

# move me On

## The problem page for history mentors

This feature of *Teaching History* is designed to build critical, informed debate about the character of teacher training, teacher education and professional development. It is also designed to offer practical help to all involved in training new history teachers. Each issue presents a situation in initial teacher education/training with an emphasis upon a particular, history-specific issue.

Mentors or others involved in the training of student history teachers are invited to be the agony aunts.

### This issue's problem:

Matt Boulton is using Bloom's taxonomy in very mechanistic ways to plan lesson objectives and think about progression in history.

Matt Boulton worked for 18 months as a Teaching Assistant before deciding to become a qualified teacher. His previous experience and understanding of the needs of students with low levels of literacy mean that he made a very positive start to the ITE programme. He is well organised, recognising the need for clear planning and careful thought about the range of students within each particular class. However, he also seems to have been very strongly influenced by practices in his previous school and by the generic professional training that he received there, giving him a rather restricted view of the process of learning history and the nature of progression.

His mentor, James, is particularly concerned by the way in which Matt automatically turns to Bloom's taxonomy to frame his lesson objectives – using that as his starting point, rather than thinking about the specific ways in which he is hoping to develop students' understanding or capacity to think historically. In working with Year 10 on a source-based GCSE paper, for example, he has tended to treat 'evaluation' as a central objective towards which all other elements of his lessons should inevitably lead, rather than considering how to extend students' thinking in many different ways. This usually means that evaluating the reliability of a source takes precedence over using that source effectively, in conjunction with others, to answer genuine historical questions. Drawing an inference (equated in Matt's thinking with 'comprehend') effectively becomes a box to be ticked on the way up the scale of lesson objectives, rather than the exploratory and creative process that it could be as students apply their existing knowledge to the interpretation of different kinds of sources. His conception of 'formulating hypotheses' as one of the highest-order thinking skills means that so far he has simply ignored the possibility of inviting *all* students to propose tentative hypotheses on the basis of one or two sources and only then engage them in selecting and evaluating further sources to test their predictions.

Similar limitations have affected his Year 8 work on the significance of the different religious changes in sixteenth-century England. Matt's rigid notion that making a judgement between the changes – using agreed criteria – and creating a visual display to show their relative significance represents the highest level of achievement apparently blinded him to the fact that some of the students were frustrated by the criteria that he had put forward and were not only eager to debate their appropriateness and to offer their own, but also quite capable of doing so.

## Extracts from mentor's lesson observation notes

### Strengths

There was lots of variety in the lesson and you made excellent use of the groups that you'd created, harnessing their competitive nature very effectively!

The 'secret picture source' and runners from each team reporting back was an excellent activity to start with – it really encouraged careful observation and exact description of what they could see. The principle of labelling each feature before getting their partner to draw an inference from it gave them a very clear reminder of the distinction between the two processes. The two specific examples that you focused on – (1) patient lying still, no one holding him down; and (2) everyone standing as if posed – were excellent for demonstrating how what can be seen leads on to further *suggestions* or *speculation* about what might be going on.

### Aspects for development

Have another look at how you have expressed the learning outcomes in your plan:

- All students will have a factual record of the discovery and first use of anaesthetics
- All students will be able to label and describe the key features of the source
- Most pupils will be able draw inferences from the source about the significance of the occasion – and thus about the importance of the first use of anaesthetics in surgery
- A few pupils will be able to evaluate the reliability of the source in answering the question 'How were the problems of 19th century surgery solved?'

This rigid structure and the approach that you took to differentiating the objectives seem to imply that some students would never actually answer the question that you posed for that lesson. Is that really what you expected?

Your focus on getting to the 'highest levels' of Bloom's taxonomy seems to have restricted your ideas about progression *within* different kinds of thinking. That particular picture – recreating the first use of anaesthetics in surgery – was well chosen, and could have given rise to many more inferences, some much more complex, or involving longer chains of thinking than others. It was disappointing that you essentially focused on one or two, and didn't really push the students to keep connecting what they could see with what they already knew. Given your previous lesson on the three problems of 19th century surgery, the students were quite capable of drawing many more inferences about how the gains from anaesthetics (longer, more complex operations) would interact with the risk factors of infection that they could see (interested observers, ordinary – or previously soiled – clothing) etc.

As it was, the final focus on the reliability of that particular source became a very mechanistic process – essentially based on its nature as a staged reconstruction, revealing how important a breakthrough they thought it was, rather than showing exactly what had happened. But the unwitting testimony – what it revealed about the (still unknown) risk factors related to infection – was effectively ignored. Students need to see that interpreting sources isn't a mechanistic process: it's an active and creative process – on which they need to bring all their existing knowledge to bear.

## Email from Matt's history mentor to the Assistant Head (responsible for co-ordinating all ITE provision within the school)

Hi Anne,

Is there a good time for a chat about Matt's progress? I'm worried about the way he's using Bloom's taxonomy as his starting point for planning lessons and thinking about objectives. Is it something that you've discussed with him in the professional studies programme? I know that some teachers have found it really helpful as a way of reviewing the kinds of questions that they ask – making sure that they're not just focusing on recall – and that everyone is being asked to think and not just regurgitate answers. But Matt seems to be treating it as his basic starting point whenever he's planning lessons, working his way up the scale, as he sees it, and not really thinking at all about what kind of historical reasoning or argument any particular lesson actually calls for. It's also making him see every lesson in a kind of self-contained box – as long as the students get to evaluate something, or create some kind of diagram to show the judgements they've made by the end of it, it doesn't really matter how it connects to, or builds on the last lesson. It's a bit ironic, but 'higher order thinking' actually becomes pretty mechanistic thinking. He doesn't appreciate what the kids are actually capable of.

I'm not sure if it's something he picked up from the school he was working at last year? Or perhaps the university have started pushing it? Can you shed any light – and let me know if it's causing issues in any other subject areas? Thanks, Jim.

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Reply Reply to All Forward

*Helen Rose is a history teacher with responsibility for Key Stage 3 history at Lampton School (11-18 comprehensive) in Hounslow. She has previously been a mentor with the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education PGCE Partnership.*

The generic nature of some professional training programmes (or of elements within them) means that a tendency to use Bloom's taxonomy for generating lesson objectives is common among some trainee teachers. While this resource is of enormous value for considering the nature of progression in pupils' thinking across the curriculum, Matt's mentor faces the challenge of moving his focus specifically onto history and the concepts it entails. Tackling this core issue in relation to Matt's understanding of progression also allows his mentor to address two subsidiary problems. The first is a need to shift from planning isolated lessons that 'tick' objective boxes to planning enquiries that build on both the content and the thinking developed in previous lessons. The second is to recognise the value of building greater flexibility into lessons, so all pupils feel motivated, included and challenged.

### IF I WERE MATT'S MENTOR, I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:

#### 1 Focus all Matt's training activities for the next fortnight on evidential enquiry

Concentrating on one second-order concept will help to ensure that the process of re-thinking his planning is not too overwhelming. Matt needs to move beyond Bloom's taxonomy, towards developing his own sense of progression in history. Some steps in this process could be to:

- (a) Ask him to read Lee and Shemilt's article on progression in evidential enquiry (*TH 113*) summarising the different stages they have seen in pupils' thinking.
- (b) Arrange two observations of lessons within evidence-based enquiries and ask Matt to identify the different kinds of thinking in which pupils are asked to engage.
- (c) Challenge Matt to draft his own model for progression for evidential enquiry, drawing on his reading and observations. How will he define or identify lower and higher levels of understanding and skill in using evidence
- d) Ask Matt to come to the next mentor meeting with suggested objectives for his Year 10 lessons on medicine, his copy of Bloom's taxonomy and his newly-drafted model for progression. Compare how his objectives relate both to Bloom's taxonomy and to his new model for progression. This should highlight ways in which reliance on Bloom's taxonomy alone will restrict both his planning and the pupils' learning and should also kick-start a *historically* focused dialogue between the two of you about progression.

#### 2 Model how to plan an enquiry

Having thought carefully about the nature of progression it is essential that Matt learns how to plan for this, not in individual lessons but across an enquiry. Show Matt your own planning process, voicing your thoughts aloud. 'The central focus here is on causation and the kind of development in their understanding and argument that I'm looking for is... ..I need to formulate an over-arching enquiry question and objectives that will promote this kind of development over a series of lessons...'. Emphasize that each lesson does not need to encompass all the elements envisaged in the progression model: the properties of thinking need to be built up gradually across the enquiry. Matt could then attempt to plan his own enquiry focused on evidence, using the model he has developed to plan and to evaluate his lessons.

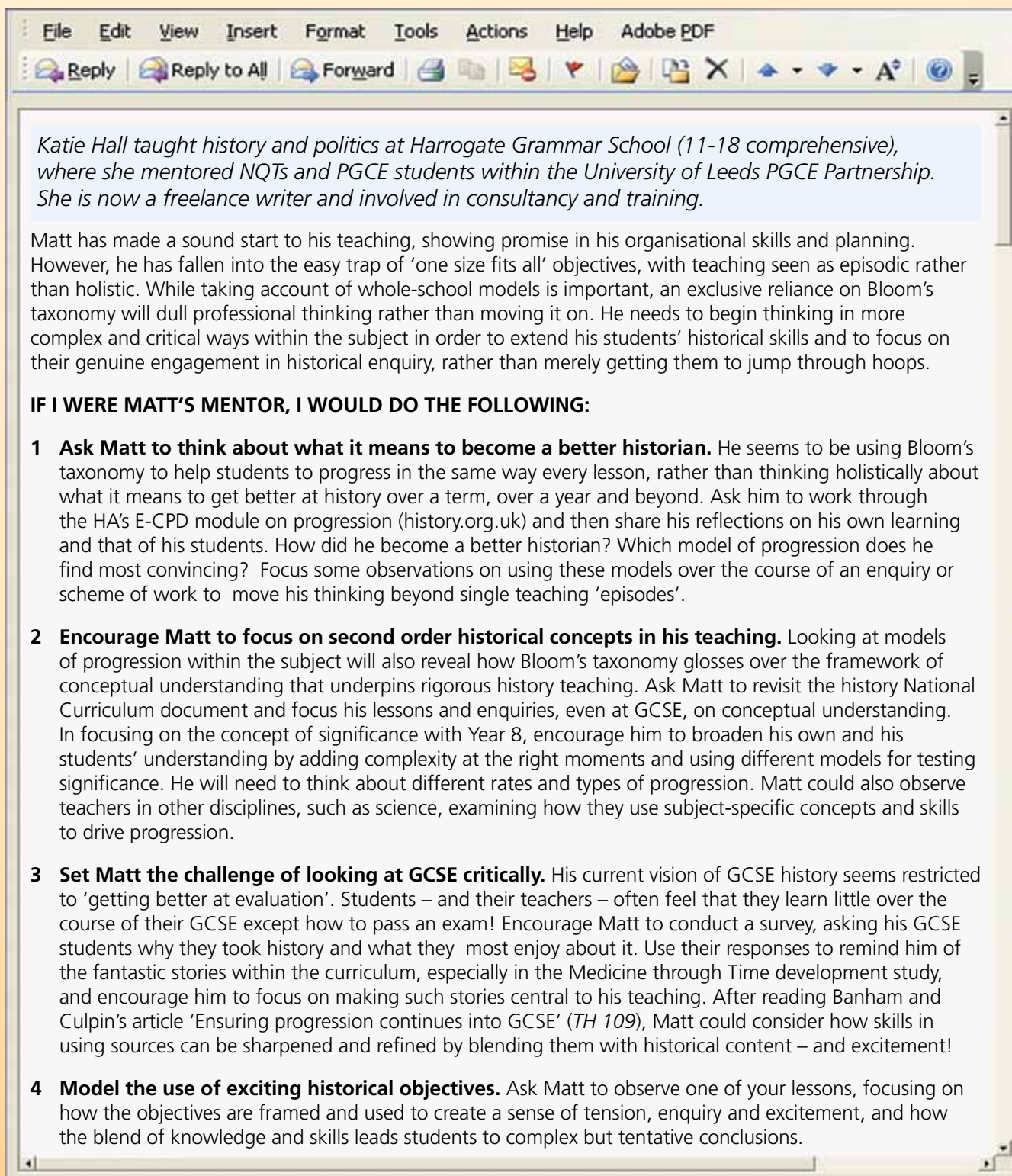
#### 3 Boost Matt's confidence in allowing for flexibility and greater pupil independence

Once Matt is comfortable developing models for progression and using these to guide his planning, it might be time to encourage him to let go of the reins a little. Try Sally Burnham's or Kate Hammond's articles on pupil-led enquiry (*TH 128* and *144*). What does he think would be the benefits of such an approach?

#### 4 Review the school's professional studies programme

In the longer term it is important to explore how Bloom's taxonomy is presented to trainees at the school (as James has begun to do). Future trainees might benefit from an activity that asked them to treat the resource as a springboard from which to consider the quality of students' thinking in subject-specific terms.

Throughout this process, which will undoubtedly take time and may require a reduction in Matt's timetable, remember to praise every step in the right direction. He clearly has great potential and a lack of time or confidence may make him retreat to the comfort zone of more mechanistic planning.



The screenshot shows an email client interface. The top menu bar includes File, Edit, View, Insert, Format, Tools, Actions, Help, and Adobe PDF. Below the menu is a toolbar with icons for Reply, Reply to All, Forward, and other functions. The main content area displays an email from Katie Hall, followed by a response from Matt.

*Katie Hall taught history and politics at Harrogate Grammar School (11-18 comprehensive), where she mentored NQTs and PGCE students within the University of Leeds PGCE Partnership. She is now a freelance writer and involved in consultancy and training.*

Matt has made a sound start to his teaching, showing promise in his organisational skills and planning. However, he has fallen into the easy trap of 'one size fits all' objectives, with teaching seen as episodic rather than holistic. While taking account of whole-school models is important, an exclusive reliance on Bloom's taxonomy will dull professional thinking rather than moving it on. He needs to begin thinking in more complex and critical ways within the subject in order to extend his students' historical skills and to focus on their genuine engagement in historical enquiry, rather than merely getting them to jump through hoops.

**IF I WERE MATT'S MENTOR, I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:**

- 1 Ask Matt to think about what it means to become a better historian.** He seems to be using Bloom's taxonomy to help students to progress in the same way every lesson, rather than thinking holistically about what it means to get better at history over a term, over a year and beyond. Ask him to work through the HA's E-CPD module on progression (history.org.uk) and then share his reflections on his own learning and that of his students. How did he become a better historian? Which model of progression does he find most convincing? Focus some observations on using these models over the course of an enquiry or scheme of work to move his thinking beyond single teaching 'episodes'.
- 2 Encourage Matt to focus on second order historical concepts in his teaching.** Looking at models of progression within the subject will also reveal how Bloom's taxonomy glosses over the framework of conceptual understanding that underpins rigorous history teaching. Ask Matt to revisit the history National Curriculum document and focus his lessons and enquiries, even at GCSE, on conceptual understanding. In focusing on the concept of significance with Year 8, encourage him to broaden his own and his students' understanding by adding complexity at the right moments and using different models for testing significance. He will need to think about different rates and types of progression. Matt could also observe teachers in other disciplines, such as science, examining how they use subject-specific concepts and skills to drive progression.
- 3 Set Matt the challenge of looking at GCSE critically.** His current vision of GCSE history seems restricted to 'getting better at evaluation'. Students – and their teachers – often feel that they learn little over the course of their GCSE except how to pass an exam! Encourage Matt to conduct a survey, asking his GCSE students why they took history and what they most enjoy about it. Use their responses to remind him of the fantastic stories within the curriculum, especially in the Medicine through Time development study, and encourage him to focus on making such stories central to his teaching. After reading Banham and Culpin's article 'Ensuring progression continues into GCSE' (*TH 109*), Matt could consider how skills in using sources can be sharpened and refined by blending them with historical content – and excitement!
- 4 Model the use of exciting historical objectives.** Ask Matt to observe one of your lessons, focusing on how the objectives are framed and used to create a sense of tension, enquiry and excitement, and how the blend of knowledge and skills leads students to complex but tentative conclusions.

## Next issue's problem:

Helen Troy is uncertain how to provide appropriate support for certain students without restricting what they can achieve. For details of Helen's mentor's problem, contact Martin Hoare at the Historical Association, email: [martin.hoare@history.org.uk](mailto:martin.hoare@history.org.uk)

Responses are invited from mentors and trainers of trainee history teachers.

Responses for the September edition must be received by 20 October 2012.

Matt and Helen are both fictional characters. Thanks to Katharine Burn, Institute of Education, London, for devising the Move Me On problem.