

What pedagogical methods promote long term retention of knowledge in history?

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Abstract

This project had the initial aim of utilising test and control groups in order to analyse the effectiveness of various methods of promoting medium/long-term memory retention, with the secondary aims of helping to promote better understanding - enabling children to make links across topics with greater confidence - and improving the oracy by which they could confidently share the knowledge and skills they had learnt.

Unfortunately, the unforeseen circumstances and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent effect on schools, has meant that the collection of any meaningful data with which to make a scholarly analysis of the aforementioned aims has proved to be unworkable. As a result of this, any conclusions have had to be underpinned by the theory gathered from published sources, academic understanding and the professional conversations between colleagues, who were kind enough to share their initial observations and analysis based on the period during which we were able to implement some of our research processes.

Introduction

"We are not makers of history... We are made by history." Martin Luther King, Jr.

The study of history is key to any meaningful understanding of the present and the skills which it teaches alongside its ethical lessons serve an invaluable moral compass on which to base analytical and critical thinking. Unfortunately, it is often given secondary prominence in education and as such pupils often fail to acquire the multitude of analytical and critical thinking skills before they have had a chance to fully appreciate their usefulness in the real world.

Nevertheless, the DfE's own statement on the rationale behind a high quality history education in key stages 1 and 2 is extremely wide-ranging in its aims:

A high-quality history education will help pupils gain a coherent knowledge and understanding of Britain's past and that of the wider world... Teaching should equip pupils to ask perceptive questions, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments, and develop perspective and judgement. History helps pupils to understand the complexity of people's lives, the process of change, the diversity of societies and relationships between different groups, as well as their own identity and the challenges of their time.²

Such ambitious and broad aims - and in particular the desire for relatively young children to attain a panoramic perspective and understanding of their past - necessitate a systematic approach to teaching that covers a wide plethora of subject areas whilst retaining common threads and a sense of context pupils can understand in relation to their own lives and the experiences of the world around them. Key to this is the ability to retain knowledge and understanding over a wide ranging variety of periods whilst possessing the analytical skills to make links, draw comparisons and highlight differences. This retention of knowledge therefore remains the key cornerstone of historical understanding - without it, the desired subsequent skills of analysis, comparison and contextual understanding cannot be applied in any meaningful way.

The subsequent direction and motivation behind this project was further much influenced by the areas highlighted during our school OFSTED inspection and its subsequent findings in the area of humanities. Whilst the majority of our children were generally able to talk with authority about their current learning, it was evident that they found it more difficult to recount learning from previous years or found it difficult to articulate meaningful links between topics. Others - who had shown fantastic ability to evidence their understanding and skills in written form - found it much more challenging to express their knowledge in conversational form. As a

¹ Martin Luther King Jr. (2012). *"A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings"*, p.13, Beacon Press

² Department for Education, (2013). *History programmes of study: key stages 1 and 2*

result the following potential areas of improvement were highlighted for targeting during any action research study within the phase including

- improving medium/long-term memory retention of children between topics of study and year groups
- developing children's ability to spot connections and links between historical periods and areas of study
- working on oracy and presentation skills in order to allow the children to articulate their learning with confidence
- It is with the above points in mind that the following research process was formulated.

Research Process

The research process was to encompass Year 6, Year 5 and Year 4 classes with one serving as the research focus and its partner as a control group.

Memory:

To develop the ability of the children to retain key information over the medium/long-term, teaching would pay particular focus to establishing emotive connections between children and historical events, objects and key individuals. Questioning, role play, debate and 'lived' experiences were specifically designed to elicit a variety of unique and empathetic emotional responses and serve as a platform for the understanding of historical events within their particular historical context. Children were encouraged to analyse their own emotional responses and justify them utilising a variety of sources.

Substantial evidence has established that emotional events are remembered more clearly, accurately and for longer periods of time than are neutral events. Emotional memory enhancement appears to involve the integration of cognitive and emotional neural networks, in which activation of the amygdala enhances the processing of emotionally arousing stimuli while also modulating enhanced memory consolidation along with other memory-related brain regions.³

Making connections:

Questioning for the first and last lesson of every unit was specifically designed to incorporate a discussion of previous learning, with the intention of identifying potential links, similarities and differences. When used, artefacts and primary sources were compared to their modern or past equivalents. A study of specific characters would include discussing other figures with similar motives or accomplishments.

Furthermore, pupils were also encouraged to add a short paragraph to their end of unit evaluations which specifically sought to make connections to and uncover similarities between previously studied periods. This could focus on the role of individuals, specific events or the experiences of entire groups such as children.

Oracy:

Final lessons of each topic were to be split between end of unit evaluations and subsequent small group presentations, during which the children were encouraged to use only physical objects (artefacts) or images as aids to recounting the learning and skills learnt in a particular lesson. The lack of notes encouraged a reliance on memory and spontaneous oracy, with images and objects to serve as the only prompts.

The association between these images and objects would act as a further linchpin in the development of medium/long-term memory:

A large body of research indicates that visual cues help us to better retrieve and remember information... Words are abstract and rather difficult for the brain to retain, whereas visuals are concrete and, as such, more easily remembered...Based upon research outcomes, the effective use of visuals can decrease learning time, improve comprehension, enhance retrieval, and increase retention.⁴

It was hoped that with each subsequent presentation, children would become increasingly effective at verbalising their learning with the minimum of prompting, utilising technical vocabulary associated with an image or item on display.

³The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory, (2017) in *Frontiers of Psychology Journal*, accessed at <https://dx.doi.org/10.3389%2Ffpsyg.2017.01454>

⁴Haig Kouyoumdjian, (2012) Learning Through Visuals - Visual imagery in the classroom in *Psychology Today*, accessed at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/get-psyched/201207/learning-through-visuals>

Findings

'Emotive' learning and its impact on memory

Feel something. Humans remember strong emotions. Try to make yourself feel a certain way while thinking about the thing you're trying to remember. Humour is often the best way to do this (for example, thinking of a silly image related to a word you're trying to memorize).⁵

Whilst this an idea that can be applicable to many subjects, it lends itself particularly well to humanities and especially history; here areas of study are full of emotive human stories, which can have a profound effect on children if they are introduced and delivered in a meaningful way. In order to achieve this, it is important that teachers have the confidence to do their own research and occasionally look beyond the available planning and find events, stories and characters that - whilst still linked to the desired curriculum knowledge and key skills - have a more direct, relatable and profound impact upon the children and lead to lasting memories of the subject matter. A good example of this has been the introduction of the story of Wojtek the bear to the Year 6 World War II curriculum in the past two years. In a historical period full of tragedy and profound moral lessons (which in themselves have been excellent to create strong feelings of empathy and reflective engagement from the children), Wojtek's story had caught the pupils imagination and provided an inspiring, hilarious, surprising and welcome strand of levity onto which the children have latched onto virtually unanimously. The image of a beer drinking, saluting, wrestling and cigarette eating bear helping in the fight against Nazi Germany, has been one which the children have retained months after being introduced to the story. More importantly, it has helped them to retain the knowledge and information of the broader historical narrative.

The more [emotional] cues that were present during learning that are also [recalled] during remembering... the more likely it is that the memory will occur.⁶

There are limitless other examples - also applicable to other areas of humanities - where empathy, humour, sadness, shock, anger and a whole host of other human emotions can be utilised to help children retain information, reflect, analyse and utilise key skills. The stories and images of Japanese pupils caught in the earthquake and tsunami of 2004 have been particularly well used in the past, as has the case study of the terrible effects of Chernobyl in relation to the study of sustainability. Moving forward as a phase, school and organisation, we should encourage our teachers to use their initiative and seek out those emotive and thought provoking strands, which they themselves would have been excited and engaged by as children. Ones which will leave a purposeful, lasting and meaningful impact on the pupils they teach.

Make connections. If you have to remember a collection of facts, it is far more effective to teach yourself how they relate to one another rather than simply memorizing.

The old cliché that history is cyclical is oft overused, misunderstood or misinterpreted. Nevertheless for the purposes of a basic historical understanding of history and pupils' appreciation of chronological events, it is a good starting point on which to begin helping children make links and connections between various studied time periods. Additionally, it is a useful memory aid to be able to categorise periods into their respective protagonists, villains, tragedies, successes, achievements etc. The key to do this is well planned, open ended questioning which challenges pupil ability to make those links themselves. By actively encouraging children to categorise, compare, seek differences and similarities, find motivations and consequences behind historical event a broader understanding of history is attained into which children can dip in and out of to justify their understanding of both the past and the modern world in which they live.

Conclusion

Whilst the unfortunate circumstances of this year have precluded the collection of enough hard data from which to draw conclusions based on our own pupils, the initial feedback from teachers has suggested that an approach which aimed to link emotions, experiences and images to long term memory as well as making a concerted attempt to provide a purposeful, pupil led exploration of links and connections to topics previously studied was a sound one. Additional focus on 'spontaneous' oracy in the form of presentations prompted

⁵ How memories are made: Stages of memory formation, (2018) in *Lesley University Article*, accessed at: <https://lesley.edu/article/stages-of-memory>

⁶ Joseph Ledoux, (1999), *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, p.23

solely by objects and images further helped to solidify and consolidate understanding, whilst promoting confident speaking and the use of technical, subject specific vocabulary.

Looking ahead, I hope to see the following ideas considered and implemented in the teaching of history and humanities in general:

- Teachers should be encouraged to widen their subject knowledge and seek out particularly effective themes with which their pupils can make real emotional connections and empathise with the subject matter. Providing children with relatable yet awe inspiring content will go a long way towards long term retention of subject matter.
- Carefully planned and effectively utilised questioning should be used to draw out links, comparisons and connections from pupils at every opportunity, but particularly with reference to the first and last lesson of a unit of study. Furthermore, the end of unit evaluation is an excellent opportunity for children to make links and draw comparisons to previous topics in addition to showing their understanding of the most recent learning.
- Children should be given regular opportunities to present their learning orally without reference to notes - instead utilising images, objects, artefacts or diagrams as prompts, thereby improving both memory and ability to articulate themselves effectively using key vocabulary.

References

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