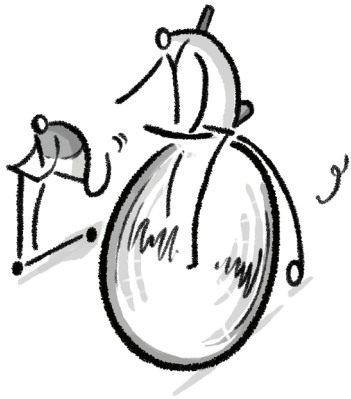
Making every history lesson count



Six principles to support great history teaching

Chris Runeckles

Edited by Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby

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While writing this book I have leaned heavily on my family, friends and colleagues; both in terms of allowing me the time and space to create it and for the ideas that it contains. Without them the process would have been impossible and I am indebted to them all.

This book is ultimately the manifestation of all that I have absorbed from the many professionals I have encountered throughout my career. I've been lucky to work in several great history departments, and there is something of all those colleagues I've taught alongside within these pages.

Of additional help have been the many colleagues I've encountered in other schools or across the varied world of social media. Everyone I've talked to or have asked to share their thinking has been gracious and generous, which has reminded me that we work in a genuinely supportive profession. Long may that continue.

Huge thanks must also go to Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby; first for giving me the chance to write this book and then for their insightful and thoughtful editing. I'm extremely lucky to work with you both.

The time during which I was writing coincided with my two daughters' first and third years respectively. Their smiles and love smoothed the process considerably, but it was the tireless work of my incredibly patient and brilliant wife that gave me the opportunity to write this book and is the defining reason why I've been able to do it. Thank you, Emilie, you're the best.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my mum. She is my greatest supporter and has forever been in my corner. Mum, I hope it makes you proud.

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Introduction

When people are asked about their favourite, best or most memorable teacher at school, a disproportionate number seem to point to their history teachers. Perhaps this is just selective hearing on my part, but if really pushed I would say the phenomenon is real and must be down to something else.

For me, that memorable teacher was Mr Reddick, who taught A level history at the comprehensive school I attended in Dorset in the late 1990s. He only taught me one unit, British Politics, 1900–1939. Latterly, I've taught this topic myself, and have been a lone voice in support of its merits, fending off howls of derision from colleagues who would rather teach almost anything else. However, Mr Reddick's teaching had ensured that I would never lose my affection for this particular corner of history.

As my perpetual connection to this piece of history proves, our subject provides a unique opportunity to find moments of resonance with young people. When brought to life by a great teacher the past can captivate, amaze, infuriate and enlighten. It gives perspective to the lives we lead, and helps us make sense of the world around us by providing that most vital of contexts, the struggle of humanity through the ages. It can also be a source of solace in turbulent times to know that many of the troubles currently being played out on the world stage are in fact extensions or repetitions of previous events.

While Mr Reddick's passion was fundamental to his success as a teacher, alone it could not make his teaching brilliant. His successful practice was built on high expectation and challenge. He never dumbed down the detail or swerved the complicated political or economic machinations that are so vital to comprehending the politics of that time. Through captivating explanation he gave the era context and helped

me place myself in the somewhat alien world of Westminster many decades previous. The feedback I received was thorough and precise and allowed me to hone my essay writing technique. Perhaps most importantly, he held the reins of discussion and debate through skilful and thought-provoking questioning. There were no gimmicks and nothing flash, just great teaching built on great knowledge of, and love for, the subject.

On returning to the classroom as a trainee history teacher seven years later, I found that the landscape had seemingly shifted. Independent learning was in vogue – and instead of refining the art of teaching, I was being trained to facilitate, with students expected to steer their own learning. Knowledge of the past seemed to be a commodity with little value, and we were taught that it was in fact the skills of learning that were important, with historical knowledge merely a conduit for the development of these. It felt wrong, and miles away from Mr Reddick's inspirational lessons.

Thankfully, in recent years much of this clutter has cleared away, with a welcome return to more traditional teaching approaches. In 2014 the Sutton Trust produced a report entitled *What Makes Great Teaching?*, which highlighted the following two factors as those linked with the strongest student outcomes:

- **Content knowledge.** Teachers with strong knowledge and understanding of their subject make a greater impact on students' learning.
- **Quality of instruction.** This includes effective questioning and use of assessment by teachers. Also shown to be important are practices including reviewing previous learning, scaffolding new learning and giving students adequate time to practise.[1]

1 Robert Coe, Cesare Aloisi, Steve Higgins and Lee Elliot Major, *What Makes Great Teaching? Review of the Underpinning Research* (London: Sutton Trust, 2014). Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Makes-Great-Teaching-REPORT.pdf, p. 2.

The importance of these factors will not necessarily be news to many teachers, but research of this kind does provide solid foundations to evidence the validity of the choices we make every day in our classrooms. A primary objective of this book is to synthesise the latest research on teaching and learning and make it specifically applicable to history teachers. There is a huge amount of evidence available, too much for a classroom teacher to be expected to engage with directly. This book does not claim to be an exhaustive review of educational research, indeed there will be areas not referred to as they fall outside of its remit. However, it does aim to bridge the gap between the world of academic research and the history classroom, which has been too big for too long.

Allied to an examination of research must always be the collective wisdom of history teachers who have, through trial and error, found out what works most often in their contexts. This book seeks to marry the evidence with collective experience; not only from my own classroom teaching but also from the expertise of my colleagues and from the insights of the many generous professionals who share their thoughts and experiences online. There are a variety of excellent teachers and thinkers who post blogs, write articles and engage with the debates surrounding history teaching via Twitter. I have referenced several, and would recommend their work as a further means of continuing professional development (CPD).

By pulling these strands together, this book seeks to explicitly articulate the fundamentals of great history teaching and provide practical strategies accessible to all classroom teachers. The framework for this is the six principles to support great teaching and learning shared by my editors and colleagues, Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby, in *Making Every*

Lesson Count: challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning.[2]

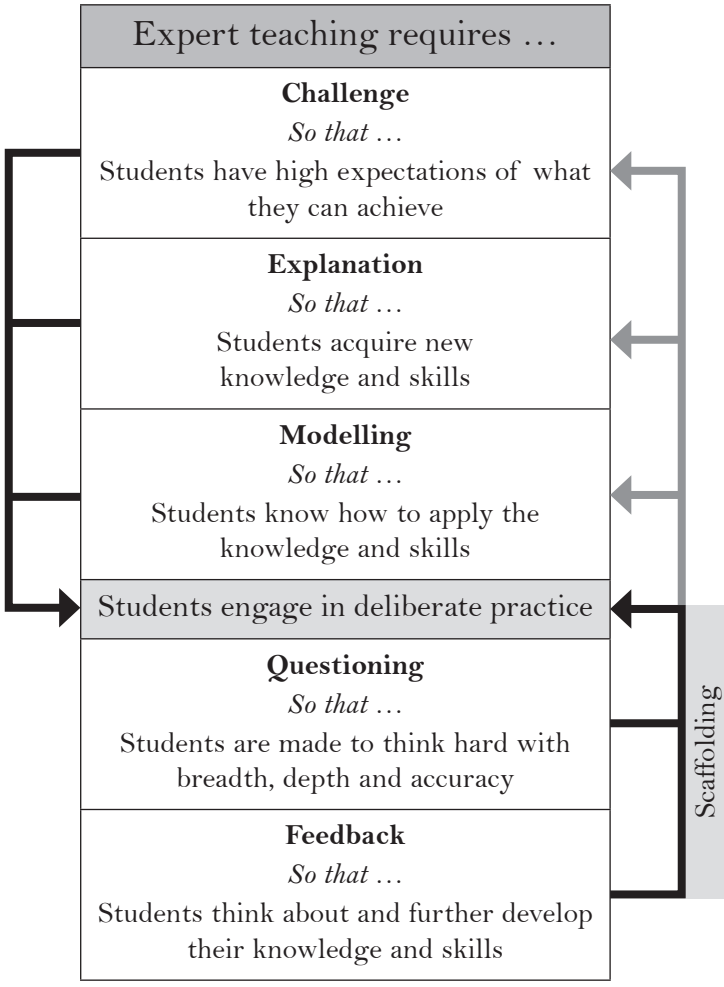
These principles are not a lesson plan and do not form a neat hierarchy or have a prescribed order for use. They are to be interpreted by the individual teacher and should be thought of as the active ingredients for great history teaching. What they provide is a means to shape our practice and prioritise what is most important for successful classroom instruction. The principles are not strategies in themselves but, by making clear what we consider to be most important to high quality teaching, they allow us to narrow the focus and dispense with the unnecessary.

Each chapter explores a separate principle; with both a discussion on the underpinning theory and practical strategies for how the principle can be realised. There are points which contain a degree of idealism, as we all need to occasionally step outside the bubble of our day-to-day and allow our thoughts to turn to what might be possible. However, the book is rooted in pragmatism and aims to be useful to every history teacher, no matter their level of experience or context.

What the book is not is a silver bullet that can be fired into all contexts without interpretation. Each school, department, classroom and cohort is different, as is each teacher. There will be some for whom all of the suggested strategies and approaches will work and others for whom many may not. It is up to you to decide which you feel will be most useful and applicable. The subtle variations and additions you make will no doubt add richness to the original ideas and in many cases improve them.

The underpinning principle is *challenge*. This is the bedrock on which all the other principles are built and if pitched incorrectly no amount of skilful teaching can compensate.

2 Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby, *Making Every Lesson Count: Six Principles to Support Great Teaching and Learning* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2015).


Expert teaching requires …
Challenge
So that …
Students have high expectations of what they can achieve
Explanation
So that …
Students acquire new knowledge and skills
Modelling
So that …
Students know how to apply the knowledge and skills
Students engage in deliberate practice
Questioning
So that …
Students are made to think hard with breadth, depth and accuracy
Feedback
So that …
Students think about and further develop their knowledge and skills
Scaffolding

We need to have the highest expectations of the level of challenge our students can cope with and not be afraid to embrace struggle as we help them pick their way through the more complicated pieces of the past.

Explanation and *questioning* are the most important tools that great history teachers possess. The storytelling and discussion elements of our discipline are vital in creating a representation of the past that young people can understand and interpret. The teacher's voice is unapologetically at the forefront of these strategies, with an emphasis on the importance of what we say to our students as well as how we say it.

Through the principles first of *modelling* and then of *practice* we will attempt to tackle how we can develop our students' fluency and competency with historical knowledge and extended writing. By modelling, we can teach our students primarily by using our own expertise, but also that of their peers, to demonstrate the knowledge, concepts and procedures vital to good historical thinking and writing. This strategy places the teacher, rather than pre-written structures, at the centre of this capacity building. With practice, we can support students to cope with the huge content demands of our subject, as well as with the complexity of our extended writing elements, all underpinned by the judicious application of *feedback*. The practical strategies included throughout this book ensure we can achieve these most challenging of objectives.

Running through each chapter are lessons from cognitive science about learning and memory. I firmly believe that knowledge of the events, people and places of the past should be at the front and centre of all history lessons. Historical knowledge is the most powerful legacy we can leave our students, as they will return to it every time they walk through the centre of a city or consider the decisions being made around them today. However, if we do not build our students' ability to retain the rich detail of the history

that we deliver, then we will have failed to provide them with this gift, and what we have endeavoured to teach will drift and be forgotten. What we must continually strive to create are long-term, useable memories. Therefore, this book aims to demonstrate how cognitive science can be the history teacher's closest companion.

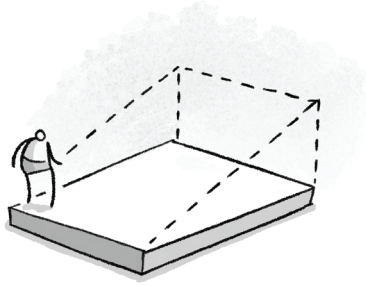
We are privileged to teach a subject that, whatever the changing tides of education bring, will always be one of vital importance. As British historian R. G. Collingwood said, "History is 'for' human self-knowledge … the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is."[3]

We may not be that memorable teacher for all our students, but we will be for some. The past is waiting to be taught.

Let's get started.

3 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994 [1946]), p. 10.

Chapter 1
Challenge



What to do about Evie

Evie is in Year 9 and does not like history. She cannot see the point in learning about people long dead or places she will never see. Outside of school she is not taken to monuments or museums, does not read for pleasure and does not engage in conversations that give the subject context. She daydreams her way through history lessons, completing the various tasks she is given to a standard that avoids drawing the teacher's attention, allowing her thoughts to drift away from the topic at hand. She does not find the majority of the work particularly difficult and is able to coast through lesson after lesson, with only occasional interruption from simple questions. When assessments come around she tends to struggle briefly before giving up. The subsequent targets she is set on how to better construct her answers make little sense as she doesn't understand the topic she is writing about. When it is time to complete her GCSE options form, history remains unticked.

We have all taught an Evie and it is all too easy to lower our expectations and allow her to be present in our lessons but rarely truly challenged. Frankly, in a lesson on the English Civil War, it is easier and requires less conflict to ask her to draw and label a picture of a member of Cromwell's New Model Army than to think about, and explain in writing, the reasons for Parliament's military success. The first may fill thirty minutes of a Friday period 5, while the second is going to take substantial time, effort and struggle. A caveat to this is that an adapted version of the first activity may contribute to a successful outcome in the second. Explaining the reasons for Parliament's success is an example of what might be termed critical thinking; however, we cannot think critically or deeply about history without the necessary subject, or domain, knowledge to think with.[1] Therefore, we must not fall into the trap of assuming that we should make our history lessons more challenging by moving more swiftly to critical thinking about the event, person or theme. We must first seek to develop our students' understanding, ensuring they have a secure base of knowledge about these topics.

In essence, history is a knowledge-based subject. We want our students to gain a deep knowledge and understanding of the past, and we should not confuse increasing challenge with neglecting the storytelling element of our discipline in order to jump straight into critical thinking or analysis. For students to be able to explain the New Model Army's success in the latter stages of the English Civil War, knowledge of the army's training and weaponry would be essential and time must be devoted to learning this detail. What is not essential is finding the right shade of brown to colour in a tunic, or selecting a particularly satisfying name for our freshly sketched soldier.

1 See Daniel T. Willingham, Critical Thinking, Why Is It So Hard to Teach?, *American Educator* (summer 2007): 8–19. Available at: https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Crit_Thinking.pdf.

Writing in the practical, engaging style of the award-winning *Making Every Lesson Count*, Chris Runeckles articulates the fundamentals of great history teaching and shares simple, realistic classroom strategies designed to deliver memorable lessons.

Making Every History Lesson Count is underpinned by six pedagogical principles – challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning – that will enable history teachers to help students better engage with the subject matter and develop more sophisticated historical analysis and arguments.

In an age of educational quick fixes and ever-moving goalposts, this precise and timely book provides lasting solutions to age-old problems and inspires a challenging, evidence-based approach to secondary school history teaching.

Suitable for history teachers of students aged 11–16 years.

Trainee, newly qualified and less experienced teachers will find Making Every History Lesson Count *invaluable, while department heads would be wise to read it too – as it has some powerful insights regarding the formation of sensible policy for the teaching of history. I wish I'd read it when I first started teaching.*

Ben Newmark, Vice Principal, The Nuneaton Academy

History is a living subject and one that prepares children for the future by helping them analyse the past. In Making Every History Lesson Count *Chris Runeckles draws out the subject's human aspect and communicates this with aplomb.*

A really useful guide for the busy history teacher.

Hywel Roberts, teacher, writer and humourist

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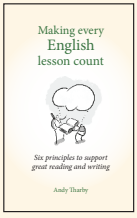

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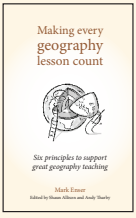

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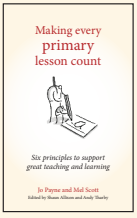

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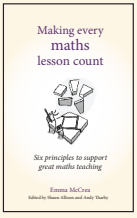

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