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**Introduction:** The aims of this chapter are as follows:

- to consider the different elements of chronological understanding that young people need to develop in order to get better at history.
- to consider the status and role of chronology in the 2014 English national curriculum as a case study in government designed curricular.
- to consider the importance of chronology in helping develop pupils' understanding of other 'second order' historical concepts.

### **What do we mean by chronological understanding?**

It might seem a deceptively simple task to define the term chronology. For example, the Oxford Dictionaries (2016) defines it as 'the arrangement of events or dates in the order of their occurrence'. However, this definition does not explicitly address the word's origin, from the Greek 'khronos' meaning time, which adds another layer of meaning to the term. This suggests that it is not simply about accurately sequencing a series of events in the order in which they happened. Instead, it also involves a deeper sense of the passing of time, over long or short periods, along with a language to measure it. As Stow and Haydn (2004, p.87) put it: 'chronology in the classroom can legitimately be widened to mean the development of an understanding of historical time'.

Consequently, there is far more to teaching chronology than sequencing exercises and the challenge for history teachers is to consider carefully how we might develop a more sophisticated understanding of chronology in our pupils. As Phillips (2008, p.42) states ‘Chronology is a key organising tool for developing pupils’ understanding of history and as a ‘concept’ within the history curriculum’. Chronology has always featured, as an element in developing pupils’ historical knowledge and understanding, in the five versions of the National Curriculum in England (1991, 1995, 2000, 2008 and 2014). Perhaps, most explicitly when it was identified as a ‘Key Concept’ in the 2008 National Curriculum that stated:

‘Chronological understanding: This is essential in constructing historical narratives and explanations. It involves using precise dates to establish sequences of events in an enquiry, using chronological terms and vocabulary (e.g. century, decade, B.C. and A.D.) and knowing the names and key features of periods studied. Understanding of periods should develop into a chronological framework describing the characteristic features of past societies and periods.

Pupils should identify changes within and across periods, making links between them.’

(QCA, 2007, p.3)

### **What are the key components of chronological understanding?**

The history teaching community has been well served by the ongoing research and reflection that has taken place over many years about the essential ideas that children need to grasp in order to get better at history. Chronology is no exception and, as with all the other ‘second order’ concepts, young peoples’ understanding only ‘develops because teachers identify the component understandings and teach explicitly to develop them’ (Dawson, 2014, p.1).

Our understanding of the different elements of chronology, which need to be taught explicitly to pupils, has developed over the last fifteen years. In 2001 Haydn (2001, p.100) produced a framework identifying four categories of time that pupils needed to understand. In summary, he suggested that they were as follows:

- T1 = The mechanics of time or the ‘clock of history’.
- T2 = The framework of the past (sometimes called the ‘Big Picture’ of the past).
- T3 = Developing an understanding of a wide range of particular events and how they unfolded (often with a focus on ‘cause and consequence’ or ‘change and continuity’).
- T4 = Developing understanding of ‘Deep Time’ (i.e. potentially right back to the origins of the earth and certainly to the origin of the first humans).

Three years later Dawson (2004, p.16-17) built on his ideas and suggested some adjustments or additions to Haydn’s framework.

- Objective 1 - Understanding the vocabulary of chronological understanding. He identified three types descriptive (e.g. before, after, decade, century, etc.), technical (e.g. BCE, CE, etc.) and conceptual (e.g. change, period, duration, progression, etc.)
- Objective 2 - Developing a ‘sense of period’ (e.g. understanding some of the key features of a period and having a sense of what life might have been like at that time).
- Objective 3 - Frameworks of History – These might be either ‘thematic overviews’ of ‘change and continuity’ over a long period of time or detailed knowledge of the chronology of some major events within the National Curriculum.
- Objective 4 - Overview of a broad span of human history.

Broadly speaking Dawson retained Haydn's T1 and T4, **and** 'blended' his T2 and T3 into Objective 3. Furthermore, he introduced an additional dimension by suggesting that understanding chronology also included developing a 'sense of period' (Objective 2).

Ten years later Dawson (2014, p.1) was indicating that: 'Chronology is a portmanteau word embracing a number of facets including: Sequencing; Duration; Language and Terminology; Sense of period and the big picture of events across time'. Thus, adding 'duration' as a further discrete element in developing a more nuanced understanding of chronology.

Haydn (2015, p.135) incorporated Dawson's ideas into his classification and introduced two more categories for teachers to consider when teaching for chronological understanding.

These were as follows:

- T5 = Developing pupils' understanding of 'duration' in the past which includes appreciating where history overlaps between periods, eras, civilisations and dynasties.
- T6 = Giving pupils 'a sense of period'; the idea that there were particular characteristics of certain periods in time.

As Haydn himself acknowledges his T1-T6 categories are not a definitive framework for understanding time. However, they do identify 'a clear sense of the various facets of time which need to be addressed in the development of pupils' understanding of the past' (Haydn 2015, p.134). Consequently, they provide a very useful checklist to enable history teachers to teach chronological understanding effectively. Furthermore, this framework also clearly illustrates the central role that chronological understanding plays in developing pupils understanding of 'second order' concepts (of which more later).

## **Where does chronological understanding fit into the 2014 National Curriculum?**

Following a period of review and consultation, the most recent version of the English National Curriculum became statutory, in maintained schools, from September 2014. Whilst the previous national curriculum review in 2007-08 had only considered the Key Stage 3 curriculum, this review simultaneously considered what might be a desired curriculum across all three Key Stages (i.e. from the age of 5-14 years old). Many in the history teaching community felt that this cross-phase approach would be helpful in addressing some of the issues regarding curriculum continuity between primary and secondary school. Ofsted's (2011, p. 4) report 'History for All' had identified that 'in most cases, links between secondary schools and their local primary schools were weak'. This review might encourage teachers in both phases to collaborate more effectively and consider how to build on pupils' prior knowledge and learning. Could this help address one of Ofsted's (2011, p. 1) concerns that pupils' 'chronological understanding was often underdeveloped' and 'some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes they had studied within any coherent, long-term narrative'?

When the draft curriculum (DfE, 2013) was released for public consultation it provoked, not for the first time, a fierce debate about the nature and purpose of the school history curriculum. The document did present a rationale for the teaching of history through a 'Purpose of Study' statement. However, the 2008 'Key Concepts and Processes' framework was replaced with a bullet point list of 'Aims' with only one explicit mention of chronology.

‘know and understand British history as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the story of the first settlers in these islands to the development of the institutions which govern our lives today.’

(DfE, 2013, p.165)

Thus, the main debate centred-around the proposed content of the curriculum. What was contentious here was that a single and specific narrative was being advocated. Critics of this approach like Spier (2012, p.50) would contend that this merely reflected ‘the importance attached by politicians and others to writing and teaching national histories in Europe and the Americas’. Likewise most historians would argue that the history of Britain incorporates many, often intertwined narratives. It was no coincidence that Simon Schama deliberately entitled his BBC series ‘A History of Britain’, clearly acknowledging in his title that there were other narratives to be told.

Furthermore Schama (2013), whilst sympathetic to the teaching of an over-arching chronology, was outspoken in his criticism of the prescribed content which he described as a ‘rather ridiculous shopping list’ (Schama, p. 8). In particular, he criticised the selection of Clive of India, whom he describes as a ‘sociopathic, corrupt thug’ (Schama, p. 4), and lamented the exclusion of Mary Wollstonecraft from the 127 prescribed topics in the programme of study. He was not alone and the content, sequencing and purpose of the proposed curriculum generated considerable national debate. The BBC Radio 4 Moral Maze series dedicated a programme to consider different perspectives about the nature, purpose and structure of the school history curriculum. The debate captured the views of both Michael

Gove's supporters and critics and illustrated the complexity of content selection and sequencing in the designing of any national history curriculum (BBC 2013).

It was abundantly clear that the authors of this draft curriculum thought that chronological understanding was best developed by insisting that 'Pupils should be taught the following chronology of British history sequentially' (DfE, 2013, p.167). However this view that helping pupils to develop a coherent long-term narrative is best done by simply starting in the distant past and gradually working towards the present, as the child grows older, is often critiqued as Philpott states:

'Chronological understanding is not developed by simply teaching events and periods in the order of time ... While some departments may justifiably choose to teach chronologically this approach will not necessarily provide pupils with a secure grasp of the concept'.

(Philpott, 2010, p.6)

Furthermore, there was also an implication in most of the discourse that understanding chronology simply meant pupils being able to sequence correctly key people, events and dates in (British) history in chronological order and that the best way to do this is to teach the curriculum chronologically. However as many have argued (Kelly, 2004 cited in Dawson 2007; Phillips, 2008; Philpott, 2010; Dawson, 2014; Haydn et. al., 2015) chronological understanding goes far beyond this narrow definition and lies at the heart of the discipline.



It is clear that during the spring of 2013 the history (teaching) community were listened to and significant modifications were made to the draft curriculum. The final version of the History National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) had reduced the amount of prescribed content, extended the breath of study (to include far more non-British history) and given schools a significant amount of choice about what they could teach within ‘historical periods’.

Although the curriculum was still presented within a strong chronological framework, the insistence that it be taught sequentially had been removed and opportunities had been created for teachers to move beyond the time-period ascribed to a particular Key Stage.

However it did appear that the final version of the 2014 curriculum seemed to have ‘downgraded’ the importance of chronological understanding as a ‘concept’, compared to 2008 curriculum. The only direct reference to it in the ‘Aims’ was in an amended version of the original bullet point:

‘all pupils [should] know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day.’

(DfE, 2014 p.232)

However closer inspection of the ‘Aims’ suggests that, although implicit, developing an understanding of chronology in all its guises is still an essential ingredient of an effective history curriculum. Table 12.1 attempts to illustrate how a secure chronological understanding is essential to meet the ‘Aims’ of the 2014 programme of study and develop pupils’ understanding of the ‘second order’ concepts.

**Table 12.1** How does chronological understanding fit into the 2014 History National Curriculum?

2014 History National Curriculum Aims	How does chronology fit into this?
1. know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day: how people's lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world.	This requires the pupils to have an understanding of both 'national' and 'international' chronologies so that, as well as having a sound grasp of British history, they can place the interactions between Britain and the wider world in the appropriate time period.
2. know and understand significant aspects of the history of the wider world: the nature of ancient civilisations; the expansion and dissolution of empires; characteristic features of past non-European societies; achievements and follies of mankind.	This also requires the pupils to have an understanding of 'international' chronologies. It also requires them to have a 'sense of period' for non-British societies. They also need a good grasp of chronology to help them understand change and continuity over (long) periods of time.
3. gain and deploy a historically grounded understanding of abstract terms such as 'empire', 'civilisation', 'parliament' and 'peasantry'.	Pupils need to understand abstract, and sometimes imprecise, chronological terminology related to time e.g. century, millennium, period, era, reign, age, CE, BCE, etc.
4. understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference and significance, and use them to make connections, draw contrasts, analyse trends, frame historically valid questions and create their own structured accounts, including written narratives and analyses.	Chronology underpins an understanding of all these 'second order' concepts. The range of chronologies pupils need to deploy is vast. Some might be 'micro' chronologies required to explain the cause of specific events. Alternatively, they might be broad, sweeping chronologies that enable them to consider continuity and change, similarity and difference, make connections and draw contrasts between periods. They also need chronological terminology to enable them to produce their own structured written accounts of the past.
5. understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.	This requires the pupils to have a 'sense of period', understand the context in which the source was created then later used as evidence by the historian as part of an enquiry. In order to understand 'historical interpretations' the pupils' require an understanding of both the time it was composed and the time period to which the interpretation refers.
6. gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts: understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales.	This requires the pupils to see that whilst X was happening in A, X or Y or Z was also happening in B, C & D. It also requires pupils to consider how long and short-term change or continuity affected different groups in society in a range of different aspects of human life.

### **Why is chronological understanding essential to the development of an understanding of second order concepts?**

The aim of this section is to explore a little more closely the importance of chronology in helping pupils to develop their understanding of key 'second order' concepts. As Counsell (2014, p.2) succinctly states: 'Chronology matters...it is just impossible for students to 'do' history without it'. Pupils need to know when things happened in order to be able to answer, with any conviction, any questions about the past.

## **Chronological understanding and ‘cause and consequence’**

‘What often gets lost [in studying causation] is the importance of the chronological dimension’

(Rogers, 2008, p.50)

The recent publication by UCL’s Centre for Holocaust Education report ‘What do children know and understand about the Holocaust? (UCL, 2015) illustrates the importance of chronological understanding to enable pupils to consider the ‘causes and consequences’ of historical events. This extensive survey into what young people know and understand about the Holocaust revealed, amongst many other things, that most:

‘students see the Holocaust in German-centric ways and don’t appreciate its geographical and chronological development, how can they understand how genocide took root, evolved and became more radicalised?’

(UCL, 2015, p. 220)

Furthermore, the report also asserted that:

‘Simply knowing the sequence of historical events and being able to chronicle them does not mean one understands their relationship or significance. Without such knowledge, though, students’ ability to consider how policies were formulated, developed and revised, or to identify the possible forces that affected these processes, is severely curtailed.

(UCL, 2015, p.207)

The clear message here is that young people need a sound and secure chronological overview that places the Holocaust within the wider context of World War II . However, they also need

knowledge of two other chronologies before they can start to consider the complexity of the causal explanations that might seek to explain it. Firstly, they need a long-term chronological understanding of the intermittent anti-semitism that had existed in Europe in the second millennium. Secondly, they need a short-term chronology of the Nazi's racial policy and the anti-semitic legislation that they introduced in Germany prior to the outbreak of war. It is only with these multiple chronologies or as Counsell (2014, p.2) calls them 'usable frameworks of knowledge' that we can help pupils move beyond the idea that, in this survey, 56% of 11-14 year-olds thought Hitler alone was responsible for the Holocaust (UCL, 2015, p.2).

Furthermore Rogers (2011, p. 52) points out 'what is important about causes is not that they come together but when they come together to make things happen'. Therefore, pupils need to see how these 'multiple chronologies' come together at a particular moment in time, to bring about a particular outcome, which might have been different at another point in time. He suggests that the use of a 'causation map' can help the students to see clearly the emergence of 'conditions' (he helpfully avoids calling them 'causes' to avoid falling into the trap of determinism) which are later attributed with causal significance. Furthermore, using the 'causation map' to consider when these 'conditions' were more or less active in the prelude to the event under discussion helps the pupils appreciate the uncertainty of the past and challenges a common misconception about the inevitability of past events.

### **Chronological understanding and 'change and continuity'**

So, what might getting better at change and continuity actually look like and how does chronological understanding fit into this? The publication of Blow's (2011) 'model of progression' for how pupils develop their understanding of change, continuity and development was particularly helpful. It was derived from analysis of a range of data collected by the Framework Working Group from pupils in response to a written test and one-to-one interviews. The model had a seven level structure and clearly identified the importance of chronological understanding to their grasp of change, continuity and development:

'Students need to understand that differing time-scales have an impact on our understanding of historical change. They need to realise how the meaning and significance of 'change' can only be determined with reference to the longer run of history'

(Blow, 2011, p.55)

Blow's statement makes it clear that in order for pupils to develop a sophisticated understanding of the nature of 'change and continuity' they need to study long time spans of the past. They also need to 'mentally stand outside the story and see how changes connect to form longer historically significant narratives' (Blow, 2011, p.52). She argues that pupils need to be taught to do this on a regular basis otherwise they will not develop a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of change, continuity and development.

Blow argues that studies in development, like the History of Medicine, will only do this if pupils are asked to place new knowledge of a medical development within a wider past-present framework. Whilst a timeline can be helpful to record these events the pupils must also be encouraged to record statements about change that should identify what was different

as a result of the development under consideration. This then enables them to make explicit links between ‘changes’ across far broader time spans. Simultaneously, they must also record ‘continuities’ on their timeline to appreciate ‘how change and continuity interact to make patterns of development’ (Blow, 2011, p53).

Furthermore, Blow suggests that timelines might inhibit higher levels of thinking in two ways. Firstly, they have only one axis, on which time is represented, and secondly only the key features or events are recorded on it. However the use of ‘lines of development’ (presented like a graph with two axis) creates the opportunity for pupils to use different criteria on the y-axis to start to consider a wide range of issues pertinent to a more nuanced understanding of change, continuity and development. Issues like ‘rates/pace/direction/ extent of change’, ‘turning points’, ‘trends’, discontinuity, progression, regression, are all able to be considered and help them ‘begin to grapple with ‘the story of the past-present’’ (Blow, p.55).

### **Chronological understanding and ‘historical interpretations’**

Perhaps the first thing to state here is the definition of ‘historical interpretations’ that is being used in this context. It means the studying of ‘historical interpretations’ that have been deliberately constructed after the event, period or person to which it refers. What McAleavy (1993, p.16) described as ‘a conscious reflection on the past and not the ideas and attitudes of participants in past events’. Therefore it does not mean asking pupils themselves to write their own historical interpretation, neither does it mean studying contemporary accounts about past events.

Another clear distinction to make is the difference between academic and non-academic 'interpretations'. Whilst 'academic interpretations' are created within a disciplinary tradition of research and scholarship the creators of 'non-academic interpretations' have greater license to embellish their interpretations depending on audience and purpose. However both merit investigation and analysis during the course of a child's education.

From an educational perspective children need to learn about different types of interpretation and, most importantly, as the National Curriculum states to 'discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed' (DfE, 2014, p232). In order to do this it becomes very apparent that they need to have a secure grasp of a number of different chronologies. Firstly, they need to have a sound grasp of the person, event or time period that the 'interpretation' is based upon. Secondly, they need to know about the period in which the interpretation was constructed. What Card (2004, p.6) called 'double vision'. Finally, they also might need to have a grasp of how the person, event or time period has been 'interpreted' between these two points in time.

This would be particularly relevant if they were considering, for example, the changing reputation of Douglas Haig's military competence in World War One during the last century. Taking Card's idea a little further this might require a 'multi-vision' approach as pupils start to comprehend how Haig's reputation has fluctuated during this time. Once again visualising this in a graphical manner might be the most appropriate method to convey to children the notion that historical interpretations are subject to change and continuity over time. As

Fordham (2014, p34) states: ‘This need, to handle knowledge of multiple historical periods at once, is what makes the study of historical interpretations so demanding for pupils’. If they are to move beyond, in this case, a 1980s Blackadder interpretation of Haig’s competence, we need to heed Fordham’s advice to allow sufficient time for pupils to grasp ‘chronological fluency and [multi] period mastery’ confidently before they can address questions, such as, Why does Haig’s reputation keep changing?

### **Chronological understanding and ‘historical significance’**

‘Judgments about who or what is historically significant, and what makes something or someone historically significant, might well vary, depending on who is making them, and when and where they are making them.’

(Brown and Woodcock, 2009, p10)

In many respects this is how work studying ‘historical interpretations’ and ‘historical significance’ can be inter-related. Just as ‘historical interpretations’ can vary over time so too can the ascribing of ‘historical significance’. Therefore, students once again need to have a chronological understanding of how the attribution of ‘historical significance’ has changed over time, and how this is often informed by the beliefs and attitudes that prevail at a particular moment in time.

Bradshaw (2006) suggests that one way to do this would be to focus on an individual. By using a graph, with a timeline on the x-axis, the pupils would then determine, and subsequently justify, how big a plinth the person’s statue should be placed upon, to represent



their relative 'historical significance' at particular moments in time. This would enable them to appreciate that, as Counsell (2004, p. 32) puts it 'significance is shifting and problematic, rather than fixed.'

As Brown & Woodstock (2009, p.11) state 'some events significance might fade with time; that of others' might grow, or re-emerge'. The following are suggestions for a range of possible enquiry questions that clearly require a chronological lens to consider the concept of 'historical significance'. The latter question also helps the pupils consider that the history we deem significant in the future might not be what we deem significant now.

- Why did it take X so long to be introduced? (e.g. Holocaust Memorial Day)
- Why was Y forgotten about for so long? (e.g. Walter Tull)
- Why does Z no longer appear in most school history textbooks? (e.g. General Wolf)
- Why was the 'two minute silence' officially restored in 1996?
- How long will the study of Nazi Germany continue to be a common feature of the history curriculum in Britain?

### **Summary**

This chapter has set out to identify the key elements of what constitutes a developed sense of chronological understanding. Furthermore, it has revealed the hidden chronological understanding that is required in order to meet the aims of the 2014 history national curriculum. Finally it has illustrated how chronological understanding is essential for pupils to start to develop a more sophisticated understanding of 'second order' concepts.

## Questions to consider

1. How can schools best design a broad, balanced and diverse KS3 history curriculum that helps pupils develop their understanding of chronology?
2. How can schools develop pupils' understanding of 'deep time'?

## Further Reading

- <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/index.php>
- [http://www.history.org.uk/resources/secondary\\_resource\\_1215,1261\\_59.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/secondary_resource_1215,1261_59.html)
- <https://school.bighistoryproject.com/bhplive>

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