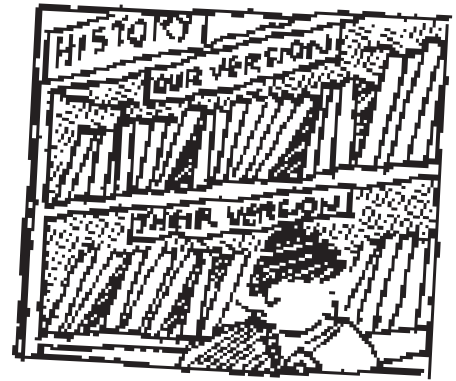


# How to Ensure that the History Department gets the best Results in the School



*In this article **Tim Lomas** examines some of the reasons why History is doing well in many schools. Drawing on information from schools in England, he asks, “Are there common characteristics about the departments which produce consistently good results?”*

*“Are there similar characteristics amongst departments and teachers which under-perform?”*

## Introduction

There is no shortage of pontification about what History teachers and departments should be doing. There may well be much sense in what has been said and written about the focus on objectives and on conceptual development, on pupils as autonomous learners, the identification of criteria and frameworks and the greater integration of historical methods with more generic and literary approaches. Practically all advice and guidance, with the exception of a few on the fringes, has advocated moving History in this direction. What has been missing is the demonstrable link between such approaches and the outcomes. Do those departments that use such methods totally really do that much better consistently?

Below is a first attempt to look for common patterns across a range of schools. The conclusions here are based on information from a sizeable number of schools – 63 of which 61 offered GCSE History. This number of schools - catering for all types of pupils - would seem to represent a meaningful sample to enable some general conclusions to be made. In 1999 over 2,500 pupils were entered for GCSE History in these schools and the gender balance was 51% girls and 49% boys.

What follows is simply one person’s summary of specific strategies which seem, on the whole, to do more good than harm in raising achievement in History. Each obviously deserves much more space than can be given here but the summary list can still be regarded as a useful discussion list as part of a History department’s approach to self-evaluation. The strategies are divided into:

- a) *Teaching and Learning;*
- b) *Organisational and Managerial.*

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*This article is an edited version of the workshop notes used in Dr Lomas’s presentation to the Historical Association Education Conference held at the University of Keel on 22 and 23 September 2000. The full text is available on The Historical Association website at [www.history.org.uk](http://www.history.org.uk) (members only section). Graphic: TES 21 Jan 1988*

## Teaching and Learning

**History departments obtaining good results have a tendency for:**

**1.** Pupils to feel **confident** in the subject. Their self belief and self-esteem are high. Lessons are characterised by “relaxed alertness”, a safe environment encouraging risk taking and thinking with plenty of praise consistently applied, high expectations and pupil optimism, an ethos of hard work and support for achievement, where pupils do not feel inhibited about asking for help. Humour tends to be used judiciously.

**2. Clarity** to be prominent. In terms of expectations this means establishing what you expect from pupils, not what you do not. Processes and tasks are explained along with what is going to happen and how to do it. One feature of many of the successful departments is that instructions are clear, ensuring pupils grasp the meaning behind the main instructions and giving plenty of practice.

**3. Genuine teacher enthusiasm and interest** to be very apparent – an infectious enthusiasm for the subject as well as wanting to treat pupils as individuals. Teachers making the difference are often those seen genuinely to care. Non-verbal cues are significant. That and tone can account for 90% of communication. The feeling of care and interest seems to motivate pupils positively.

**4.** There to be frequent **discussions with pupils about how they are learning.** Knowing about pupils’ preferred learning styles seems to matter as does being aware of “preferred” teaching styles, e.g. facilitator, transmitter, manager or colleague. Many teachers are likely to favour the ones linked to their own preferred learning styles. The feedback and way in which goals are taken seriously and followed up can be crucial. All the talk about differentiation needs to remember this. Research in Scotland (1993) showed that most pupils did not like individualised learning or different schemes but rather a teacher who explained and made them understand and set goals.

The successful departments seem to have a higher level of awareness of particular pupil traits and adapt work accordingly.

For example, some of those who achieve the best results with boys recognise that cognitive test results do not support the idea that skills in History are gender-linked.

5. Teachers to have a **high level of knowledge** which is used to provide interest. Some of the best results come from departments where teachers have a store of interesting anecdotes.

The “gossip” of History matters. Concentrating just on the big picture is a mistake. It needs to be done in conjunction with the human angle, especially the bizarre. That may mean trivia on occasions. It is not wasted. We too often forget that most people’s later interests were initially kindled with something fairly trivial in that area. It is the specialists who tend to know the interesting stories and the trivia. Good results are linked to a well-qualified staff teaching the subject.

6. Teachers to be aware of the **range of appropriate methods**. Those in the most successful departments seem to have an above-average awareness of the importance of:

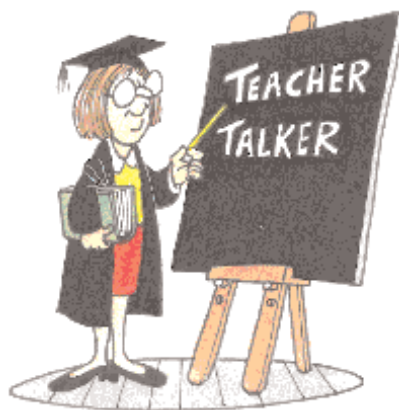
- ♦ the fact that pupils can regress as well as progress in History with progress being sporadic;
- ♦ making content as “concrete” as possible;
- ♦ presenting work appropriately;
- ♦ having high expectations of pupils with regard to their ability to think historically;
- ♦ having a range of strategies for pupils to develop their ability to think independently including structured and more holistic tasks using devices such as frames,
- ♦ having a positive classroom atmosphere.

7. **Classrooms** to be flexible and stimulating, e.g. good display above eye level; even colours and plants can make a difference.

8. **Planning to be realistic**. Planning is obviously important but some of the best results are achieved where the planning is personalised but not too extensive. Contrived detailed matrix plans are commonplace but they are not always associated with the real successes. The key to success seems to be plans – whether long, medium or short which:

- ♦ are personalised i.e. not just listing from the specification or published schemes of work;
- ♦ focus on pupil experiences rather than teaching methods;
- ♦ have very limited numbers of objectives and outcomes but are specified in terms of understanding. Instead they consider what is the minimum one needs to devote to that area and how far might one be prepared to extend it if it motivates pupils and inspires higher order thinking.
- ♦ consider the possible directions for different types of pupil – not necessarily just by ability but gender, interest, preferred learning style, dominant intelligence (see Gardner et al);
- ♦ build in flexibility but give some thought to maximum and

*“Thus, whilst not wanting to belittle the vital importance of clear objectives, the systematic development of skills and the development of thinking strategies, there is a strong indication that the enthusiasm and the effort of the teacher do matter considerably - enthusiasm for the subject, commitment to the pupils, a concern for them to achieve well do matter.”*



minimum times for different components;

- ♦ plan carefully the key questions and ideas;

- ♦ plan for a good blend of depth and outline;
- ♦ integrate the homework effectively;
- ♦ address the importance of reinforcement;
- ♦ clarify how the knowledge, skills and

conceptual understanding is a development of earlier work;

- ♦ build in links across blocks of work;
- ♦ consider how one might remedy deficiencies in the pupils knowledge and understanding at the end of the unit of work.

9. **Pace and purpose** to be very obvious. The more successful departments tend to take much more notice of the efficiency of lessons and homework. 5 minutes more in each lesson adds 10 hours to a History course. It is taxing but pupils rarely resent prompt starts, the full use of the lesson time, clear class rules and procedures, teacher irritability when repeating because of inattentiveness (this can take up 10% of lessons), effective homework and preparation of equipment before hand and a requirement to ensure work missed by pupils is done and that cover work is of a high quality.

10. Considerable care to be taken with **questions and tasks** so that they blend open and closed ones, cover a range of types, all pupils are involved, involve pupils having to pose as well as answer questions, allow for extended as well as short responses (the average is 30 seconds).

11. **Timing** to be almost automatic. Some of the best results occur when the teacher has a really good sense of timing – knowing exactly when to move on. It is too simple to assume that variety is all-important. It depends and there can be just as much of a problem with too much variety as not enough.

12. A fair degree of **active pupil work**. Despite what has been stated above, involving pupils practically does often benefit many pupils. Whilst no doubt devoid of universality, it is as well to heed the dictum that we learn:

- 10% what we read;
- 20% what we hear;
- 30% what we see;
- 50% what we see and hear;
- 70% of what is discussed with others;
- 80% of what we experience personally;
- 90% of what we teach someone else.

13. Proper consideration to be given to **reinforcement**. Many things need repeating but it needs to be planned for systematically and in different contexts. Above all it needs to avoid being a boring “switch off”.

14. The teachers to **take nothing for granted** and to have a high level of awareness of issues such as:

- ♦ pupils remarkable propensity to forget and confuse;

- ♦ poor general knowledge, e.g.. geography, limited general vocabulary.
- ♦ pupils failure to see the point of much of what they do without clear justification given;
- ♦ what interests pupils and what does not (see below);
- ♦ the complexity of the terminology often used in History especially the abstractions, complex language formations, metaphors;
- ♦ pupils difficulties with writing;
- ♦ how group work is often ineffective;
- ♦ how much History work is actually copied;
- ♦ how presentation often deceives.

**15.** Great care to be taken with **source-based work**, e.g.: not accepting sources at face value;

- ♦ comparing and contrasting sources rather than commenting on each separately;
- ♦ avoiding regurgitated and learnt responses especially about “primary and secondary sources”, bias and sentences which start “it depends on...” relating to the content;
- ♦ above all, with linking source evaluation and the context;
- ♦ copying huge chunks of a source in an answer.

**16.** Making **links and connections**, comparisons and contrasts and establishing relationships. When new information is acquired, it is not sufficient simply to acquire it. Without connections and relationships, the knowledge will soon be lost. It needs to be reshaped.

**17.** Pupils to be adept at **making and using notes**. The successful departments have often trained pupils to make effective, practical notes that can be used efficiently. Pupils need to be trained to identify the relevant. Notes are best made when linked to an issue. There is a need to ensure notes:

- ♦ deal with the significant;
- ♦ do not include everything that is said;
- ♦ are more than simply writing down points especially when systematically covering what is being said. Much more effective is mind mapping. This replicates the way the brain works. It does not store in neat lines or columns but tree-like, patterns, associations etc.

**18. Reading** to be supported. Good departments have often improved attitudes towards reading especially improving reading efficiency. Departments ensure:

**a)** Reading is for a purpose, e.g.. for information, criticism, to substantiate a point, to make a presentation, to identify the significance, to re-organise information;

**b)** They do not take specialist vocabulary for granted. A piece of research suggested that History at GCSE involves 19 technical terms a day. Wherever possible, abstract points are related to concrete examples;

**c)** They work on developing vocabulary, e.g.. key words, vocabulary lists, picture clues, highlighting, definitions.

**19. Speaking and listening** to be given a strong emphasis. The range of strategies might include:

- ♦ class and group discussions and debates;
- ♦ different types of questions including extended ones;
- ♦ improving social skills of attentiveness, group interaction, confidence, concentration, perseverance etc;
- ♦ simple role play (although there is evidence that the less

able do not respond positively to too much drama);

- ♦ retelling stories - to aid memorisation, sequencing, change and causation;

**20.** The amount and purpose of **writing** to be carefully planned. This can be characterised by

**a)** Practicing plenty of writing but aiming to make it as interesting as possible. Successful departments try to avoid boredom by reinforcing skills through new contexts using new vocabulary, abstractions, content, sources and with new historical questions and enquiries.

**b)** Using a range of formats, e.g. narrative, description, reports, imaginative, analytical, discussion, evaluative, reflective, explanatory, diaries, letters, interpretative, persuasive, substantiating.

**c)** taking care with imaginative work so that it does not distort the historical perspective as everyday feelings are dredged up divorced from period. Imagination is a vital ingredient for the historian but it needs to be developed in a structured way.

**d)** using well-tried and simple activities such as sequencing words, word puzzles, notes, rephrasing, planning questions, diaries, letters, eyewitness accounts, different viewpoints, summarising.

**21.** Recognising the importance of **recall and revision**. Successful departments often recognise that good results in History cannot avoid recall and some devise ways to improve the memory including effective revision. There is a need to teach memory skills.

Revising is difficult for many pupils. In a 1996 survey, 85% 12 year olds did not know what “revise” meant. Features of some good departments are:

- ♦ revision plans prepared by pupils and shared with the teacher. They discuss with pupils what they see as their revision priorities;
- ♦ awareness of the barriers to effective revision such as disillusionment with poor mock results, being overwhelmed by the amount, dislike of the subject or aspects of it, poor reading and low literacy levels, a part-time job, addiction to TV, games etc, poor notes, a poor revision environment, procrastination, peer group pressure;
- ♦ training pupils in revision including explaining that revision is effective in the ascending order:

silent reading;

reading aloud;

reading and then writing;

creating a mental picture;

describing the mental picture.

reinforcing, e.g.. after one day, 2 days, 4 days, 8 days,

16 days etc;

- ♦ using past questions or reorganising. Thematic revision and tests can also be useful, e.g.. a focus on people, events, dates, wars etc;

**22.** Taking particular care with **homework**, e.g. avoiding drills or finishing off wherever possible. Homework is seen as being relevant to the next lesson to reinforce a new problem or an old issue from a different perspective.

**23.** Specific targeting on tried and tested **examination strategies**. For example, the successful departments often:

a) Ensure both that pupils catch up on work missed and that they understand what has been covered in their absence.

b) Target borderline candidates; a strategy has been to target D-candidates.

- ◆ Inform pupils of the minimum mark needed for particular grades and the characteristics of grades. Target action plans on raising to the next level – even 2 levels up;

- ◆ Provide pupils with a sense of realistic optimism.

c) Practice questions including:

- ◆ Covering answers as a whole class;

- ◆ focusing on the relevance of answers;

- ◆ answer plans;

- ◆ summaries;

- ◆ emphasising the words of instruction and the key words in questions;

- ◆ practice past questions;

- ◆ model answers;

- ◆ asking pupils to mark answers using the criteria. Give pupils access to the marking criteria;

- ◆ timing practice – particularly avoiding them copying out the questions in exams. Heighten awareness of time factor;

- ◆ making effective use of chief examiners reports;

- ◆ Put under some exam pressure;

- ◆ Developing awareness of possible dangers such as misreading questions, looking for key words, knowing the difference between an exam question and a similar one done previously, balancing time with marks available, the importance of introductions and conclusions, backing up generalisations, checking that all parts of a question have been answered, the importance of checking at the end.

24. The **human side** to be given a high priority. The successful departments realise that one needs to balance History skills and concepts with developing a greater understanding of the human situation. This issue is too often underestimated.

- ◆ it is a major factor in motivating pupils;

- ◆ it is needed to help explain the complexity of human life, causation and motivation. Without such consideration, pupils are at a disadvantage with History. They bring only a limited personal experience of life in terms of years and context.

- ◆ it helps pupils appreciate the past. Pupils do not find it easy to respect as well as understand people in the past.

Good departments therefore are already tuned in to the “citizenship philosophy”. Their teaching recognises the need for pupils to:

- ◆ have a respect for the people in the past;

- ◆ understand something of their values and attitudes;

- ◆ understand the choices available to people in the past.

They see the need for pupils to be able to understand the “human side” – in particular, issues such as:

What motivated people to act as they did?

Why did people act with irrationality/rationality?

How did contemporary people interpret “common sense”?

What were the values permeating a particular society or a group within that society?

Their plans for History teaching throughout the age range build in the development of pupils’ capacities to:

- ◆ care what happened in the past and for the people who lived in the past - particularly the role of common humanity.

Evidence suggests that pupils will not care about past people or even try to understand them without seeing the need to;

- ◆ appreciate as much as possible their achievements within the context of their age;

- ◆ see the importance of the “human side” in History – putting people to the forefront;

Developing spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness is a key part in the development of the affective appreciation of History;

- ◆ sense what is reasonable in human situations;

- ◆ recognise what is significant in the past and the choices available to people;

- ◆ discuss the motives driving characters;

- ◆ discuss relations between people in a story;

- ◆ rehearse anger, joy, irritation through historical contexts;

- ◆ discuss who was right, wrong etc.

25. Putting plenty of emphasis on helping pupils **see the wood for the trees**. Pupils need training in seeing the big picture and

a strong feature of many high-achieving departments is the explicit focus on the idea of “significance”. The teachers recognise that pupils need to be able to assign some priority to the mass of information pupils receive about the past. That helps provide them with some meaning and understanding of the human situation

as well as establish some relevance for the subject through making a connection between the past and their world today. Without developing this understanding, pupils will find it difficult, for example:

- ◆ to pose the significant questions;

- ◆ to extract the most important information;

- ◆ to marshal arguments containing the most important explanations, changes etc.;

- ◆ to substantiate arguments effectively.

26. A good understanding to be demonstrated of the **key ideas** and messages that pupils need to understand. In some of the best examples, departments have established the key ideas associated with the main concepts and built these systematically in a progressive way to reinforce and extend.

27. The **role of the story** is not neglected. Pupils enjoy it and it is an effective way of addressing the human dimension. The story provides framework, terms of reference and sets the scene to allow plenty of thinking and open-ended work. It stirs the imagination. Many of these successful departments do not skimp on the story in History and many of the History teachers are successful storytellers.

## Organisational and Managerial

**History departments obtaining good results have a tendency for:**

1. providing good consistent assessment and the use of the information;

- ◆ a good understanding and use of data about performance

*“Story telling is  
the wisdom of History”*

derived from assessment

- ♦ regular discussion about the overall quality of work, the factors affecting it, the actions needed to effect improvement and whether the overall progress is sufficient;
- ♦ a clear structure of meetings or opportunities to discuss with a heavy focus on assessing performance and devising strategies;

2. The high-achieving departments often have:

- ♦ a reasonable but not excessive amount of assessment most of which forms a normal part of teaching and learning;
- ♦ a range of approaches and not just writing.
- ♦ a simple recording system which allows the user to see how well the pupil is progressing in key aspects over a period of time with an indication of progress;
- ♦ a clear, manageable marking policy with a clear understanding about the type and amount of comment expected, e.g. clear feedback, correction of errors and the use of any grading system;
- ♦ pupils doing assessments of their and other work using marking criteria;
- ♦ regular discussion about pupil progress at departmental meetings and on other occasions;

3. Taking trouble to assess the opinions about their own **pupils' preferences** and using this information as part of their planning and organisation. Discussions with more than 350 pupils reveal the following general conclusions;

a) Pupils did not refer to the difficulty of the subject quite as much as their teachers do. What many did note though was the amount of reading and writing involved, especially writing they did not enjoy because they did not see its purpose.

b) The enjoyment of certain aspects of their subject tended to recur frequently throughout the age range 11-19. These included:

- ♦ issues covered in some depth;
- ♦ a focus on interesting people rather than institutions and abstractions;
- ♦ conflict - of all kinds;
- ♦ variety within lessons and over a period of time;
- ♦ a good story told by the teacher;
- ♦ engaging in the historical process particularly practical activities such as fieldwork, solving problems, decision making and research projects;
- ♦ learning that links class work to other aspects such as questionnaires, talking to others, using libraries;
- ♦ information technology.

There was **more divided opinion** about:

- local history;
- social and economic history;
- extended writing;
- the balance of passive and active experiences;
- debates and role play.

There is a surprising amount of **hostility to source work** at all stages. Whilst few found it to be particularly difficult, many pupils expressed real doubts about its usefulness and interest. This same view applied to lower order skills such as observation, basic comprehension as well as higher order ones such as interpretation, comparing, evaluation. The closest they came

to real enjoyment was a discussion of interesting visual sources such as gory medical or war scenes or when sources were used to deal with a worthwhile historical question. They could cope with this as long as they regarded the historical investigation rather than the source work as the central concern.

c) The view expressed by many teachers is that pupils and their parents do not see the relevance of History. Changing a syllabus though does not lead automatically to larger numbers. Good results and teaching seem to matter much more. Changing a syllabus without conviction can actually have a negative effect. Teacher enthusiasm for the subject seems to be more influential than the syllabus itself. Relevance is caught up with good grades and few pupils assessed relevance in terms of specific history content. In career terms, awareness of the vocational benefits of History was low. Interestingly, many of those who did not opt for the subject hardly viewed its relevance differently to those who did choose to study it.

## The Implications for History Departments

1. Probably the major factor in explaining popularity is **good teaching** closely accompanied by a high status for the subject. A tradition of good exam results tends to equate approximately with decent option numbers.

2. Popular departments were staffed generally by **good, well-qualified teachers** with specific qualifications in the subjects with the best teachers also teaching lower down in the school and not confining themselves to the examination classes or the most able pupils.

3. The most popular departments had a **reputation for enthusiasm and involvement**. A surprising number of the more popular departments had at least one teacher closely involved with examination marking. The teachers became involved in county and national activities and read journals, organised visiting lecturers and belonged to historical societies and organisations.

4. Such departments also tended to have a reputation for **rigour, hard work and high standards** but were prepared to innovate and offered experiences to pupils beyond the normal call of duty such as history clubs, extra homework and revision sessions, encouraging ICT and having a wide range of visits.

5. Time and time again one heard pupils in the most popular departments referring to the **characteristics recognised in good teachers** such as good discipline, a good relationships with pupils, teacher awareness of effective methods, teacher enthusiasm for the subject, clear explanations, hard work, constructive praise and criticism and plenty of feedback.

6. The popular departments did need the **support of others** in the school particularly the head and senior management teams. Several of the popular departments were led by someone from the senior management team but claimed their first love was the subject and the children. Many popular History departments had stability with no strong desire to change what worked well. There was often little enthusiasm for changing syllabuses to deal with new and unusual themes.

7. Most good departments had at least **reasonable accommodation used to good effect**, e.g. attractive display, competitions, history news items, class museums, timelines. Most popular departments spent wisely on resources and did not rely

excessively on worksheets either in class or for homework.

8. The most successful departments have a “**naturalness**” about them. It means, for example, that there are:

- ♦ few false links with other subjects or attempt to put the subject simply as a servicing one, e.g. to literacy, geography, ICT.
- ♦ tasks that are meaningful, e.g. no source-based work demanding broad conclusions from short gobbets;
- ♦ the materials used are real and authentic. Some of the most successful departments, for example, put great store on pupils seeing real documents, visiting historical sites and receiving visitors;
- ♦ the imaginative work is carefully controlled, e.g. there is not too much of the “imagine you are” or describe a day in the life of... Imaginative and creative work is based on actual historical people and events. There is no reason why simplification and making issues as concrete as possible should compromise realism.

9. Resources are given very careful consideration in some of the most successful departments. The best are not necessarily those most lavishly endowed but which:

- ♦ have clear criteria for selection, e.g. using pupil views, design and layout, readability, appropriateness for curricular initiatives, distortion, quality of questions, illustrations;
- ♦ plan explicitly how a particular resource actually speeds up historical understanding and interest rather than just contributing to variety or a key skill, e.g. videos, ICT, sources;
- ♦ embrace a range of resources so that pupils become aware of differing sources of information, e.g. written, visual, graphical, artefactual, electronic;
- ♦ are located in different places such as classrooms, home, ICT library and maybe elsewhere in the community so that pupils understand that information and ideas are unlikely to emanate from a single repository;
- ♦ are not dominated by worksheets and workcards.

## Conclusion

All the indications are that further investigation is needed before being dogmatic about the factors affecting success at History. Crude tendencies might exist but not neat patterns. The number of factors examined also needs to be increased and one should also look at trends and variations across area and types of school. For example, **other influential factors** that were only probed generally in this survey might include:

- a) time available;
- b) resources;
- c) quality of accommodation;
- d) effectiveness of homework;
- e) a whole school approach to learning skills;
- f) pace and timing of activities;
- g) gender or other types of pupil.

This article has simply tried to make a more direct link between actual outcomes using quite a large sample of schools and students rather than make assumptions. The overall conclusion is that the picture is far from a straightforward or consistent one. Nor does a good exam result mean that the pinnacle of historical competence has been reached. Hopefully this is just the start rather than the final word on this issue.

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