

HOW TO TEACH CHRONOLOGY

— Andy Reynolds and Alan Hodgkinson

Introduction

Chronology is the air that history breathes and without it children's historical understanding is limited. Chronological understanding enables pupils to place their learning within the 'bigger picture' and better remember historical people, periods and events. So:

- Key Stage 1 pupils should be aware of terms that describe the passing of time and be able to place events and objects in chronological order. Furthermore, they should be aware of a past beyond living memory.
- Early in KS2, pupils should develop an awareness of chronology, be able to employ dates and terms to describe the past, and realise that the past can be divided into periods.
- Later in KS2, pupils should produce work making appropriate use of dates and terms such as ancient, modern, AD, BC, century and decade.

The problem

Within the current teaching and learning of history dates have seemingly been de-emphasised. They have been replaced by phrases such as 'a long/ very long time ago'. This change appears to cause the serious difficulties that pupils have in understanding **the temporal dimension of our society**: events, movements, beliefs, values and substantive concepts such as catholicism, civilisation, communism and conservatism that are the vocabulary of citizenship in a plural, liberal democracy:

The solution: effective teaching

Effective chronology teaching must be carefully planned and reinforced through fast-paced and enjoyable activities. Pupils can – and do – develop the important concept of chronology. For example, the Year 4 pupil who said:

Sir, I used to think that the Romans and Victorians lived within a few years of each other, because you told us they both had good sewerage systems. I now know this can't be right because of the timeline thinge (sic) on the wall. It told me there was about 1,500 years between these two periods, and nobody can live that long, not even you Sir, so the Romans couldn't have been involved in building the Victorian sewers.

Below we suggest in three easy steps how teaching for chronological understanding can be made more effective for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils.

1. Get the planning right

For Key Stage 1 and 2 audit what chronological teaching and learning is already being undertaken. Focus upon specific questions to monitor if pupils' progression in chronological understanding is adequate. Then:

Plan for sustained teaching and learning of chronology

- **Regular and systematic reinforcement is essential.** Focus on teaching to explicit objectives for chronological understanding. Build chronological understanding deep

into the framework of planning, rather than add it in the form of discrete exercises alongside existing units of work.

- **Reinforce chronological knowledge and understanding** through the units of work that introduce and conclude Key Stages 1 and 2 and each year of study.
- **Link chronological understanding into historical enquiries.** Create opportunities to relate each new topic or enquiry to pupils' existing mental chronological frameworks so as to steadily reinforce, add to and deepen their chronological knowledge and understanding.
- **Place a topic or enquiry in its wider historical framework** before and after it has been studied in detail.

Use timelines constantly and consistently in teaching and learning activities.

- Ensure that pupils have the opportunity to record their historical learning upon **individual timelines** which they take with them from one class to the next.
- **Provide each class with a large timeline** and ensure it is actively used within teaching and learning activities.
- **Encourage the employment of timeline activities** as the basis for school assemblies. Pupils should be able to observe what history teaching is coming next and what has been covered before.

2. Get the vocabulary right

Developing the language of chronology is most important if pupils are to appreciate fully historical people, periods and events. The language of chronology includes:

- **descriptive vocabulary**, e.g. before, after, a long time ago, a very long time ago, ancient, old, new, decade, century, millennium, modern;
- **technical vocabulary**, e.g. AD, BC, the use of the 19th century for 1845; and,
- **conceptual vocabulary**, e.g. change, continuity, sequence, duration, period, chronology.

3. Employ fast-paced and fun activities: Key Stage 2 activities

Timelines

Many primary schools use timelines in an effort to promote chronology. These lines appear in many forms, from a 'washing line,' where time periods dangle, sometimes precariously, to more formal ones based on mathematical number lines. However, timelines do not serve any useful purpose in the promotion of time concepts if merely used for display. Outlined below are activities that may be profitably employed to ensure that timelines become effective teaching tools within the primary classroom. Before any of the outlined activities are commenced pupils must have a secure understanding of what AD means. AD should be referred to as meaning after the birth of Christ

Class teacher's timeline

Events from your own life are a good starting point for the completion of an interesting timeline. The photograph of yourself as a baby never ceases to capture the pupils' imagination and can provide a stimulus for discussion. Many pupils have difficulty understanding where an adult's lifeline

fits into their own schema of temporal understanding. This understanding can be assisted if pupils are given the dates of their teacher's lifeline so that they can compare it with their own.

AD timelines

It is important when introducing the AD timeline that pupils are allowed to discuss what the line shows and how it is organised. The issue of placing the past on the left needs to be discussed and taught. Also, it is important for pupils to realise, when using the AD timeline, that the numbers become larger the closer to the present we are.

Children's personal timelines

A useful follow up to the teacher's timeline, is to allow pupils to construct their own personal timelines which employ dates.

- Your pupils can place pictures, either photographs or drawings, of events such as their birthday, first day at school etc. onto a timeline. These lines can be extended to take in the lives of both parents and grandparents.
- This activity is useful in that it begins to develop ideas that time existed before the pupil was born. This work slowly develops chronological understanding and allows pupils a practical reference tool for the coherent sequencing of their historical knowledge.

Large class AD timeline

A class timeline is a beneficial teaching tool because it enables a clear representation of the past to be seen by large groups. Although many commercial timelines are available, care should be taken in their selection.

- Horizontal rather than vertical timelines should be used as these appear to cause less confusion than spiral helixes or zig-zag lines.
- It is important from the outset to represent centuries distinctly on the timeline. This can be done effectively by colour coding these dates. Through discussion it can be explained to the pupils that the chances of a person living through more than one hundred-year period is highly unlikely.
- By constantly referring to these lines, pupils quickly realise how the passage of time makes it impossible for certain people/s still to be alive.

AD 'time rulers'

Smaller AD timelines can be stuck onto a pupil's ruler; these provide a 'ready reckoner' when referring to historical periods.

- They are helpful for quick fire questions, such as: Who came first in time, the Vikings or the Victorians? or more difficult questions such as: How long is it since the Romans invaded Britain?
- The study units that a pupil has encountered can be sequenced using these rulers as a guide. When placing these periods upon the timeline, it is important to discuss the relationship of each unit to the others.

The use of dates

A common misconception, which pervades the research, is that primary-aged pupils cannot understand dates and so they should not be taught. However, more recent research has developed activities which appear to enhance children's abilities in dealing with dating conventions.

- When you feel that your pupils are confident with the usage of AD dates, BC timelines can be introduced. Again time must be taken and discussion used to explain what BC means; your pupils will quickly realise that this term means before Christ.
- Care should be exercised with the term BC; although specifically stated in the national curriculum, it may not be a wholly appropriate term to use in isolation in your school. The following activities are useful in the development of pupils' understanding of dating conventions.

People cards. A set of cards can be made quite easily. The set of cards could include three or four people from the teacher's own life and that of the school's. As indicated below, the card should contain several AD dates; birthday, first day at school and occasions such as marriage.

- At the most basic level pupils can sequence the cards using each date in turn.
- The activities can be made more challenging by adding further people, such as those indicated in the National Curriculum, as well as 'ordinary' people from the children's locality and by employing BC dates.

When pupils are confident in these activities the next step is to look directly at specific dating conventions.

People cards – decades and centuries. There are several activities that appear to work well in the development of the dating convention of the decade; for example, pupils can be asked to group their cards, say, by all those people born in the 1920s AD or those who died in the 1930s AD. In follow-on activities pupils can be asked to group their cards, say, by all those people born in the 1900s or those who died in the 1800s.

- The employment of centuries should be introduced gradually and reinforced constantly if pupils are correctly to understand the temporal terminology.
- You can introduce quick fire starter/plenary activities to your lessons.
- An activity that is beneficial as a quick starter is time snap. If you explain to pupils that a 'snap' can occur with any card that has a birth date in the 1950s, or, if using centuries, in the 1800s or 19th century. You start showing your people cards in rapid succession and give points to the individual or team who provide the quickest correct answer.

Human timelines. Give each of your pupils a card with a person or object that lies upon the AD timeline. The pupils can be asked to come out table by table and organise their cards (and themselves) into the correct chronological order.

And, finally, to end with a few do's and don'ts:

* **Don't:** underestimate pupils' capabilities; solely employ the phrases 'a long time ago' and 'a very long time ago'; be afraid to use dates to locate specific people, events and periods in time.

* **Do:** consistently employ timelines; use accurate temporal vocabulary; make time links to all the study units the children cover; ensure that learning is lively and fun.

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