

Mr Ellis is a History Teacher and KS3 History Leader at the RGS, and has been teaching here for the past 4 years and writes this week's guest blog post on active learning and ways to challenge the boys to get the most out of the information they are taught.



Like Mr Wallace and Mr Bennett, I have also been reviewing my teaching methods and really trying to think what will work best for our students in trying to raise their attainment not just at KS4, but at KS5 and KS3. There is a lot of pressure on students and teachers alike in trying to achieve the best results possible and this pressure then manifests itself in the creation of exam factories, which doesn't always work for every student and often takes the enjoyment out of the subjects being studied. I refer you to Plato whose thoughts on education are still relevant even today:

Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each. Plato (BC 427-BC 347).

I like this quote as it relates, I feel, to a particular style that I have used in my lessons and in most cases can be subscribed to other subjects. It is often referred to as active teaching and alongside flipped lessons and guided lessons, it just adds to the teaching toolbox of ideas that will hopefully help each student to know what amuses their mind and direct them to the genius within them and raise their attainment.

At a recent conference I attended, about raising attainment at KS4 in History, Ben Walsh, one of the speakers, (an author of many of our History GCSE textbooks), gave a speech on trying to get students to understand the fundamentals of source analysis and ensuring that ALL students can understand what we mean by source analysis. Within History this is often the bane of our lives when it comes to ensuring that our students do well with these sorts of questions, which are so popular with the exam boards today, but are often unpopular with the students as they do not fully understand the principles.

To refer to Ben Walsh and the research he has done, when you ask the students their perception of Historical practice, you often get these replies:

Eh?; Sources and stuff; The stuff in sources; That stuff they tell us to do ... "bias and that."
Ben Walsh 2012

With regards to these sorts of replies, he challenges the methods that have been used and instead of asking the students what they can find out, or asking whether these sources are useful or reliable about X, Y and Z, we should ask them what questions can these sources answer and how satisfied are they with those answers? Getting them thinking, and challenging them with a collection of sources and getting them to come up with the questions that can be answered by the sources can raise their understanding.

Alongside this, challenging the student's perceptions of source work, is the active approach to challenging their views on a particular topic and getting them to really think about it. This way they are more likely to have a deeper understanding of it and raise their attainment. The active approach and this is something that you cannot use in every lesson, is to turn the classroom into the topic you are looking at.

For example:

Recently I have been studying the Berlin Wall with my Year 10s and the common misconception within this topic is that every East Berliner wanted to go to the West and this was a simple decision. By turning the student into an active participant we challenge them and get them thinking. The historian Ian Dawson has done a lot of work on active learning and with the help of Ian Luff has devised a number of different active scenarios to help a student's understanding of a topic. Their scenario "Escape to the West" is an activity intended to give insight into the ideas and attitudes prevailing inside the DDR (East Germany) during the period 1961-1989. It challenges the simplistic view, so often held in the West, that every citizen of the DDR was desperate to re-locate to the West German Federal Republic.

For the activity I changed the room into Cold War Berlin, with an East and West side and a death zone in the middle. Every student is involved and is given character cards, and an information sheet with push, pull and stay factors on them and a set of instructions. They are then asked to read their cards carefully and make a decision on whether they are going to stay in the East or risk an escape to the West. If they decide to escape, they have to be careful about trusting anybody as some of their colleagues are secretly playing the Stasi, who will be trying to find out who is planning an escape and can then arrest them. If they can plan with somebody else without being caught the chances of them getting across the divide will be greatly improved. The Stasi officers also have the power to offer bribes to any they think might tell them who is thinking about escaping. After this talking period, the students are given a period of time to try an escape if they want. On the Western side are other students tempting them over. The end result is that some of the students are successful, some are reported on and are arrested and some are caught by the guards. In the debrief, I asked why some decided to stay, and why some tried to escape and some decided to report on others. The variety of answers was brilliant and well thought out and when I then asked them to write down for me 'What factors might an East German citizen considering an escape to the West think about before taking a final decision and was it as simple as the West suggested?', their answers were much better thought out as they were able to remember what they had decided and explain why they had decided to do what they had done. (If interested, more activities like this can be found on www.thinkinghistory.co.uk.)

Challenging the students in different ways and using a more active approach, alongside guided learning and flipped lessons has certainly helped me raise a greater understanding in my subject and raised attainment, in a fun and memorable way. As mentioned previously by Mr Bennett and Mr Wallace, these are all ideas and not new ones, but have been refined and adapted by each teaching generation and can be used alongside

traditional methods to help the student better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of his genius.