

Active learners:

classroom strategies for enhancing history teaching

Lindsey Rawes

Lindsey Rawes has provided a range of activities which she uses with children to engage them in developing their historical knowledge and understanding. She has included retrieval practice, engaging children as detectives when looking at artefacts, and evaluating the understanding of historical questions through card sorts, considering similarities and differences, and using true and false statements. Each of her approaches is exemplified through reference to specific historical contexts and sources.

Using practical activities in history lessons is a great way of getting all pupils involved and engaged. Such activities, where children are physically doing, moving, and talking, also consolidate children's understanding of key historical concepts and knowledge. In this article, I will outline some practical examples of activities and games that I have used to enhance history lessons and will discuss the impact these have had on my pupils' historical understanding.

Retrieval practice

Retrieval practice tasks can really help in building up children's substantive knowledge. History is, of course, not just about getting pupils to reiterate a list of dates and facts but there is still a certain amount of knowledge and concepts we want pupils to recall: for example, the most important dates, key events, people, and the big ideas from a period. One task that my pupils have particularly enjoyed is the use of retrieval practice grids: working in pairs, children used mini-whiteboards to answer a set of questions on a

Figure 1: Retrieval practice grid

Learning from further back	Learning from last session/week	Learning from two weeks ago
Learning from two weeks ago	Learning from further back	Learning from last session/week
Learning from last session/week	Learning from two weeks ago	Learning from further back

3 Points 2 Points 1 Point

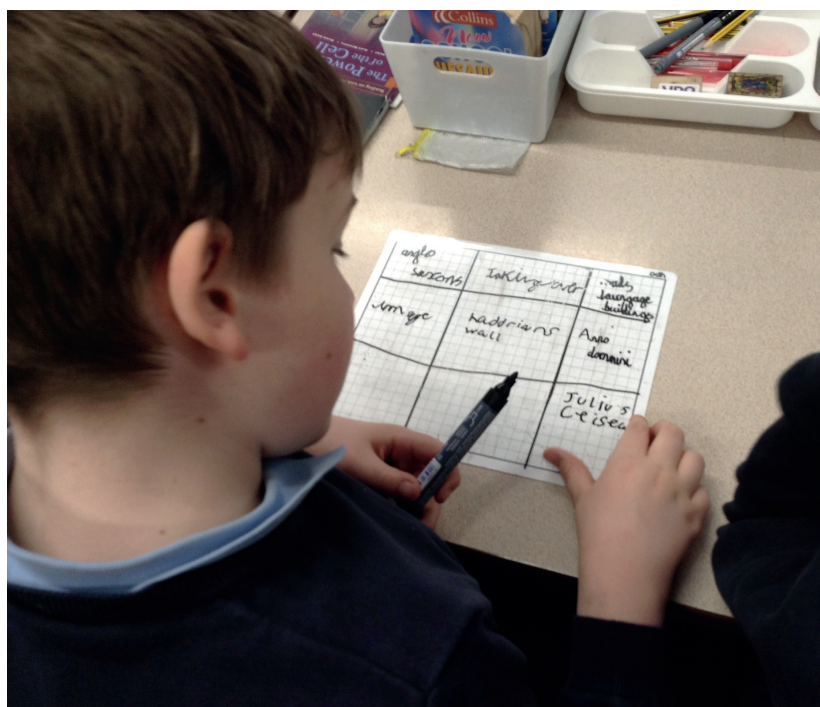
given period within a time limit of five minutes at the start of lessons. They earned different amounts of points for each question, depending on how long ago the learning was taught (Figures 1 and 2).

This starter really engaged pupils as the emphasis was on discussion with a partner and involved a bit of friendly competition between pairs. The more we did this activity, the more I found that pupils were better able to recall what they had learnt, accumulating more knowledge and being about to talk articulately about key historical vocabulary and substantive

Figure 2: Retrieval practice grid – Roman Britain

Why did the Romans decide to leave Britain in AD 410?	What does the word 'invasion' mean?	Name three positive things the Romans did in Britain.
Name another civilisation who were alive at the same time as the Romans?	Name the wall the Romans built to defend Britain from the Picts.	What does AD mean?
What is the Romans army's 'testudo' formation called in English? Why was it so successful in battles?	What was the name of the tribe led by Queen Boudicca?	Which Roman leader first tried to invade Britain?

3 Points
 2 Points
 1 Point



concepts. Some of them were even able to apply their knowledge at the end of the unit to construct their own grids and test each other.

It is crucial that this doesn't just become an activity in regurgitating lots of useless facts or a 'pub quiz' activity with information that won't help children (yes, knowing that Romans used a sponge on a stick when they went to the toilet is a fun fact, but it probably isn't the most important take-away about that period). When choosing questions for retrieval practice grids, it is important to think about the main substantive facts we want pupils to recall as well as second order concepts and vocabulary that would be beneficial to include. Concepts, such as government, democracy, society etc., need to build up cumulatively throughout pupils' history journey and be revisited regularly. Questions should be progressive and build on information and vocabulary already covered as well as relevant material linked to prior learning in previous units of history.

This activity is also a great opportunity to make links to other periods studied, by introducing questions about periods they have studied early in the year or in previous years. It is also a way to see which information or vocabulary pupils are finding difficult remember and as a way of making a quick assessment of pupils' substantive knowledge; during lessons, I was able to respond to aspects of learning pupils had misunderstood and to address these within the same session.

Artefact detectives

In this activity, pupils become 'detectives', using clues from the artefact to reason and construct a valid argument about the evidence in front of them and thereby develop their enquiry skills (Figures 3 and 4). It is important not to overwhelm pupils with lots of artefacts and choose just one they can focus on in detail. Pupils also need to have some context of the period – there is no point in showing pupils a Roman artefact if they have no pre-existing knowledge of the period and its society; as such artefacts should be

Figure 3: Late neolithic or early Bronze Age axe/hammer



You have three minutes...

What do you think this object was used for?

Who do you think owned it?

Where do you think it might have been found?

What period might it be from?

What questions do you have about this artefact?

Figure 4: The Alfred Jewel



You have three minutes...

What do you think this object was used for?

Who do you think owned it?

Where do you think it might have been found?

What period might it be from?

What questions do you have about this artefact?

earlier in the sequence of lessons. One even mentioned that this was the same as in our class novel, *Goodnight Mr Tom*, where an evacuee child carries a teddy bear.

I then gave the pupils some context: I provided them with the name of the sculpture and explained that it is in Liverpool Street Station, London. I also posed some further questions: Why did they think the statue might be here? Did that fit in with their initial ideas? Why do you think it is called 'The Arrival'? Is there anything else you can see that will help you? Some pupils suggested that the sculpture couldn't be of evacuees because they had been sent to the countryside (they already knew that London was heavily bombed in the Blitz) and one child noticed that the plaques at the side of the sculptures had the names of European cities on them and suggested they were refugees from another country. One boy had some prior knowledge about Jewish children in the war and correctly linked these ideas to the *Kindertransport*. This synthesised pupils' existing knowledge and got them to re-evaluate their hypotheses when new information was provided. It also led to an interesting discussion where pupils linked the image to modern refugees. I only then revealed the context of the statue and gave pupils information about what it was. This ten-minute task then led into the main content of the lesson all about the *Kindertransport*.

Figure 5: Kindertransport sculpture



Examples of question prompts:

What can I see?

Why was this artefact produced? Why was it made?

What does this artefact tell me?

What do I need to find out?

Same... different

This starter (Figure 6) is great for developing pupils' understanding of similarity and difference. It could be particularly useful for Key Stage 1 where similarity and difference between objects from the present and past is an integral part of learning (comparing toys or transport for example, which could be a longer task at this age). In Key Stage 2, I have used this activity to draw contrasts between different time periods.

chosen carefully and can be a great way of introducing a lesson (for example the sceptre from the Sutton Hoo hoard would be a great segue into a lesson about Anglo-Saxon society).

During a unit on World War II, I gave pupils an image of the sculpture 'The Arrival' by Frank Meisler (Figure 5). Pupils had five minutes to discuss it in small groups using a set of question prompts; once more, the emphasis was on discussion. Pupils noticed that the children were all carrying cases, had labels attached to their clothing and that there were railway tracks behind them. They also noticed that one child was holding a teddy bear. By this point, most pupils were convinced that the children were evacuees and were able to link this to prior knowledge from a session

Another question which can be posed is 'Which do you think is the best?' Pupils must justify their explanations based on the evidence they have and this can lead to some interesting debates between pupils. It is also an effective way of introducing new information. For instance, at the start of a lesson about Anglo-Saxon homes I got pupils to compare a picture of a reconstructed Anglo-Saxon house with an image of a Roman house (an aspect of Roman society they had already studied in Year 4) as a starter task. There were a variety of opinions; many children said they thought Roman homes were better and justified their answers by saying Roman homes were built from stronger materials and had running water, central heating

Figure 6: Roman and Anglo-Saxon houses

Same... different



With your partner, list on your whiteboard as many things that are the same and as many things that are different about these houses.

Which is better? Explain your reasons!

and were better decorated. We then used the main part of the lesson to find out if Roman homes really were better than Anglo-Saxon ones using a range of sources. At the end of the lesson, we returned to the initial question about which was the best; pupils had more evidence to support their claims at this point and, interestingly, some changed their opinions, supporting their new argument with solid evidence.

Diamond Nine

Diamond Nine grids can be a great tool to get pupils to explain and justify their arguments with evidence. Children are given a diamond grid and set of nine cards with statements about an event or an individual from the past. The children then work in teams and must rank the statements from the most to least important. This task needs to be done after pupils have gained some knowledge about a topic, as the whole idea of it is to provide a reasoned case for their answers.

During a unit on the Anglo-Saxons, I gave pupils a set of cards (Figure 7) about Alfred the Great and asked them to order the statements about his achievements. There was lots of lively discussion in each group between pupils who wanted to change the order of the cards, some arguing that his work translating books was his greatest feat while others said it was his victory at Edington. The children were able to talk eloquently about their opinions; one said that the works he had translated still have an impact today. During this part of the lesson no writing was done but when the children had to record a short written response they were able to do so much more confidently.

This task is particularly good for getting children to consider the concepts of legacy, impact, and significance. It could be done with Key Stage 1, focusing on various significant individuals but would work equally well in Key Stage 2 to consider the legacy of the various societies, where older pupils often give sophisticated answers for their choices.

Figure 7: How would you order Alfred the Great's achievements?

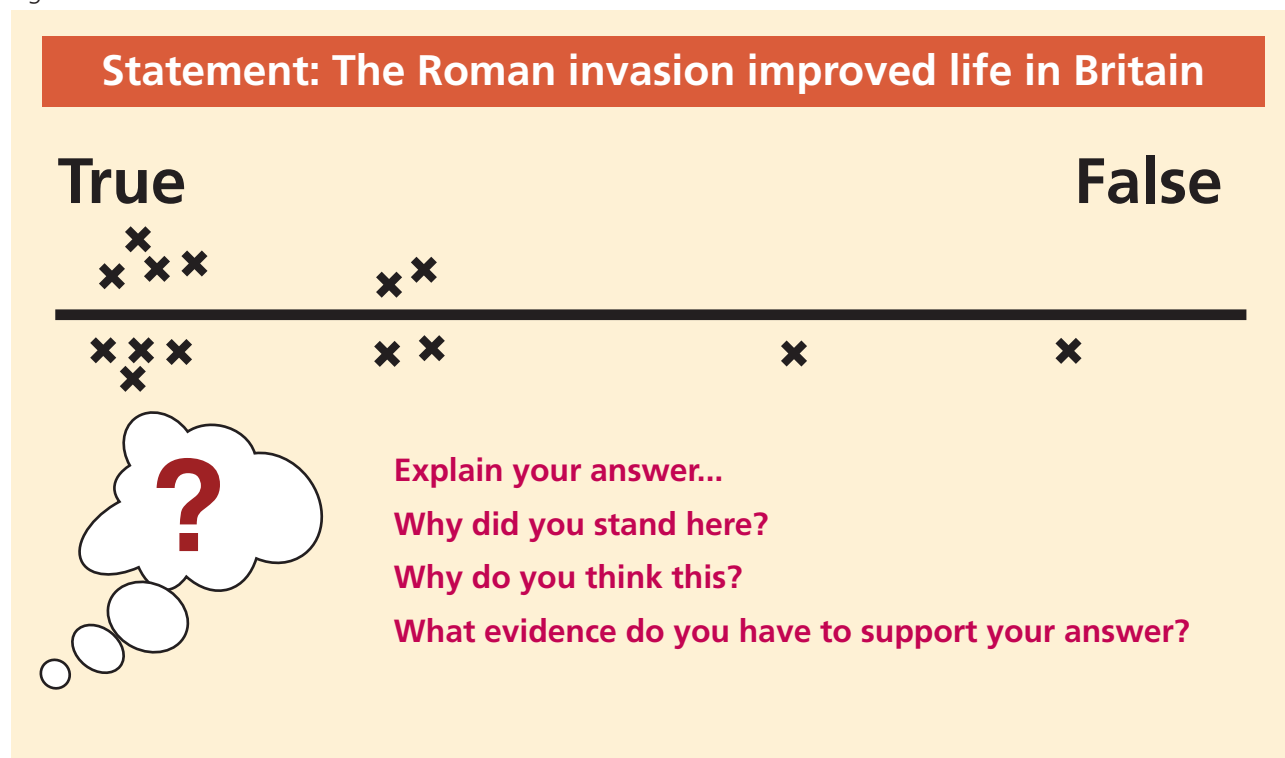
Alfred defeated the Viking army at the battle of Edington.	Alfred built fortresses across Wessex to defend his kingdom.	Alfred united his own kingdom and others through marriage.
Alfred had Latin documents and books translated into Anglo-Saxon.	Alfred signed the Treaty of Wedmore with Guthrun and brought peace to England.	Alfred introduced new laws to make his kingdom more stable.
Alfred negotiated a land settlement called Danelaw where the Vikings could live.	Alfred had more coins minted and the economy grew.	Alfred was a good leader and fighter. He learnt how to defeat the Vikings by studying their tactics.

True or false?

This last game is something that can be used at the end of lessons to assess what pupils have understood. I've also used it as a starter at the beginning of lessons where pupils have some prior knowledge of a period and have returned to the statement at the end of the session or a couple of sessions after the pupils have gained more insight and knowledge.

First, I set up the classroom with two cards at each end which say 'True' or 'False' (this could also be done out on the playground or in the school hall) (Figure 8). If you can find or draw a line on the ground with masking tape or chalk, this is even better as this gives pupil a spectrum where they can stand to show their opinion. I then give pupils a very one-sided statement, about which they must decide whether it is true or false based on their learning.

Figure 8:



Example statements:

The Roman invasion improved life in Britain.
World War II didn't have any positive impact.
Vikings were vicious raiders.
Ancient Egyptian society was more advanced than Stone Age Britain.
Henry VIII was a great monarch.

At first, many views will be very polarised, and pupils will go to either end of the spectrum. However, part of this game is to get pupils to explain why they stood in a certain position and to develop their reasoning. For instance, when I asked my class to decide whether World War II had no positive impact many stood at the true card focusing on the deaths involved, bombing and the Holocaust. However, a few pupils stood further along the line towards the middle. When I questioned them, they explained that they thought there were some positives as the war helped women become more independent and some evacuees had better lives in the country. I then asked all pupils to discuss their choice with a partner before repeating the exercise, allowing them to change their position if they so wished. This time, more pupils stood further along the line and when questioned gave more thoughtful answers.

I found this an effective way of assessing pupils' understanding visually and through their responses to my questions. It also is a way of getting pupils to comprehend that there is often no one simplistic answer to historical questions and to think about

historical interpretations. Once more, I found that, when pupils were asked to write a short answer based on our initial enquiry question, they were able to articulate this much better in writing because they had had discussed and debated their ideas together.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found that these short, interactive strategies engaged pupils in learning whatever their ability. They also helped them to retain more about what they had learnt, gave them more confidence using historical terms and language and made lessons more fun and memorable.

References

- Fines, J. (2012) 'Oracy and writing: speaking, listening, discussion and debate' in *Primary History*, 60, pp. 36–38.
- Rigby, K. (2022) 'Back to basics: using artefacts in the classroom' in *Primary History*, 90, pp. 40–42.
- Rudham, R. (2001) 'A noisy classroom is a thinking classroom: speaking and listening in Year 7 history' in *Teaching History*, 105, pp. 35–40.
- Vella, Y. (2005) 'Promoting talk during history lessons' in *Primary History*, 40, pp. 24–27.

Textbook

- Horrie, C. and Hillman, R. (2019) *100 Ideas for Primary Teachers: History*, London: Bloomsbury.

Lindsey Rawes is History Lead and a Key Stage 2 Teacher at Normanton Common Primary Academy, West Yorkshire. She is also a Chartered Teacher of History.