

Learning to read, reading to learn:

strategies to move students from 'keen to learn' to 'keen to read'

Conventionally, students learn to read before they come to secondary school. As a result, for the majority of our students, reading can be taken for granted. Yet sometimes, as history teachers, we can find that we assume too much. Although our students are often able to read the words of the text in front of them, do they read with understanding? Can they get behind the text and between the lines in order to interpret meaning? How can we inspire students to want to read in a critical, but constructive manner? These are questions raised by Martin Loy throughout his varied career in history teaching. He recognised that preceding the challenge of teaching students to write good history was the underlying need to motivate students to read. Inspired by articles in *Teaching History 111*, Loy has developed a range of approaches to challenge his students not just to read, but to read well.

For the last ten years I have been attempting to improve the reading ability of my history students. Reading is the medium through which students are examined in national qualifications, assessed during their school career and expected to learn through substantial parts of lessons. Therefore, it has always seemed expedient to make what students do when reading as productive as possible. My fundamental aim as a teacher is to give those in my care the tools to enable them to learn for themselves. Reading is a key enabler in that process. However, as a lover of books myself I aim to push students beyond the need to read; I want to help the student to *learn* to read, and to *want* to read, for themselves. At my present school, as a teacher of students between the ages of eleven to sixteen, I have sought to promote not only the necessary skills involved in reading, but also an inherent love of reading.¹

Plenty of good practice exists concerning reading in school history. My current Year 10 class, for example, have now experienced three years of my attempts to put into practice and extend the work of Counsell.² As a result, in comparison to earlier cohorts, they have more confidence in their abilities to deal with longer texts. They no longer automatically switch off when faced with a page of writing as they have the knowledge and experience of navigating a challenging text, breaking down the writing into more manageable chunks. My lessons almost always have a major emphasis on reading, and as much as possible it is reading which leads the lesson: students discovering for *themselves*, often collectively, rather than me at the front telling them what to learn.

Moreover, I have been influenced by an article by Alison Kitson on enabling Year 12 and Year 13 students to read and enquire into the topic of women in the Third Reich.³ It was valuable to observe strategies that enlivened evidence-based work while also meeting the requirements of formal assessment. In particular the article gave me the confidence to adapt some of the enquiry based methodology I use in Key Stage 3 to later years. I have worked with a colleague at a local Sixth Form College to look at the demands on students there with regards to reading and I have sought to adequately prepare my students for success at AS and A2. As well as going some way to prepare students for the step up from GCSE it has helped me to emphasise to my Year 10 and Year 11 students the necessity of reading to learn.⁴

I began this process with the sort of idealism that Woodrow Wilson brought to proceedings at Versailles. Similarly some of my aims have not quite worked out in practice as I intended. My self-imposed challenge had been to get students to read whole books.

Martin Loy

Martin Loy has taught in a range of secondary schools in England and abroad, most recently as head of department at Hillcrest Grammar School (3-16 independent), Stockport.

I now realise that achieving this at GCSE is often simply not appropriate. Yet, providing students with the tools they need to be able to read a whole book (and the desire to do it!) is still my focus. I would like to suggest that the key to success in this area is threefold:

1. Get learners to want to learn how to learn.
2. Get learners to learn how to read.
3. Get learners to want to read for themselves!

Eat your own sprouts first

As teachers it goes without saying that we must be reading too. We run a real risk of being hypocritical if we are always getting our students to read material and learn more, when we give the impression that we know everything already. I still try to read or re-read articles and books (and relate my findings to my classes) rather than sitting in the class with the knowledge that the last time I read anything seriously was at university!

Most of my teaching in Year 9 and beyond is 'modern world,' but my real passion remains the early modern period. Just as Year 8 were tackling the issue of 'Cromwell: hero or villain?' I was reading an article on Cromwell by Morrill and Baker.⁵

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As the class considered the issue of regicide, I asked them to consider possible motives behind the action. Sundry ideas followed, mainly revolving around a selfish desire of Cromwell to become king himself. At that point I introduced the article I had recently read. Many students gleaned a huge amount from this, not only in terms of the information and interpretation, but as a way of modelling what it actually means to study history. We also had an intriguing discussion about razors. Morrill notes that Cromwell went without shaving for a few weeks whilst in mental turmoil over the gravity of the decision before him. Such asides and details do not often make it into textbooks, but it is exactly the type of detail that makes the figures of the past come alive. In this way it will act as a motivator for some to want to read further for themselves.

Earlier this year I stumbled across the Penguin 'Great Journeys' series. My reading of number 18 by George Orwell, *Fighting in Spain*, coincided with covering the key question 'Why did international peace collapse in 1939?' with Year 10.⁶ In the past, I had not spent too much time on the Spanish Civil War, but wanted to share some of the book with the class. Conveniently placed on my desk, a student noticed it, asked about it, and so we were off. I spent the remaining part of the lesson having a 'planned impromptu discussion' about the Spanish Civil War. I found that most students had encountered Orwell through *Animal Farm* and a few of the wider reading students had also heard about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁷ On this occasion I read out selected highlights, although in retrospect I could have given the students passages to explore for themselves. In the next lesson I used *Fighting in Spain* as a comparison to the numerous

letters and poems of Ivor Gurney that we cover in Year 9.⁸ In this way pupils were able to compare the experience of fighting in two very different conflicts. Despite the need to get through the GCSE specification, I believe the students gained a great deal from these lessons; not just a better understanding of the Spanish Civil War, but also the fact that as a teacher I am still reading and coming across new books that I enjoy reading and talking about with students.

Make material available; use the available material

There are vast resources for students to draw on and read, from traditional books to modern media such as the intranet, the internet and some CD-ROMs. It may be necessary to use creative means. When did you last sit down for a good long chat with the school librarian about the reading needs of the average Year 10 history student?

Recently, towards the end of the academic year, I had three double lessons with Year 10 in which I wanted to review some of the topics we had covered. I was able to produce a stack of back copies of GCSE *Hindsight* magazine for the class.⁹ I encourage students to subscribe throughout their GCSE course and then, at the end of Year 11, I ask students to donate their stock of

magazines to the school. Normally, I end up with three or four of each edition. I asked the students, in pairs, to select a magazine and find a relevant article. From there they were to read the article, following a set of guidance steps (see Figure 1). The key to the success of this exercise was differentiated intervention. With the more able, I was strict and encouraged them to do everything by themselves. With the less able, I intervened early to ensure that the reading and summarising was done correctly and appropriately. This gave them the necessary confidence to complete the next steps more independently.

Figure 1: Six steps to reading and understanding

Step 1:	Find a relevant article.
Step 2:	Based on the title, write down a set of questions that I would like the article to address or answer.
Step 3:	Read and make notes along the way. Create a list of words that I don't understand.
Step 4:	Summarise the main points of the article.
Step 5:	Answer as many questions from Step 2 as possible.
Step 6:	Write a review of the article.

Initially a pair of able boys who were reading an article on the Weimar Republic got thrown by early paragraphs concerning the musical *Cabaret*. By focussing on this introductory point, they failed to grasp the bigger picture. When I reminded them of Step 2, they made better progress. A trio of weaker girls studying an article on the Treaty of Versailles initially missed out Step 2, preferring to get straight to copying out the table on terms of the treaty. A pair of very able girls chose a challenging article on Abyssinia. They worked through all the steps. They were disappointed that all the article did was, they thought, to go through what they knew already, but they underestimated the power of reading the article as a confidence-building revision tool. The students completed Step 6 for homework and we spent the third lesson with each pair sharing their findings with the other students.

Here's an elephant. Bon appetit!

It is essential to give students appropriate levels of reading, but also to make that level progressively more challenging. One way to approach this can be in the length of the piece, from a single sheet handout to a short article, then a longer article, a chapter of a book, and finally a book. The use of the *Hindsight* articles with Year 10 was only successful because they had begun to get used to the length and complexity of such articles. The progression has been broadly chronological with Year 7 students being given little more than one side of A4. In subsequent years the typeface begins to shrink and the number of sides of prose tends to increase. It is not just the length of a piece of writing which can be hard for students to face. It is also the complexity of the language. I make it clear to classes that in reading (as well as answering

questions) it is possible to pass on a lot of information with a small portion of writing.

To test this theory out, I used an article that analysed the causes of the Second World War.¹⁰ We spent a substantial part of a lesson working through all the words students did not understand. With some individuals, admittedly, the activity was quite de-motivating, especially those who have particularly limited vocabulary. However, those able to grasp the majority of the argument enjoyed unlocking the meaning of some of the more complex words. It is essential to know the class before deciding whether this type of activity is worth doing or not. However, deliberately providing material which is 'beyond' the students' age or stage can be a meaningful exercise. It is also a clear reminder that the historical vocabulary our students are generally exposed to is limited and restricted. I wouldn't recommend doing this regularly, but hope that an experience like this encourages students to see that no text is too complex for them, providing they go about things in the right way.

Get students to want to read for themselves

If students can *see* the benefits of reading, before they necessarily *experience* the benefits, they are more likely to want to read. Resisting the temptation to tell students the answer, I have sometimes referred them to a source of information where they can find the answer out. A new pupil might have thought I was being off-hand or awkward. In time, however, the students have got into the habit of looking for the answer themselves first, only asking for help if they have been unable to find it.

Figure 2: Some strategies to aid effective reading

A few years ago I encountered an issue where some of my keener students, who had caught onto my ideas of the importance of reading for themselves, were trying to improve their progress by learning speed reading techniques. Initially I was supportive of their efforts until I did some research myself into this phenomenon. I am now fairly convinced that encouraging this practice will not help prepare students to read the whole book effectively. Reading with discernment and care is, when it comes to digesting a tome at university, far better than reading through, page one to one thousand, much in the way we might work through a summer novel.

I now take time with my students working through various tips on how to get the most from reading.¹¹

- A.** Looking at the different styles of reading: scanning, skimming and detailed reading;
- B.** Investigating ways to be active whilst reading: coming to the text with questions you hope the material will answer, noting down key words, underlining or highlighting, summarising small chunks of reading
- C.** Suggesting techniques like the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review) or QUASAR (Question, be Active, Systems, Analyse, Reflect) or countless other variances to improve or speed up learning through reading;¹²
- D.** Using a dictionary to help expand vocabulary and fully access the material. Not just a dictionary that provides synonyms, but a detailed one which gives alternative meanings. Just be prepared to handle occasional times where lessons go off on an etymological tangent!

Encouraging students to read for themselves is part of the way we can avoid teaching our students to rely on others. It is striking how we run the risk of producing over the years what could be called 'learned helplessness'. We can teach students to rely on us as teachers to provide, explain and critique the material which they read. One classic example of this is the student that raises a hand during the exam to ask whether to write in full sentences, even though the question clearly states, 'Answer using full sentences.'

Now that you are old enough, you can start to read for yourself

Have you ever experienced this scenario? You ask students to get textbooks out at the beginning of a lesson, but they just sit there with the books shut, even though you may have been part-way through a topic or chapter in the previous

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lesson. Yet reading can be encouraged. Take Ellie. For a while she arrived at every lesson with her head buried in a Harry Potter book. I tried chatting with her about her own reading, whilst gently suggesting some historical material. She started reading a book on Pepys which she found a bit heavy, but is gradually starting to get into biographies.

It is important to value reading with students from a young age. Make reading natural. Encourage free reading and keep moving students on to ever more challenging, complex and extended texts. Reading stories to a class in Year 7 can get them used to listening, but also to finding things out from books. Then, they will invariably want to read similar things for themselves. So if asked, how can you get a student to read a book in Year 12, the answer must surely be get them reading for themselves in Year 7. What you read, or get your students to read, will largely depend on what they are learning at any given time. The very principle and practice of reading can matter just as much as the precise choice of text.

Giving time and space for reading

Finding the time and space for reading can raise some very practical dilemmas. Should I get the class to do another essay, or do I have the time to take in an article which will inform the pupil a little better on an area of study or the bigger picture? Clearly this need not be an either/or situation, but are we willing to sacrifice the odd essay for clear ring-fenced time for the pupil to actively read? Similarly it may be necessary to convince our heads of department, that the homework in students' homework diaries which seems to say, 'Read pages 31-33' is actually far more than they may imagine. Likewise, there is tremendous value in basing an entire lesson on reading something together in class, stopping at various points to expand, discuss and clarify.

What are the overall benefits of active, thorough, extensive reading? It can be wide-ranging, risky and challenging, but in reading an entire book, the reader can get to know and understand an author; one can sense their passion, see their principles and appreciate their humour and style. This aspect can often be lost in textbooks which give, admittedly, the meaty chunks of an author's view, but nevertheless still lose some of the flavour and texture of the whole literary animal.

There are various things we can do, as teachers, to help this cause. For a start, please let us avoid saying, 'Homework today is *just* reading.' The word 'just' appears to suggest that the assignment is deficient or second-rate. Rather than portraying this element of learning, in or out of the lesson, as 'just' or 'simply' reading, let's bring back the nobility of the pursuit in its purest form. Let us collectively as a profession raise students' expectations by demonstrating

to them that reading is in itself a noble, worthwhile and ultimately extremely rewarding activity. There is no need to be apologetic. To read actively, with discernment and understanding, if done well, is task enough.

REFERENCES

1. Thinking of some of those I have taught, 'love' may be a bit strong, but at least we can ensure an acknowledgement of the expediency and practicability of reading as an academic pursuit and/or a way to access higher education, to check the small print on things before signing up, and as part of becoming a content and happy adult.
2. See Counsell, C. (2004) *History and Literacy in Y7: Building the Lesson around the Text* London: Hodder Murray
3. Kitson, A. (2003) 'Reading and enquiring in Years 12 and 13: A case study on women in the Third Reich', *Teaching History* 111, *Reading History Edition*
4. My colleague did comment on the apparent 'dumbing down' of A Level texts over the past few years. However, even if examination students are expected to work with rather brief adaptations of historians' work, I believe we should still be exposing them to more than sound bites during the course of study
5. Morrill, J. and Baker, P. (2001) 'Oliver Cromwell, the Regicide and the Sons of Zeruiah' in Peacey, J. (ed.), *The Regicides and the Execution of Charles I*. Cop 2001 Basingstoke: Palgrave.
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8. For more on Ivor Gurney see Chapter 4, 'Severn and Somme: What can one man's letters and poems tell us about the First World War?' in Byrom, J., Counsell, C., Gorman, M., Peaple, D. and Riley, M. (1999) *Modern Minds: The Twentieth-Century World*, London: Longman Pearson
9. *Hindsight* is a magazine for GCSE history students on the Modern World course. See www.philipallan.co.uk for further details.
10. Finney, P. (1999): '1939 After Sixty Years', *The Historian* 63 pp16-21
11. I have found it possible to tailor the online advice given to university undergraduates in order to help my Key Stage 3 and GCSE students get the most out of their reading. For example the Southampton University web site provides very useful reading advice at www.studyskills.soton.ac.uk/develop.htm.
12. 'Systems' here refers to pupils understanding different reading styles (systems), such as speed reading, scanning, and skimming and grasping when to use each one.

CPD Notes

Your reading

What history have you read recently? If you feel that time pressures limit your reading, perhaps your department could act on this together. Decide on a topic, perhaps around your new A-level specifications, find some book reviews and journal articles in the area and divide them between you. When you read, try some of Loy's strategies so that you can understand the processes that your students will be undertaking. Set a departmental meeting date well in advance at which these readings can be shared and discussed. Don't forget to include your ITE student in the process as they may well have knowledge of recent historiography from their own studies. Would it be too ambitious to include some gifted sixth form students in the process in order to broaden their own reading? This could result in a flourishing history department book group. You might even discover members of staff from other departments who have a passion for reading history in their spare time!

Progression

How do your students make progress in their reading of history over the course of their school experience? What do you expect students to read in Year 7 and how do you expect them to go about it? A departmental discussion on this topic could throw up some interesting differences. Try to come to a consensus on what, and how, Year 13 history students should be reading, then work backwards. What opportunities and strategies will you have to provide for younger students to enable them to reach this goal?

Culture

What is the culture around reading in your school and, particularly in your department? Is reading valued as an act in its own right? Do you have tasks on your scheme of work that really value reading? Is the library well stocked with books that are relevant to the topics you teach? Why not produce reading lists of suitable historical novels for each year group and hand them out at parents' evening or put them on the school intranet? There is an excellent list of useful historical literature at the back of the Historical Association's guide to *Survive and Thrive as an NQT* by Woodcock and Stanford. When it comes to the end of term, set up competitive book trawls on next year's textbook so that pupils become familiar with using index, contents and chapter titles to discover a range of details.

Share your passion

On the surface Loy's article is about reading in the history classroom. However, underpinning this is his own passion for reading; something he feels strongly about sharing with his students. A time of new programmes of study and new specifications is the perfect opportunity to enable you to share your passion with your pupils – whether that be for art or literature, architecture or music. Just as Ellie in Year 8 moved from Potter to Pepys, so your students may raise their aspirations by seeing history outside of the textbook.

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