

### Lesson – What’s worth remembering: The reach of history

#### Knowledge framework

Scope

Perspective

Methods and tools

Ethics

<p><b>Context/purpose</b></p>	<p>This lesson uses the area of knowledge (AOK) of history to demonstrate the element of scope within the knowledge framework. To consider the nature and scope of the making of history. To partially simulate the production of knowledge in history.</p>
<p><b>Links to areas of knowledge and optional themes</b></p>	<p>AOK: history with occasional links to art, natural sciences, and human sciences. Optional theme – knowledge and language: students need to be aware of the power of language (e.g. conflict vs war, terrorist vs freedom fighter), as well as Indian vs Native American, and similar vocabulary differences in many countries or among social groups.</p>
<p><b>Essential understandings</b></p>	<p>That history is not the past only, but the study and interpretation of past events from the perspective of the present.</p> <p>That history is a narrative, a story, that a culture tells itself to make sense of the past. As Ken Burns wrote, ‘People tend to forget that “history” contains the word “story”.’</p> <p>‘Historical study is not the study of the past but the study of present traces of the past. If people have said, thought, done, or suffered anything of which nothing any longer exists, those things are as though they had never been.’ (GR Elton)</p> <p>That bias (implicit, cultural, gender, etc.) is unavoidable but should be acknowledged (see Zinsser in Resources), and that in selecting one thing and not another, there will always be events, peoples, perspectives, etc. that are left out and/or marginalised.</p> <p>That history is not only an account of world, or national, or group events, but can be a search for universal frameworks of historical movements.</p>

<p><b>Knowledge questions</b></p>	<p>How far can we speak with certainty about anything in the past?</p> <p>If truth is difficult to prove in history, does it follow that all versions are equally acceptable?</p> <p>To what extent does a culture’s history as told reveal its values?</p> <p>Are value judgements a fault in the writing of history?</p> <p>What can be meant by ‘History is part hope, part myth, part reality’?</p> <p>What is the difference between a fact in history and a fact in the sciences?</p> <p>How much faith should we put in the past to predict the future?</p> <p>Does the historian have a moral obligation to tell the truth?</p> <p>Is it possible to identify the ethical principles present in a historical event from a description of behaviour?</p> <p>If the historian must combine the rigour of the scientist with the imagination of the artist, how can historians be confident about their conclusions?</p> <p>What kind of historical truth does the poem of Wilfred Owen contain? <i>Dulce et Decorum est</i> (1917)</p> <p>Do any of the other four AOKs – natural sciences, human sciences, art, or mathematics – require a history of that AOK in order to create new knowledge in that field?</p>
<p><b>Activity 1</b></p>	<p><b>The five most...</b></p> <p>Students are put in groups to design, defend, and reflect on a plan for what they think would be the ideal high school history textbook; in other words... What is worth learning? First, students are given two minutes to brainstorm a quick list for each of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the five most significant historical events of all time</li> <li>• the five most significant historical events of the last 500 years</li> <li>• the five most significant historical events (movement, discovery, happening) in the history of The United States, England, or China, etc.</li> <li>• the five most significant events of the 21st century.</li> </ul> <p>Obviously, this list can be expanded: the last 1000 years, the 20th century, etc. Inevitably, students will ask, <i>What do you mean by significant?</i></p> <p>Next, students form small groups to compare their responses. Do they see trends? Do they notice any bias? Are they surprised at what their classmates put in or left out?</p> <p>Debrief with any problems, questions, or discoveries that their discussion generated.</p>

<b>Activity 2</b>	<b>Textbook committees</b>  Students are put into small groups to design the ideal high school history textbook. Each group should look again at their lists and decide if they want to pursue certain themes, correct any oversights, combine their ideas, etc. The teacher will determine how the history should be documented (poster, Google doc, etc.)  Instructions: Narrow down the focus of your textbook. For instance, Contemporary Spanish history? World history of conflicts? History of Asia, past and present? The spread of capitalism?  Agree upon five to ten chapters based on the lists you put together. Make a table of contents.  Explain briefly why you chose these units, these events, these facts, these figures, etc.  Explain the aim of your textbook – to inspire? to shock? to educate? to honour? to celebrate?
<b>Activity 3</b>	<b>Peer review: Swap and analyse</b>  ‘It might be a good idea if the various countries of the world would occasionally swap history books, just to see what other people are doing with the same set of facts.’ (Bill Vaughan)  Once the groups have completed their textbook plans, they will swap with another group (you can do this more than once if time allows). As the group gets a new history textbook plan, they should comment on the following:  Did the scope of your history exclude or marginalise some people or events? Who or what is privileged here?  Is there a blatant or hidden agenda at work in this history?  What are the consequences to current historical knowledge from your selection of what is important or what is left out?

## Resources

Anderson, B. and Zinsser, J. (2000) *A history of their own: Women in Europe from prehistory to the present*. Oxford University Press.

Berlin, I. (1953) *The fox and the hedgehog*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Carr, E. H. (1961) *What is history?* University of Cambridge & Penguin Books.

Collingwood, R. G. (1946) *The idea of history*. Oxford University Press.

### The historical thinking project



Controversies about history textbooks, both between nations and cultures (the Japanese/Chinese conflict over the 'Nanjing massacre') as well as within a single country.



Texas school board control over the content of history textbooks; a walkout from students in Denver over a new 'sanitised' textbook for their AP history class, etc.

The rewriting of the history of indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia and other places.

**Wider connections**

The Japanese textbook controversy: Four different responses to *A new history textbook* written in 2001 by a committee of Japanese historians, by Chinese, North Korean, South Korean, Japanese.

**‘The Big History Project’** started by Bill Gates and David Christian to enable the global teaching of the subject of ‘Big History’, which is described as ‘the attempt to understand, in a unified way, the history of Cosmos, Earth, Life, and Humanity’. It is a course that covers history from the Big Bang through to the present in an interdisciplinary way.



Why study Women’s history, or Black history, or other similar concentrations?

Are there paradigm shifts in the way history is written similar to the paradigm shifts Kuhn talks about in the natural sciences?

Articles about modern-day politicians and media sites clashing over truth (‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, etc.)

Panel of teachers from a school’s history department interviewed by the TOK teacher to showcase TOK thinking about their subject.

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