

TEACHING & LEARNING JOURNAL - EDITION 17

From knowledge organisers to a 'knowledge party': strategies to prioritise pupil learning over performance

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As part of the literacy working group looking into the development of knowledge organisers (KOs) I have taken part in many productive conversations with colleagues about their design, implementation and use in subject specific contexts. Though their role remains controversial in some quarters (Counsell, 2019), when used effectively they can provide an essential starting point for engaging pupils with a knowledge rich scheme of learning. According to the literature on the subject they have two main functions.

Firstly, they are used as a key tool in helping pupils to retain specific information in their long term memory. KOs are handed to pupils at either the start of, or at a specific point within a unit of work, and form the basis of home learning revision tasks which are then sequenced to coincide with particular lessons. These then become the basis for low stakes quizzing and other spaced retrieval practices. In many schools pupils follow a 'look, cover, write, check' approach when using their KO's – similar to how you might first learn key vocab when studying another language. This has the added advantage of taking away any sanction for failing to engage with the homework from a pupil's low quizzing score and onto the quality of revision itself, for which the teacher can then offer support.

Secondly, knowledge organisers can be invaluable for asking the question, 'what do we want our pupils to know?' This may seem obvious when designing any unit of work but as (Powling, 2020) points out KO's allow colleagues within a department to sit down collaboratively and to distil the key information and concepts that they want pupils to master. In addition, in a subject such as history, this allows for more detailed discussion about questions of breadth and depth and when and where within the curriculum you want to drill down and focus on specific case studies.

Thus, a knowledge organiser is far more than a glossary of keywords. It can become an integral part of the planning process. In my own practice I have tried to develop KO's with colleagues which include timelines, diagrams and vocabulary related to different themes which pupils can then be specifically directed to when revising. In doing this I have deliberately tried to avoid large chunks of text – no lengthy explanations of key concepts or events - and to limit information to what can only be included on one page. (See figure 1). They are very much a work in progress and could benefit from the addition of dual coding (Thornton 2018, Powling 2020) but they lay out the foundational knowledge which pupils are expected to master. Through the process of designing and re-designing them over the next academic year it is hoped that we will be able to fully appreciate the essential knowledge pupils need to become an expert in each area they are studying.

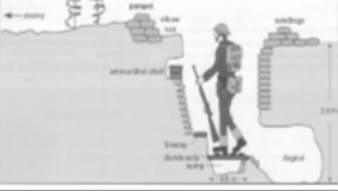
Year 8 Knowledge Organiser: Why did so many men die during World War One?			
Chronology of key events		Features of a trench vocabulary	
28 th June 1914	Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip.		
28 th July 1914	Austria declares war on Serbia.		
1 st Aug 1914	Germany declares war on Russia.		
3 rd Aug 1914	Germany declares war on France and invades Belgium.		
4 th Aug 1914	Britain declares war on Germany.		
Dec 1914	The Christmas truce saw peace break out in parts of France.	Barbed wire	Placed in front of the trench to slow down the enemy.
April 1915	Second Battle of Ypres – poison gas is used for the first time.	Duckboard	Made of wood and placed on the bottom of a trench.
Jan 1916	Conscription introduced in Britain.	Dugout	Underground room offering protection.
July – Nov 1916	The First Battle of the Somme. 60,000 British casualties in the first day.	Firestep	Used to help soldiers shoot over the parapet.
April 1917	USA declares war on Germany.	Parapet	A barrier at the front of the trench to help protect soldier's heads.
11 Nov 1918	Germany signs an armistice ending the war.	Sandbags	Protection from bullets and shrapnel. Made the trench higher.
Medical vocabulary		Zigzag	The pattern of the frontline trench.
Trench foot	An infection of the foot caused by cold, wet and unsanitary conditions.	Key individuals	
Trench fever	A disease caused by lice that began suddenly with severe pain followed by a high fever.	Franz Ferdinand	Heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire
Shrapnel wound	Injury caused by the fragments of a bomb when it explodes.	David Lloyd George	British Prime Minister from 1916
Infection	The contamination of a wound, e.g., from a soldier's uniform or the soil.	Douglas Haig	Head of the British Army
Gangrene	An infection to an area of the body caused by lack of blood in an area of the body.	Gavrilo Princip	The assassin of Franz Ferdinand.
Shell shock	A mental breakdown brought on by experiencing the horrors of war.	Lord Kitchener	Secretary of State for war 1914 - 1916
		Triple Alliance	The treaty between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy to support each other if attacked.
		Triple Entente	Agreement between France, Britain and Russia in response to the Triple Alliance.
		Conscription	Compulsory enlistment in the British army.
		Propaganda	Information used to make you support something.
		Stalemate	When two sides cannot make any progress.
		Trench	The area dug into the ground where troops lived and fought.
		Casualties	People who have been killed or injured in battle.
		No Man's Land	The area between the two trench systems which no side controlled.
		Artillery	Larger heavy guns usually situated at the back of the trenches.
		Brodie Helmet	Introduced in 1916 to protect soldiers' heads from bullets and shrapnel.
		Armistice	An agreement to stop fighting.
		Assassination	The targeted killing of someone.
		Militarism	A belief that a strong military force should be maintained and used to solve problems.
		Alliance	A partnership between two or more countries to support each other if one is attacked.
		Imperialism	Gaining power by taking over colonies usually through military force.
		Nationalism	Believing strongly in your country.

Figure 1: Example knowledge organiser for the Year 8 unit, why did so many men die during World War One?

Getting an invite to the 'knowledge party.'

This idea of knowledge organisers providing only foundational knowledge is key. On their own they are not a panacea to improve pupil performance but rather they are a beginning from which pupils can start to make connections between different facts and concepts, getting them invited to what Michael Fordham (2016) calls 'the knowledge party.' To get an invite to the knowledge party you don't just need to know the right people. You need to have learned the right facts as well. You also need to know about how concepts operate in different contexts and to understand that different words can mean different things over time. You also have to know how all of these ideas link together. Fordham gives the example of the term 'middle class' and how for him this is not a bland definition based on income or birth but rather something that conjures up a mental image of:

'London coffee houses, Viennese concert halls and Parisian tennis courts. I call upon a lifetime of textual encounters in imagining the middle classes: Lucy Pevensie, Phileas Fogg and Marius Pontmercy are as much a part of this as Charles Darwin, Emmeline Pankhurst and George Mallory.'

For Fordham all the characters above are in conversation at a party in the settings that he has been able to create based on a lifetime of knowledge enhancement. The question of how to create such mental imagery in the minds of our pupils is a tricky one but it cannot happen without a strong knowledge foundation.

Learning not Performing

Writing a history essay is difficult. Making sure that our pupils are able to develop their foundational knowledge and to then use it to answer a particular question can be even harder. At the ATTLeaders2020 conference earlier this year Melanie Hooson spoke about the need for teachers to understand the difference between learning and performance; the idea that learning is embedded knowledge that pupils have packaged away into their long term memory to be used when needed, compared to performance which is merely the appearance of learning e.g. completing a 4 mark question at the end of a lesson on the subject they have just been studying.

In some ways history is an ideal subject in which to develop a pupil’s foundational knowledge; to make sure that they are learning rather than performing. For instance, the telling of stories can make it easier to link facts and ideas together. However, the reality is that as a subject that is mostly taught chronologically, it can be a challenge in history to develop sophisticated retrieval practices that deepens pupil knowledge in a way that does not simply rely on quizzing.

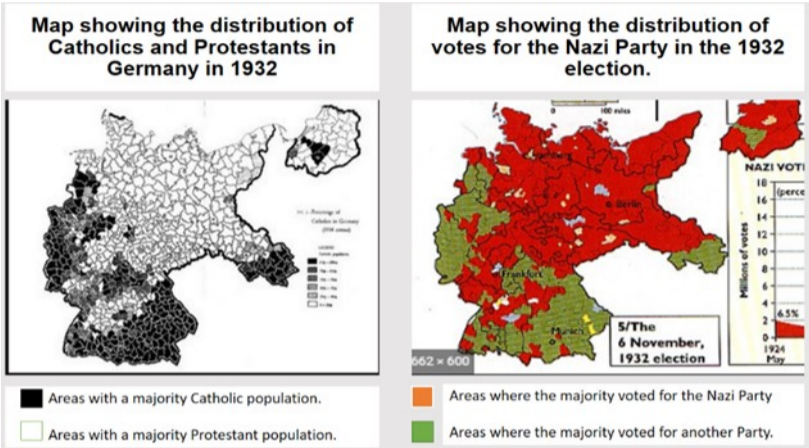


Figure 2: Religious and political distribution maps.

The work of Hill (2020) in developing employment techniques within a scheme of work has helped in this regard. Much like the writing of Dale Banham, Hill argues that it is the ‘turning of facts into plot structures... which gives history its explanatory power.’ For instance at GCSE rather than just teaching a narrative that solely follows the specification, Hill suggests that you could introduce important figures who appear suddenly (or briefly) earlier than otherwise intended by looking back at past events through their eyes. Any task that can simultaneously look back to previous learning and project forward to the content of the current lesson can help pupils be more secure in their knowledge connections. A lesson on Nazi policy towards the Catholic Church in the 1930’s (see figure 2) can help develop knowledge connections by asking pupils to discuss maps of Germany based on voting patterns and religious denomination. In a simple visual form you can see that Catholic areas were less likely to vote to for the Nazi Party than Protestant areas. In one image pupils are being asked to recall information about why people voted for the Nazi party and to surmise about how these voting patterns could influence Hitler’s treatment of the Catholic and Protestant Church in the future.

Mental migration to historical worlds

Hill's work on employment is linked to his idea of ‘mapping historical worlds’. In essence to try and make history as immersive an experience as possible for pupils, much like you would be drawn into the Star Wars saga or the Marvel Universe. This is obviously easier said than done. Such a process Hill argues helps pupils with this mental mapping of information (as discussed by Fordham above) and makes it easier for them to create the all-important knowledge connections. To do this it is important for the teacher to have strong and specific subject knowledge and as part of my ongoing CPD I read The Norman Conquest by Marc Morris as a way of helping to develop a new Year 7 unit on Anglo-Saxon and Norman England. This unit moves away from asking the traditional question of why William won the Battle of Hastings and instead focuses on the impact of the conquest itself and how far the Normans transformed England.

Reading Morris’s book has allowed me to develop lesson plans that move beyond the essential knowledge of the enquiry question and bring in wider period and substantive knowledge which Hammond (2004) argues is fundamental in helping pupils use their learned knowledge effectively in their written work. Such an approach has allowed me to plan lessons that alternate between a macro and micro setting. For instance, lesson one locates Anglo-Saxon England within the broader context of its links with Scandinavia, Normandy and France, while lesson two starts with a focus on life in Ipswich and Suffolk before zooming out to investigate the structures of Anglo-Saxon society. As a result of my subject specific reading I am in the process of creating the hooks which will hopefully draw pupils into this historical word. For instance the fact that up to 30% of people in Anglo-Saxon England lived as slaves, or that it was routine to slaughter your defeated opponents after a battle are vivid examples of what life was like before 1066 and how it was subsequently changed by the Norman invasion.

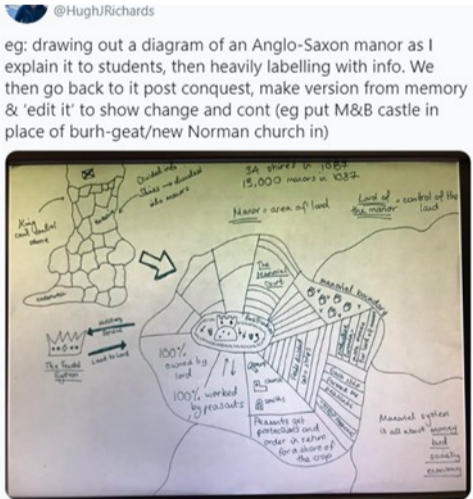


Figure 3: An example from Richards (2019) of a diagram of an Anglo– Saxon manor.

In figure 3 you can see a diagram by Richards (2019) of an Anglo-Saxon manor. Richards argues that as with spider planning for essays (rather than the use of writing frames), diagrams are an effective way of introducing pupils to change and continuity as they allow them to use their foundational knowledge in complex ways.

In developing this new Year 7 unit of work I am aware of the added complexity that introducing the notion of change and continuity can bring. How can you effectively approach such concepts so early in the secondary scheme of work? How can you be sure that pupils have developed enough foundational knowledge to properly engage with second order concepts? Here we need to return to the beginning and to focus once again on the mastery of the knowledge organiser.



It is not simply that pupils are drawing what they have been studying, but rather that they are participating directly with their teacher in thinking about historical processes. In doing this it enables pupils to engage in much greater detail about the extent of any change or continuity that occurred; to think about who benefited from it and who did not, and to consider to what extent any change was spread evenly across the country. A second 'edited map' of Norman England makes explicit these contrasts.

Much of this work as part of my ongoing CPD training is still in its developmental phase. The Covid-19 pandemic has inevitably limited opportunities to advance these ideas in the classroom. What I have learned is that knowledge organisers have the potential to serve a dual purpose in improving my practice. Firstly, to act as the starting point for reflecting on what should be taught in any given unit of work, making it explicit what we think pupils need to know. Secondly, that they can be an important tool for helping pupils move beyond their foundational knowledge and develop complex understandings of the past. In essence to make it more likely that pupils are learning about history and not just performing it. I look forward to working with colleagues over the next year to evaluate the effectiveness of knowledge organisers and their role in helping as many pupils as possible gain entry to the knowledge party!

