

## Teaching historical significance at Key Stage 3. A discussion of five models offering different criteria.

When there is so much history to study how do students know what is significant? Is everything on the National Curriculum significant? If not why is it there? Are there significant events that are not taught in schools, when other less significant events are? In any case students do not passively absorb what the National Curriculum and GCSE specifications tell them. Rather, they filter and sift, remember and forget, add to and modify, thereby reconstructing their own personal historical understanding. But they need help in making sense of it all. They need help working out what we mean by significant. Several models have been advanced. I'll do no more here than lay them out before you, inviting you to take from them what you will. The other file on practical strategies shows how these could be employed in the classroom.

### Model A

One of the earliest attempts to define the criteria for historical significance came from **Hartington**. To him there were six vital ingredients.

1. People at the time thought that it was important
2. It affected a lot of people
3. It led to other important events
4. It still affects attitudes and beliefs today
5. It affected people for a long time
6. It affected people deeply

### Model B

Rob Philips helpfully added his own six years ago;

Profundity: Refers to how deeply people were/have been affected by the event. How deeply were people's lives affected?

- Quantity: Refers to the number of people affected by the event. Did the event affect many, everyone, just a few? Were the effects widespread or localised?
- Durability: Refers to how long were people affected by the event. How durable was the event in time? Was the event lasting or only ephemeral?
- Relevance: Refers to the extent to which the event has contributed to historical understanding. Is the event relevant to our understanding of the past and/or present? Does the event carry any meaning to historians today. Is it used to make comparisons, for example?

## **Model C**

**Christine Counsell** has recently pitched in with her own 5 Rs. I am usually very dubious about neat alliterative headings, but I may be wrong in this case. See what you think. They are accompanied by comments from Frank Mason, Advisory Teacher for History, Worcestershire LA, who tried to apply Christine's criteria to a study of the Titanic

### **Remembered**

The fact that Titanic memorials can be found in different parts of the world should be of interest. Moreover the varying subjects of the memorials could be investigated. Titanic-titanic memorials.com provides a useful resource here. There are opportunities for local links here in getting pupils to identify local memorials and suggest why they are there, whether there should be other memorials.

### **Results**

The idea that something good can come out of a disaster is often an intriguing one for pupils. Comparisons can be made with the Great Fire of London.

### **Remarkable**

Images of how the Titanic was reported on at the time can be given out to pupils and they can work in pairs/groups to interpret them. The question of how interested people were at the time can be examined. I found pupils were particularly intrigued by the apparent discrepancies in some of the reporting and why this might be. The five front pages from the Evening Sun can be used to examine the changing emotions as the story unfolds. Obviously comparisons can be made with the way in which "big" news is reported today. The five newspaper headlines could be cut up and pupils asked to sequence them. Local reporting of the sinking can prove a useful discussion point.

## Resonant

The phrase “rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic” is one few pupils seem to be aware of and no criticism should be attached to that. However if they are invited to ask parents, teachers or other adults then they will probably find a more positive answer. It is interesting to note that the phrase seems to have first been coined in the USA in the 1970’s, 60 years after the sinking of the Titanic.

## Revealing

The name of ship might provide a useful introduction to the idea of revealing. Who or what is a Titan? Why was the ship given this name? Does this tell us anything about attitudes in the period?

The table of deaths/survivors by class and statements about third class passengers should provoke some interesting thoughts about the end of an era.

## Model D

Take the example of World War One. Why is it significant? Apply the **GREAT** criteria.

Groundbreaking

Remembered.....by all

Events.....that were far reaching

Affected.....the future

Terrifying

## Model E

This model is different. It looks at the idea of significance as being part of collective memory function, designed to tailor the collective past for present-day purposes. More specifically, they can be seen as identifiable contemporary reasons for ascribing significance to events of the past. They help to explain how and why people from the education and public communities establish few connections of significance with the collective past. These types of memory significance are threefold:

1 **Intimate interests**; use of personal family, religious, cultural, or ancestral connections to the events (I was there so it was significant to me)

2. **Symbolic** significance; use of particular events for present-day national or patriotic justification (i.e. this is a national holiday so it must be important, we wear symbols such as poppies to remember a particularly significant event).

3. **Contemporary lessons**; use of historical events to draw simplistic analogies in order to guide present-day actions e.g. comparisons with appeasement in lead up to the Iraq war.

## Further reading

Lomas T. 1990 Teaching and Assessing historical Understanding. London. The Historical Association

Phillips, R.2002. Historical Significance - The Forgotten 'Key Element'? Teaching History 106 pp.14-19.

Seixas.P. Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance. Social Education 61 (1) 22-27

Wineburg,S.S. Historical thinking and other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past. Philadelphia : Temple University Press.