies conscription was needed. (This was introduced early in WWII).	Medical improvements resulted from the lessons learned by militia doctors and surgeons, which would benefit medical science in the 20th century.	There are over 60,000 monuments to the war dead in Britain. The dead from every war are remembered each year on Remembrance Day, 11th November, the day WWI ended.	Over ten million people lost their lives in the First World War.
People raised questions about the militia leadership of WWI.	Trench warfare was the main method of warfare used but it was largely a failure. Future wars would be fought differently.	This was the 'first' 'world' war, with people from all over the world involved. It was supposed to be 'the war to end all wars' but sadly this did not happen.	Many words we use today originated in the First World War. e.g. 'pal' (friend), e.g. 'stunt' (attack).

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Revolution. Pupils were then asked to discuss the order of the big headings: could we have started with ‘empire’ instead of ‘population’ or ‘agricultural revolution’, encouraging pupils to think about the developmental, as well as the contingent nature of the Industrial Revolution. Finally, they were asked to speculate about ‘what would have happened if X or Y had not been present? In what ways would history have turned out differently?’

**3. Richard Arkwright Entrepreneur:** Whilst this was going on, the other half of the class were watching a video on Richard Arkwright (with a structured observation sheet) which actually deal with very similar themes (invention, entrepreneurialism, investment, establishment of factory system, growth of Cromford etc). This provided the opportunity to see how a significant individual can shape history.

**4. Answering the ‘Big Question’:** In the next lesson, in order to help pupils investigate *How important was the Industrial Revolution to our lives today?* pupils were given cards containing evidence relating to Industry & Inventions, Agriculture, Transport, Social Change and ‘Britain and the World’. They were then asked to categorise under the titles of ‘Before the Industrial Revolution’, ‘During the Industrial Revolution’ and ‘Our World Today’. A summary table was provided for them to note the key points, which was then used as the basis for a final activity that involved pupils either (1) preparing a TV programme script showing the importance of the Industrial Revolution to our lives today or (2) designing their own ‘commemorative plate’ of the Industrial Revolution, to demonstrate its significance (paper plates were provided, which could then be displayed on the wall).

By focusing attention on significance, these activities made the Industrial Revolution appear more relevant and meaningful to pupils. Often, the Industrial Revolution is taught via a series of disconnected, jumbled and disparate topics that make little sense to pupils. Therefore, Hunt is right to argue that ‘attention to the significance of events, changes and people in the past can provide a useful balance against the compartmentalised episodic approach which has to result from breaking down a prescribed area of study into individual, manageable lessons’.<sup>13</sup>

### ***A role model for today? Using historical significance to promote mutual understanding and to combat racism***

During the project, we designed some activities that used the notion of historical significance to undermine prejudice. We were influenced in this connection by the work of Pankhania who argues that racism can only be understood by ‘examining the relationship the British state has had with black people throughout history. Certain questions are central to such an examination. When, why and how did the contact first

begin? How did this contact develop?’<sup>14</sup> As an anti-racist, she advocates analysing the inter-connected political, social and economic factors behind Britain’s colonisation of India and parts of Africa, as well as Britain’s role in the creation of apartheid in South Africa, to consider the long-term impact of this imperial legacy on British attitudes to black people. Pankhania argues that racism stems from an unequal power relationship between white (= superior) and black (= inferior). It follows that pupils will only be able to understand the nature of contemporary race relations by appreciating the historical legacy that created this. Therefore, Pankhania rightly argues that opportunities have to be found to demonstrate that ‘black people have made a major contribution towards the development of Britain’.

The history of slavery poses a number of challenges to the history teacher in this respect. On the one hand, slavery has to be studied in order to appreciate its vital role in the creation of racism but on the other hand, constant images of slave subjugation have the potential simply to reinforce the superior/inferior stereotype referred to above. An important strategy here is to demonstrate black people’s role in their own emancipation, rather than merely emphasising the importance of white reformers such as William Wilberforce.

The life of Olaudah Equiano provides an excellent opportunity here: under the enquiry theme of *Olaudah Equiano – A Role Model for Today?* we analysed Equiano’s extraordinary life story, which provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his contribution to the anti-slavery movement. This exercise involved breaking down the chronology of his life, and encouraging pupils to discuss the most significant events which influenced him. Cards were then provided, which the pupils were then asked to sort into the short term, medium term and long term significance of Equiano’s life in terms of the contribution he made to the campaign against slavery and was used as the basis of the extended piece of writing.

This aspect of the *Total History Experience* research also emphasised to us the importance, using Riley’s phrase,<sup>15</sup> of ‘choosing and planting’ enquiry questions in relation to appropriate key elements. Thus, our emphasis upon significance here contrasts with Wrenn who in my view misguidedly concentrates upon an interpretive deconstruction of Equiano’s life.<sup>16</sup> Given the limited opportunities available to ‘unmask’ black history, it seems to me that we need to use Equiano as an opportunity to demonstrate black achievement, rather than for deconstruction. This is where an over-emphasis upon historical interpretation, at the expense of historical significance, can be unhelpful.

Similarly, traditional textbooks tell the narrative history of the Crusades from the perspective of western Christendom, thus reinforcing the moral right of the



Crusaders in contrast to the 'infidel' Muslims. Like Booth<sup>17</sup> the *Total History Experience* used resources to show children the history of the Crusades from both perspectives, but we took this further. Under the enquiry question: *How have the Crusades affected life today?* we considered the long-term legacy of the Crusades upon European life in a range of spheres, such as trade, architecture, mathematics, astrology and so on. The concluding exercise involved an explicit discussion of the positive impact of Islamic culture. This sort of approach undermines a central factor in the creation of racist ideology, namely the artificial creation of the binary oppositional 'them and us', based around a negative view of 'the other'. Given the current delicate state of race relations in Britain, this is particularly apposite.

There is evidence to suggest that other teachers are also beginning to see the utility of significance for undermining racism and other forms of prejudice. Hammond's recent contribution to this journal on teaching the Holocaust demonstrated the importance of showing the pupils 'a proper understanding of the significance of the event and a quiet appreciation of its true horror'.<sup>18</sup> Hammond suggests that whereas the horror of the Holocaust sometimes provoked inappropriate comments from some pupils used to blood and violence through on the film and television screens, an explicit emphasis upon significance encouraged her to conclude rather movingly at the end of her article that 'some "learning outcomes" can only be demonstrated by silence'.

### Conclusion: historical significance and citizenship

The evaluative work undertaken during the course of the *Total History Experience* both with teachers, student teachers and pupils demonstrated the effectiveness of significance in a range of ways. By theorising about what is meant by historical significance and then applying these ideas in practical contexts, the research showed that the concept can be used to:

- show pupils the relevance of history and therefore improve their motivation for learning;
- plan effective enquiry questions, which provide exciting opportunities for a more meaningful interrogation of the past;
- change the perception amongst some teachers and pupils that some topics (such as the Industrial Revolution!) are uninteresting and lack relevance;
- demonstrate the links between local-national-international perspectives;
- provide opportunities to raise citizenship-related issues such as commemoration, global awareness and anti-racism.

I would therefore endorse Hunt's claim that 'the consideration of significance promotes not only the

ability to explain and support a case, but also encourages pupils to consider where they stand on some of the significant and enduring issues that arise from the study of people in the past'<sup>19</sup> This is surely a fundamental corner-stone of a liberal and democratic education and a pre-requisite for effective citizenship.<sup>20</sup>

**Rob Phillips'** is currently Director of the ESRC funded British Island Stories: History, Identity & Nationhood (BRISHIN), which explores the inter-relationship between history and national identity in the United Kingdom.

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