

Encouraging individual learning in classroom history

Jon Rosebank

You cannot *teach* individual learning. It is obvious when you think about it. All we can do is create the *conditions* in which students begin to think for themselves. In fact, given its openness to debate, history must be one of the best subjects for encouraging individual learners. It is why good schools place a high value on excellent history teaching.

How do we create the conditions for individual learning? The basic rule is to run an inductive classroom. If we stand at the front and feed them information or a continual stream of instructions or questions, or if we simply bombard them with one PowerPoint after another, our students will never bother to think for themselves. More important, they will never have the *confidence* to think for themselves. History is perceived as getting through an historical episode or absorbing some already-organised body of knowledge or list of interpretations. Telling them what they are going to learn at the start of each lesson ticks a box for inspectors and educationalists, but makes students feel excluded and patronised. Instead, make each history lesson an adventure, an investigation. Kid them that we do not yet know the answer. It is amazing, but students are able to suspend their disbelief, and love the challenge.

(It is something I discovered when I was doing John Simkin's inspired Yalding project with a year 7.¹ I suggested they use his documents to work out the *occupation zoning* of the village – having no idea myself what the result would be. It was one of the best lessons I ever taught, dazzled a visiting French educationalist who happened to be there, and transformed my practice).

Arrange the desks into three sides of a square (even if you have to add some in the middle). Sit yourself level with the front desks. I always break the rules and sit on the teacher's desk: it is a sign of stillness, confidence, and informality. Insist on eye contact with them all, *all of the time*. From at least year 9 insist that they are making some notes as we go along, however incomplete. Make sure they have basic information to work with, whether from a previous lesson, in a book, or in something we hand out.

Then have a conversation, knocking idea about, posing dilemmas, suggesting possible approaches. Laugh a lot. Of course, we are in charge and at the appropriate moment we will bring the discussion to a conclusion. But now our students feel that we are taking them seriously, that they are able to make a contribution. On the other hand, they also perceive that there is nowhere to hide. They must be ready to respond at any moment and they are expected to make their own record. The most rewarding thing students ever told me was that, as soon as they stepped into the history department, they felt expectant, challenged, *taller*, capable of bigger and better things. They were going to be part of something exciting, every time.

Then set them tasks that require them to *process* information. Just making notes on a subject or writing a basic account sends the signal that someone else has the answers and their job is just to

¹ John Simkin, '[Yalding Medieval Village Project KS3](https://www.spartacus-educational.com/yalding.htm)' ([spartacus-educational.com](https://www.spartacus-educational.com)) (1997, updated 2020)

memorise them. Avoid over-complex tasks that do not have any clear outcome in understanding. Avoid closed questions. Avoid groups bigger than three and preferably two, so that there are no passengers. Get them to sort, prioritise or categorise information. Get them to play roles which require individual decision-making. Get them to contribute *individually* to a debate, a newspaper, or a display. All the time we are asking them to make their own mind up and then defend their conclusions.

Finally, set a question or a task that will end up as *their* record of what has been done. Never dictate or write notes on the board unless they have become exceptionally confused about some issue. Check what they are doing so that what they write will be of value to them when they look back at it.



Belinda Fewings, 19th century classroom

Encouraging individual learning is about taking risks in the classroom. It demands confidence – we need to be very sure of our material. We must allow discussions to be noisy and exercise books to get messy. We must make sure we have back-up – good revision to plug gaps, a good textbook or notes they can always refer to. I routinely made GCSE classes make notes as we went along. At the end of the term before the exams I would then hand out *my* version of the notes for them to take away. That way my students had actively processed everything for themselves but would eventually have a complete record for revision.

Unless we let them loose, they will end up being dull to teach and uninterested in history. I found that students taught in this way arrived in the sixth form (in large numbers) excited to be challenged, and full of their own ideas. Others, perhaps coming from another school, dully waited for me to give them the answers. The key is to hold in our minds that the objective is not to get through the course but to enjoy being historians with them. Teaching them the tricks to

pass history exams is much easier (and something we must talk about another time.) But that is not why any of us do the job.

Dr Jon Rosebank is Fellow of New College, Oxford; Executive Producer BBC Documentaries and History; Head of History 11-18; writer (but not more than one of these at any time.) Now writer and presenter of [History Café](#), revisiting historical episodes and making scholarship accessible on all podcast platforms.

References and Resources:

John Simpkin, '[Yalding Medieval Village Project KS3](#)' ([spartacus-educational.com](#)) (1997, updated 2020)

[Teaching for beginners / Historical Association \(history.org.uk\)](#)