

F-6/7 Humanities and Social Sciences - Concepts for developing historical thinking

Sources

A source is anything that has been left behind by the past, which provides information that can add to our knowledge of the past. A source might be a document, artefact, music, a gravestone, a picture, a midden or a piece of ephemera, such as a postage stamp. However, a source becomes 'evidence' only if it is of value to a particular inquiry.

Historical sources are often categorised as 'primary' or 'secondary'. A primary source is usually described as 'from the time', for example, a diary kept by a famous navigator in the sixteenth century. A secondary source is usually described as a 'story' or 'commentary' by someone who was not actually involved in the situation being described, for example, a modern picture book 'about' that navigator. Evidence, a focus concept starting in Year 7, is what we learn from a historical source when we ask good questions.

Continuity and Change

Elements of change and continuity exist simultaneously in the material and immaterial world. These might involve changing and continuous family structures, occupations, homes, technology, values and attitudes. Change occurs at different rates simultaneously, linking forward and backward in time, whilst continuities define aspects of the past that remain/ed the same over certain periods of time.

In historical studies, learners move from simplistic notions of history as a series of events, to powerfully complex understandings about change and continuity.

Cause and effect

The concepts 'cause and effect' are used to investigate why things happened. As historians identify chains of events and developments over time, short-term and long-term, they find there can be multiple causes and effects of an event, that they are related, and that they can be immediate or longstanding.

From young students' early notion that things simply happen randomly, and what did happen was inevitable, the increasing study of contextual and causal factors in history can enable eventual understanding of the complex interrelationship of multiple, shifting causes.

Significance

There is too much history to remember all of it. In historical studies, the selection of what should be investigated and remembered is assisted by considering questions such as, 'How did people in the past view the significance of an event?', 'How important were the consequences of an event?', 'What was the duration of the event?', 'And how relevant is it to the contemporary world?'

Significant events include those resulting in great change over long time periods, as well as the history of ordinary people made significant when contextualised to larger events and of relevance to us today. In recent decades, some historians have explored new areas of significance or have brought fresh perspectives to traditional areas. Increasingly, there are histories of the oppressed, the marginalised and the 'ordinary' people of 'ordinary' communities, including people who were relatively powerless due to race, religion, gender or class.

Perspectives

In historical study, a perspective is the position from which a person sees and understands events going on around him/her. In studying history, two types of perspective are important – those of the 'people of the past' and current perspectives 'about the past'. (This may differ from a person's point of view, which is an individual's rational or irrational view or feeling about something.) The lives and actions of people in the past are shaped by the social, cultural, intellectual and emotional factors of that time and place. Exploring 'unusual' and unexpected ideas and attitudes of some people of the

past, encourages students to think more deeply about those 'strange' ideas, and also – by comparison and contrast – about the taken-for-granted assumptions of their own society.

As today, however, there could be dramatic differences in values, attitudes and practices among people in societies long ago – producing instability, conflict and upheaval. Studying historical differences in perspective, and consequent conflict, can help students understand the roots of conflict in their own world and offer signposts towards possible resolution of that conflict. Today's perspectives 'about the past' can also vary.

Empathy

In historical inquiry, the term 'empathy' is used to describe engagement with past thought. The re-enactment of past thought and feeling is a greater challenge than constructing descriptions and explanations of the past. It requires an understanding of the past from the point of view of a particular individual or group, including an appreciation of the circumstances they faced and the motivations, values and attitudes behind their actions. Empathy encourages students to overcome the common tendency to see people of the past as strange and incomprehensible.

Student empathy is encouraged when a teacher sets the scene in a particular historical setting and asks the students to describe a memorable episode and to express their thoughts and feelings. Unlike creative fiction, it relies on a disciplined imagination. The aim is for students to respond in ways that are true to the time and the situation – plausible and convincing in the activities described, words spoken, attitudes expressed and values implied. However, empathy is not authentically achieved if later standards, customs, values and truths are used to judge other times, potentially creating wild and unhistorical imaginings. Empathy promotes deeper understanding of 'difference' in the past and, where appropriate, tolerance and acceptance in the present.

Contestability

Contestability, a focus concept starting in Year 7, is an inescapable characteristic of history, emerging from the essential nature of the discipline. History is the study and description of something ('the past') that no longer exists. Reconstructing the past depends on the surviving fragments of the past, themselves 'problematic' and involves processes of interpretation, disciplined imagination, and judgment by historians who bring to the task their various abilities, experiences, perspectives, foibles and fallibilities.

Contestability occurs when particular interpretations about the past are open to debate, for example, as a result of a lack of evidence or different perspectives, with debate often remaining intractable. Some students might question the value of a discipline that seems incapable of producing 'the truth'. However, contestability gives history a distinctive strength and value: in history, as in life, certainty remains elusive but nonetheless worth the pursuit.