Getting to grips with concepts in primary history

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Perhaps one of the most perplexing aspects of teaching history is the fostering of conceptual understanding. History subject leaders often find this a challenging issue. Even if they have a decent grasp themselves, it can be difficult for others in the school who have to teach the subject.

Over recent years, the pages of this journal have often addressed the teaching of different concepts but that might still leave unanswered questions. This article focuses on a number of questions related to what is often known as 'second-order' concepts.

1. What are some of the key 'second-order concepts'?
2. What key ideas should we be getting over to the pupils which need frequent reinforcement?
3. How can they be taught in a meaningful way to pupils, reflecting their ages and abilities?
4. Are there some good teaching examples that illustrate some of the points made?

The key concepts relevant to primary pupils

Although there is some discussion about what exactly form the main concepts, many agree that they include the following:

- **time, change, chronology** – to create a sense of period and time, the sequence of when things happened, what changed and what continued, what we might see as progress.
- **reasons and results** – how can we explain why things happened in history, how did people make a difference to what happened? What followed as a result of these?
- **interpretations** – how and why does the way that history is produced differ? Do we all understand the past in exactly the same way? How do we show what the past was like?
- **historical evidence** – what do we use to find out about the past? How can we use this material safely to produce the best history we can? What are the problems when using historical sources?
- **significance** – how do choose what is most important in history as we cannot use everything?

Why bother with these concepts?

Together they can be said to cover what 'history' is about, without the content. They can give structure to all the separate facts and pieces of information that make up the past. Without some way of planning and organising our history teaching, we could end up with a load of separate facts and little real understanding of why things happened, what changed, how we produce history and what we might consider is really important. The concepts can help us see what ideas we want pupils to grasp and can help us plan the tasks and questions we want.

What is vital, however, is the recognition that a concept is not a 'one off' – taught for one topic and then left. If the concepts are so vital, they need to be planned for and taught time and time again. The understanding needs to be reinforced through different content. The concepts can also be understood at different levels and so they need to be covered in a progressive way.

This article attempts to address this issue, by looking at what key ideas underpin the concepts – encountered first in foundation or Key Stage 1 and then further developed in Key Stage 2. Nor does it end there – they will be further developed in Key Stage 3 and beyond. The progression is not just age-related as some pupils may have a conceptual grasp that is better or less than the expectations for their key stage.

Concepts can seem academic and divorced from the excitement of history. They should not be seen this way. It is important that they are not taught in an arid way divorced from real historical content but they are seen as a way of organising the vast amount of historical content there is to cover and making it manageable.

It is also crucial that teachers do not adopt a mechanical approach. A curriculum organised by concepts would almost certainly not work well. Nor might one that just covers one concept at a time. Sometimes that may be needed but at other times several may be covered together in an integrated way. For example, when explaining an event there may well be coverage of some or all of the concepts listed above.

What are these ideas that the concepts represent? It might be reasonable to expect that pupils in Key Stage 1 might understand the following main ideas. Some seem obvious but unless one stresses these ideas time and time again they can easily be ignored.

1. A world existed before they and those around them were born but their world today is connected to the past.
2. All people in the past did not live at the same time.
3. The past can be described in different ways – old, new, today, yesterday, last year, days of the week, years, once upon a time, long ago, past/present, before/after, when I was little etc., as well as some period labels.
4. Many things in the past have changed (and are still changing) but some things are the same.
5. People in the past were real people, had feelings like real people and usually did things for a reason.
6. Events usually happen for a reason (sometimes more than one reason).
7. People in the past did not know the same as we do today but they were not really more stupid.
8. Not everyone in the past thought the same.
9. People in the past did not always think that the same things were as important in their lives as you do today.
10. Things did not always turn out as planned.
11. We can tell different stories about the same history.
12. We find out about the past from different sorts of evidence/clues that come from that particular time.
13. We can show the past in different ways such as pictures, writing, film, theme parks, museums, music and legends.
14. We never know everything that happened in the past.
15. We can disagree about what was happening in the past and it does not necessarily mean that some people are wrong.

These ideas continue into Key Stage 2 but many pupils will develop their understanding throughout the Key Stage 2 years, for instance:

1. A world existed before they and those around them were born – some things occurring many years ago before there were ways of writing about the past. Human time is only a small part of time.
2. The past can be described in different ways – dates, period labels, divisions such as decade, century etc.
3. The past was different from today: some things have changed (slowly or quickly) but some things are the same.
4. Change does not always mean progress. There can be 'bad/negative' changes. There are differences between change, progress and development.
5. People in the past had feelings and emotions and had reasons for their actions.
6. It is not always easy to work out why things happened and why people did or thought things.
7. Reasons and events usually lead to results (sometimes more than one) but things did not always turn out as planned.
8. People in the past did not know the same as we do today but they were not really more stupid. When things happened, it was often confusing and uncertain for people and they did not know how things would turn out.
9. We can put together a story/account about the past in different ways. It can be different if we use different information or have views about what is important. This does not mean that one version is right and another wrong.
10. Not all history has been fair to all people and groups. Sometimes this is deliberate and at other times accidental.
11. We find out about the past from different sorts of information/sources such as written, artefacts and pictures. Some parts of history have many sources but others have very few.
12. Different people help put together what happened in the past, such as historians, archaeologists, film makers, museum curators.
13. Not all the sources from the past can be trusted. We always need to be careful when using any evidence from the past, e.g. it can be inaccurate, incomplete, unfair. With care, however, we can make some use of all information – it always tells us something about the past.
14. It is often better when we can find more than one piece of information/source for our topic.
15. There is a difference between a source and evidence. The source is the information but it is you or the historian who uses it as evidence in your own way to answer your questions. A good historian can ask many questions about the sources they use.
16. We never know everything that happened in the past so it means that we have to work out things that are likely to have happened and that means giving opinions and ideas rather than definite facts.
17. Because we need to tell a clear story, we need to choose which bits to use and this means deciding what is important. Not all information is equally important.
18. We should care about what past people did. We should try to understand them without necessarily agreeing with them. Much of our lives today is because of what people in the past have done.

What sort of activities can pupils do that help develop this understanding of concepts in a progressive way?

These ideas are only examples but they do provide a range of activities for the five main concepts that can be used with pupils of different ages. A number of different examples are provided. After each section there is a specific task that links to that concept to illustrate the point.

1. Time, change, chronology

With younger children, make sure they **use and practise time words** such as 'once upon a time', 'long ago', 'now/then', 'past/present', 'before/after', 'new/old', 'when I was little', 'when my mum was young', 'today/tomorrow/yesterday'. Pupils can look for events that happen more than once in history, e.g. birthdays, anniversaries, festivals.

Older pupils can discuss how they measure time and what would happen if we did not measure it. How might we have measured time before clocks? They can also use an increasing range of period labels as they cover more themes such as Roman, Saxon, Ancient Egypt, and gradually have dates introduced including more complex terms such as BCE.

Sequencing activities with younger pupils can start with a limited range where there are obvious differences such as costumes and technology. They can be linked to time-points such as their grandparents or since they have been alive.

Older pupils can cope with more subtle and larger ranges of objects and can construct narratives possibly based on events. They are also likely to be able to sequence events and objects over a wider range of years.

Timelines and family trees. Younger children are likely to start with personal and family timelines, with progression occurring when the generations are extended backwards.

Older pupils can be introduced to dated timelines and even multiple timelines where, for example, local, national and global events are depicted together. They can also use different kinds of timelines such as time clocks, e.g. showing the typical day in the life of a past person, wavy timelines to show the uneven passage of time. Pupils can show more independence in researching issues to place on timelines or in comparing timelines.

Work on family trees might start with simple personal ones with a limited number of generations and siblings, moving on to more complex ones extending more generations and whole centuries.

Similarity, difference and change. At its simplest with the youngest pupils these activities ask for similarities and differences between two fixed points, e.g. two pictorial images for two different time periods. One of the comparisons might be today with another past period.

For older pupils, this can be extended to several time-points leading to discussion on the changes, what have been the main ones, why might they have happened, what we mean by 'progress' and whether they can explain this in what they are studying. They might consider who gained and who lost from the changes and developments. Different periods can be compared, with older pupils looking at changes, similarities and differences across more than two periods or societies. The oldest primary pupils might also consider how people at the time might have viewed the changes and whether this is different from how we might view the changes today.

Example 1: Developing the concept of similarity/difference and change. A Greek and Victorian shopping scene. What are the main differences and similarities between the two scenes? The concept can be dealt with progressively by adding to the number of scenes or by making the differences more subtle.









2. Reasons and results

Finding reasons and results. With younger pupils, this can simply involve finding a reason why something might have happened or who caused something to happen.

As pupils become more mature they can identify more than one cause for an event, then decide which of them is the most important giving their own views on why. The same could apply with results/consequences. They might also be able to read accounts and separate the causes from the events. Older pupils might be able to recognise some different types of cause, e.g. causes that built up over a long time, those caused by people, caused by other events, 'accidental'.

Linking reasons and results. Even some younger pupils might be able to see what was a reason for something, what the event was and what happened afterwards linked to the event.

There is much more opportunity for older and more able pupils. They might make some inferences. The teacher, for example, presents conditions or causes and the pupils could work out possible consequences which could then be compared to real outcomes. It is unlikely that all younger pupils might be able to see what people at the time may have felt was the cause of something, e.g. religious, magic etc. but this situation should improve as pupils become more familiar with historical events. Rather more taxing even for older primary pupils is to see whether they can understand how causes link with each other (pictures and diagrams are often useful here) and they might even be able to envisage how something might have turned out differently if one of the causes (e.g. a person, technological invention) had not been there. This might encourage some to ask whether something was bound to happen (inevitable) or whether the event actually solved things or created more problems.

Simulations, role play and drama can be used to explore events and their causes and outcomes, particularly offering insights into motivation. Use may be made of actual sites or re-enactments. Such activities often work more successfully if approached in the form of a problem to be solved, especially a dilemma, rather than a scene to be reconstructed. Pupils might be encouraged to consider peoples' (individuals and groups) choices they might have had as well as reactions to events, whether they could have anticipated what would actually happen. They might be better able to grasp that people may have acted differently to how they might today, partly as

a result of the circumstances and age in which they lived. Getting them to write diary entries or letters can be a really good way to get them to explore feelings, motivation and what was happening and why.

Example 2: From these two images of the Vikings, what might have happened to the people in the lands they travelled to? Pupils can deduce effects, e.g. plunder, trade, violence etc.

3. Interpretations

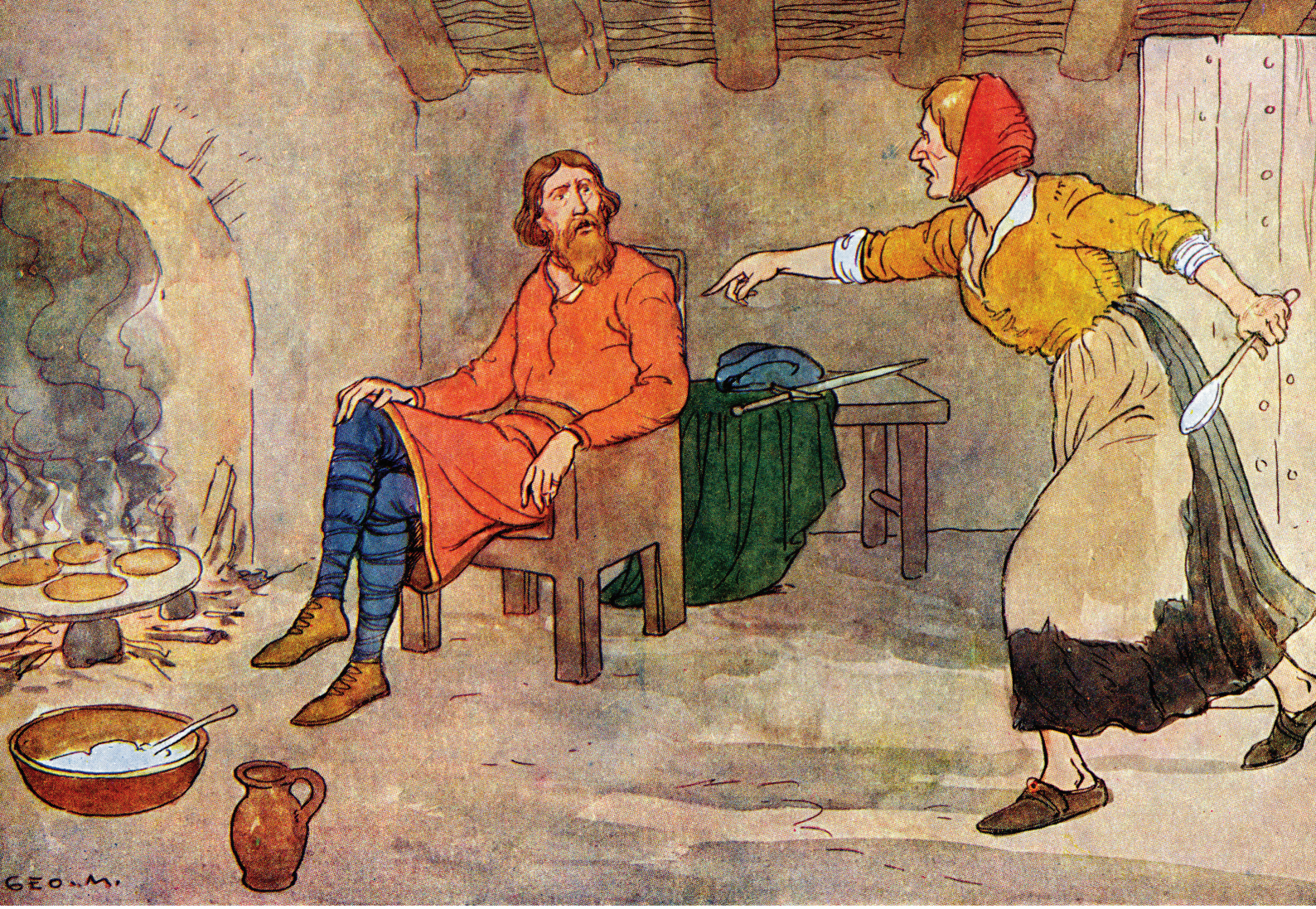
Detecting interpretations in history. Younger pupils may spot differences in small accounts such as events they have been involved with, a story or a visit. They will develop greater skill in this as they become older. Older pupils should also see differences between what might be a fact that most people agree with and an opinion.

Reconstructing their own history. The youngest pupils are likely to be able to piece together a few snippets to produce an historical scene or story. Older pupils can plan their own history, using evidence if necessary, to reflect a particular judgement, e.g. that X was best or most important. This might be a museum display for the classroom or an account of a person, country or event or an image or pageant or a summary. From it they might understand how and why there might be differing viewpoints about history. Different pupils in the class may be able to explain why they have represented or interpreted things in the way they have.

Work out the authors. This is more likely to be done by older pupils. From some accounts, pictures etc., they can use clues to work out something about the authors/producers, e.g. what they believed in, what evidence they may have had. They can consider how convincing they find the interpretations. They might also be able to devise their own questions which they would like to ask authors and artists to help understand their interpretations.

Example 3: This is someone's drawing of what they think the inside of an Iron Age house looked like. What message do you think they wanted to give? Are you convinced that this is a totally accurate picture of an Iron Age house? This could encourage pupils to think about how reconstructions are put together and why they might not always be completely factual.





Example 4: This is an image of Alfred burning the cakes. What do you think the artist was trying to show? How well do you think he/she does this? How do you know that this was not produced at the time of Alfred the Great? This example illustrates that images were often produced to reflect a particular story or viewpoint.

4. Historical evidence

Using sources together. For younger pupils, just extracting information from one source such as a picture or artefact may be enough but gradually the demand can be increased by asking pupils to use more than one source.

The demand can increase further when the sources become less obvious or relevant information has to be searched for in a more complex source. The oldest primary pupils may be asked to select from some sources that are useful and from others that have little or no use. The best work is that used as a natural part of an investigation, e.g. when sources have to be located and used to answer a specific historical question or produce an account such as an eyewitness report.

Getting inside a source. For younger pupils it may be enough to ask them what the source is and what it can tell us

This can lead to more demanding work where pupils consider issues such as what the gaps are, what can be trusted and what the intended message is. They might pose a set of questions they would like to ask about a source. They might also in later primary years be asked to delve into the mindset of the compiler/author – what type of person were they likely to be? It might be possible to miss out a part of a source and the pupils then try to work out what is missing. An alternative task might involve them adapting considerably the format of sources, e.g. write in first person, convert from a picture, write from another viewpoint or adapt for a different audience. They could ask questions to characters inside pictorial sources or consider how people may have reacted to the source at the time it was produced. Or a source may be divided up and they have to put it back together as it would have been in its complete form. One often enjoyable activity is to provide a 'faulty' summary of a source. Pupils can check this against the original to find the teacher's deliberate mistakes.

Creating their own sources. Pupils can create their own sources, gradually learning to depict them as they might be at the time and representing particular compilers' interests. It is invariably useful when the versions of different pupils are compared. They might also compile a different version or a fuller version, e.g. a picture of an artefact being used in its context or filling in a gap in a pictorial source.







Example 5: Poverty through the ages as part of a development study post 1066. What do you think the photographer is trying to show? Do you think he/she is on the side of those who are poor or does he have no sympathy for the poor? This encourages pupils to question a source – why was it produced – and shows them that even photographs need some evaluating.

Example 6: These are all artefacts from the Indus Valley civilisation. What do you think they are? What can you work out about their society? This allows pupils to see that one can make deductions about a society from surviving artefacts.

Example 7: From what we have learnt about the Ancient Egyptians so far, is there anything in this source that surprises you? This may allow children to see that sources can be used to alter possible preconceptions such as the role of women, Egyptians had leisure time, etc.



5. Significance

What seems important at the time and now? The youngest pupils might pick out one or two important bits from a story or say what is important in a picture or find out what their parents feel is important now and in the recent past.

As the pupils become older, they should develop some ability to say why particular bits are important. Role play can be an effective way to address this. Pupils might be able to suggest what different people at the time felt was important. The oldest primary pupils might understand that we might think something is of different importance to what those at the time thought – i.e. understanding that people could not always see the significance of something when it was occurring. Significant issues such as events or changes can be shown in different ways such as pictures, diagrams, lists, timelines, charts as well as writing. Summaries are a good way of seeing whether pupils understand what is most significant in a historical period or society. So is giving pupils lists and asking them to discuss and justify the order of importance. They might also improve their conceptual understanding by comparing the importance of two (or more) people or events or even two societies. An end-of-topic display can also encourage pupils to consider what is most significant about what they have been taught.

What is worth remembering? This may provide an opportunity to consider local, national and international events such as anniversaries, and for them to think about what is worth remembering and why. This can be personalised so that different pupils can express their own opinions on why something is worth remembering. They can be asked questions that get them to consider why something is worth remembering, e.g. Were many people affected? In what ways were they affected? Did it lead to something important? Do we still feel the effects? What do they think might have happened if this event had NOT occurred?

Example 8: In 2018 pictures like these appeared all over the country. What is the event? Why do you think it important that we remember these people and others like them? This allows pupils to investigate significant events and why we commemorate certain ones. It can lead to them discussing what we should remember and why something might be more significant than something else.

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