

What confuses primary children in history and what can we do about it?

Tim Lomas

Young children who automatically see shiny things as new no matter what their age, those who mix up technology from one age with another, those who dismiss people in the past as stupid because they did not have the possessions we have today, those who equate the age of a pictorial image with the age of the people within it. All these are relatively common misconceptions which children have.

This is not an article about 'historical howlers' but a serious look at some of these misconceptions. While it may be amusing to look at some of the common ones, there is a serious point behind it. Without being aware of them, pupils are likely to repeat them and, in doing so, have a distorted grasp of history. Teachers need both to be aware and to devise teaching strategies to challenge and amend them.

Good teaching cannot exist unless one is aware of the likely problems that pupils have when learning history. Without this awareness, they are likely to continue to operate in a confused world and repeat errors. Surface impressions can often mask considerable gaps in real understanding, something only remedied by close and worthwhile questioning. Questions can so often flatter to deceive.

The article focuses not just on misconceptions but on perceptions and lack of awareness. It begins by outlining some of these and then goes on to consider how teachers might help address them. They might include:

What are the signs? Confused chronology/anachronism and no sense of duration

What you might see:

- children drawing images such as modern technology in scenes of ancient times;
- mixing artefacts from different periods;
- confusing things a long time ago with more recent ones – having little idea really of whether something was a long time ago or more recent.

Alan Hodgkinson referred to a child asking a class question – if Cleopatra had not been bitten by the asp, would she still be alive today?

- having no grasp that some things lasted a long time and others were more recent – perhaps not surprisingly many will struggle to see the huge lengths of time occupied by the Stone and Bronze Ages;
- unable to make any links between the different history they have covered. History in primary schools is often taught in blocks – partly a symptom of the National Curriculum being divided into study units or areas of study. This may make history understandable, interesting and manageable. The downside is that pupils tend to see history as episodic, divided into blocks with few links between them. Many primary children thus see their history in a tunnel-visioned way;
- huge problems with the mathematical dimension of time, i.e. abbreviations such as AD (CE) and BC (BCE).

Confusion and simplicity with why things happened and what were the results and why people in the past acted as they did

What you might see:

- being content with a single reason for an event;
- the reasons for an event are just a list of unconnected factors;
- not being able to see that some reasons for things and results may have been more important than others;
- believing things were bound to happen in the way they did – i.e. the result was inevitable and could not have turned out differently;
- a judgemental and simple way of looking at why people did things – often they were 'stupid';
- lacking a grasp of what makes humans tick. Perhaps not surprisingly, pupils have a limited chronological experience of life so their grasp of the human situation can be very restricted. They find

it difficult to understand people not just because they lived a long time ago but also because their lifestyles were so different and they were adults. The outcome is that pupils often see people in the past as amusing, brutal and inferior as well as two-dimensional. The end result can be a lack of care and respect.

- Stereotypical views of people in the past and historical situations. It may well be that different types of people are lumped into a single category sharing common characteristics. This can apply to groups such as old people, black people, women and various countries.

Misunderstanding sources and finding difficulty with historical investigations

What you might see:

- seeing sources just as a way of gathering information – accepting them at face value;
- alternatively dismissing sources altogether and not seeing how they can be used to answer history questions – adopting a totally defeatist attitude;
- having a simplified view of what sources are. Pupils often do not see a source in its original context so get a simplified and distorted view as they have been adapted to make classroom use easier. Many pupils never realise that sources were often long, convoluted and with many irrelevancies with regard to their particular enquiry.
- having difficulty carrying out a useful historical investigation – often resorting to much copying and uncritical description rather than showing any higher-order skills.
- not seeing that sources can show that there are different valid ways of looking at things. If there are different viewpoints, many pupils believe that only one can be right and the rest must be wrong.
- confusing a real source with a reconstruction even one that reconstructs a different event.

What can we do about it?

Clearly there is no quick universal answer and many of these challenges will be addressed by consistent good teaching and effective learning. As a starting point, it might be worth taking note of the following:

1. A major reason why pupils become confused is simply that they lack historical knowledge. While throwing out masses of content is hardly a panacea, it is important that pupils have access to enough historical material about themes, individuals and situations. Without adequate historical knowledge, pupils will always find it difficult to assess the importance of things since they have too few reference points. **So the first requirement is sufficient time for the subject.**
2. Even with enough content, it can easily become a

forgotten blur of masses of facts with proper tasks and questions. One way of improving learning is for **children to be encouraged to see links and connections between what they are doing and what they have covered previously.** Tasks that ask them to make links, to compare and detect similarities and differences can also prove effective. This ultimately helps them decide whether some particular event was unusual or typical.

3. Carefully choose the content so that it invites contrasts and provides interest. All valid history falls at the first hurdle if the teaching does not **build in enough interesting and varied content so that the children can establish a chronology, identify the key events, people, changes and developments and how and why things turned out as they did.** Checking that planning allows this to happen is a positive step to avoiding confusion.
4. While not a task solely for history, adding any **general knowledge** helps historical understanding, e.g. the human situation through reading, a sense of place through geography, historical inventions through science and technology. The teacher cannot cover everything. Stimulating pupils' curiosity and interest especially through reading is a key way of reducing historical misunderstanding and broadening historical awareness.
5. An awareness of the **key historical concepts** and building these into planning so that they are developed and revisited. The National Curriculum draws attention to some of the key concepts to aid historical understanding such as cause and consequence, change and continuity, significance, the use of evidence and interpretations. It is vital that these are developed in a progressive way by focused tasks and questions. Pupils understand, for example, that various causes often contribute to an event or historical situation, that sources need to be used carefully when answering a historical question, that ideally sources should be checked against other sources, that people, events and countries can be represented and seen in a range of valid ways. Targeted questions are vital rather than general tasks such as 'investigate what life was like in Roman Britain' or 'imagine the local town 100 years ago'. Such general tasks can mask confusion and misinterpretation – often hidden by extensive copying and plagiarism from books and internet.
6. Having an awareness of progression. All those teaching history should have **some awareness of what it means to get better at history** in terms of historical knowledge and understanding (a good example is the Rising Stars Progression Framework). It means ascertaining that pupils have good content knowledge. This sometimes

Some examples of tasks that help address misunderstanding and confusion

Activity 1:

This is a reconstruction in a modern source about the Roman invasion of Britain. Half the class could be shown this image for a short period of time – say 30 seconds. The other half do not see it. Then working in pairs, the observers have to describe to the non-observers what is happening. The non-observers then draw or describe the scene and the events depicted.

Why does this help deal with misconceptions?

This can help pupils understand that sources and interpretations are not always reliable. The class will recall different features showing that sources do not always provide universal truths – even eyewitnesses.

Taken from: <http://history.parkfieldict.co.uk/romans/roman-invasions>

Activity 2:

Pupils can look at houses from two different periods in the past – in this case Ancient Greece and Egypt. They could be asked to make inferences, e.g. Who might have lived in houses like this? What are the similarities and differences? What does this tell us about life at the time? Imagine a day in the life etc.

Why does this help deal with misconceptions?

It can help address four particular misconceptions. First, that a particular historical situation or concept was not identical in the past. In the past everyday terms such as government, ruler, village and house had different meanings. Pupils need to build up a database to help broaden their understanding. Second, it helps shatter the myth that people in the past were inferior, stupid and incapable. Third, although the evidence may not be complete we can make some sensible deductions about what it was like to live in the past. Last, by comparing two societies it shows that we can make links between different societies rather than depict the past as separate episodes unconnected to each other.

Activity 3:

Pupils at any key stage can look at an image of a local scene like this and be asked to interpret what they see. Then ideally ask them to link to a now-and-then question – e.g. What would a person going back in a time machine to this period notice most? Alternatively what can work as well is the other way around – what would a person from this scene most notice if they were transported to this same street today?

Why does this help deal with misconceptions?

It helps address a historical concept – change, similarity and difference. Above all it helps children understand that there is a link between past and present rather than seeing the past as something done and dusted. It can help build up a wider three-dimensional database of the past and help enhance their local knowledge. It might also help them to understand that different people might identify different things that they see as significant.

<http://history.powys.org.uk/school1/welshpool/broad.shtml>

Activity 4:

Here children can be given two sources, in this instances about mill-workers in Victorian times. The first is by a Mr Gaskell.

'Any man who has stood near where workers leave the cotton mills would have to admit it would be impossible to spot an uglier set of men or women or boys and girls. Their complexion is sallow and pale and their features flat. They are very small with the average height of 400 men being only 5 foot 6 inches. Many of them have bow legs. A great many women and girls are lame or walk awkwardly. Nearly all have flat feet. Their hair is thin and straight. The men often have a patchy beard. They look sad and dejected and they sprawl around.'

The second extract is by a Mr Ure.

'Some of you may not believe me when I say I have never seen such pleasant faces and fine figures. Those working for Mr Ashton in his weaving factory walk tall and stand up straight. Many of them are very neat and wear neat handkerchiefs on their heads. Many of them are very beautiful.'

Pupils can be asked what the main differences are. They could be asked to draw a picture of a mill-worker from these accounts – half based on one account and half on the other. They could then be asked to think of reasons why there might be differences and asked whether they believe one more than the other. They could also be asked how they might like to check these sources.

Why does this help deal with misconceptions?

The main issue here is two very depictions of the same historical situation. It can help pupils understand that there can be two or more valid depictions and it does not necessarily mean that one is wrong. There may be reasons for the differences, e.g. showing that there could be variation and not one stereotypical picture. They also need to know that the best way to address these differences is to do some further probing. That is what historians do – look for further evidence to cross-check and see whether one is more typical than the other or find out a bit more about the authors to see whether they have any reasons for distorting things.

means testing recall – even if this seems unfashionable. It means returning to test memory of previous topics so that the wider picture can be established. It means testing the same concepts in a range of different contexts. So often teachers have fallen into the trap of believing a pupil or class has grasped something when they have demonstrated it once. The evidence suggests that real understanding is only gained from reapplying and embedding this understanding in different contexts such as different topics.

- Introducing some **historical vocabulary with different meanings** over time to show that there is no one stereotypical view, e.g. family, home, transport, princess, king, weapon, village life, religion.
- Focusing on **higher-order thinking** in history. Pupils sometimes have excellent avoidance tactics in higher-order thinking. They can be content with surface and limited answers. They need to understand and to demonstrate that the best history answers are not simple ones such as one cause and one effect or one view about a person but instead we need them to recognise the uncertainty of their answers – something they should certainly be grasping by the later primary years.
- Checking that **the pupils understand what they have to do**. Conventionally good history uses many different command words in its question – hopefully far more than 'what'. Misconceptions and misinterpretations could well be less extensive if teachers check that pupils do grasp the meaning

of words such as **compare and contrast, compose, comment on, have a debate, define, describe, discuss, explain, establish, give an account, how, how far, how reliable, how different, how similar, how useful, interpret, investigate, list, outline, prove, recall, review, state, summarise, to what extent, what**.

- Think of ways we can check that they have fully grasped something, that it is embedded and secure. It means specifically assessing some of these areas of misunderstanding and then re-checking later with different content. Some examples are provided above.

Conclusion

This article has not tried to cover all of the misconceptions and misunderstandings that might occur in the primary history classroom – just some of the more common ones. Addressing these misunderstandings is part and parcel of the good teacher's repertoire. Rather than pupils being told they have got it wrong, often the best way is for the teacher to realise what has not been grasped but for them to then devise strategies so that the pupils improve their understanding almost without realising that they misunderstood in the first place.

Tim Lomas is Honorary Secretary of the Historical Association, a former principal education inspector and author as well as member of the Primary, Secondary and Branches Committees of the HA as well as the *Primary History* editorial board.