

-  
-  
  
bennewmark

Head of Humanities, ex-VSO and Teacher of History. Left wing politically, conservative pedagogically.

## Gimmicks and the danger of bait and switch.

FEBRUARY 2, 2017 | BENNEWMARK | 5 COMMENTS

When I trained as a history teacher more than a decade ago I thought the highest compliment I could be given by a child was “we don’t feel like we’re learning in your lessons, but we do.” Nobody needed to spell this out because it was in the very air I breathed.

I believed the very best lessons were those in which students were tricked into learning. The role of the teacher was to sugar the pill by wrapping the unpleasantness of learning up in fun activities in the same way my mum used to disguise paracetamol by crushing it and mixing it in jam. The aim of Outstanding™ teachers were lessons in which the learning only became apparent in Road to Damascus moments. “Aw shucks, you got us again Sir!” The children should exclaim. “We’ve learned the entire feudal system perfectly and we thought we were doing rhythmic gymnastics!” Under this conception of teaching something as simple as telling a student something seemed like cheating.

The aim, of course, was to ‘hook’ children into learning; fun tasks mean happier children and happy children learn faster.

The first problem with this approach was just how fiendishly difficult it was. In effect I was trying to teach my subject by not teaching my subject. This meant hours of work planning fun gimmicks to graft the learning on to. For years I taught a starter in which children chose who they thought should be the next England football manager to hook them into thinking about contenders to Edward the Confessor’s throne in 1066.

It just didn't work. Expecting children to get better at something by doing something else is illogical. Children who spend time making models of castles or painting posters get better at making models of castles and painting posters. Any history learned is incidental. The difference between tasks like these and real history is so vast that such approaches amount to nothing more than an elaborate bait and switch trick which, sooner or later, causes resentment.

Even some old stalwarts of KS3 teaching can be very problematic. For many years, as a Year 9 assessment, I asked students to write a 'letter from the trenches'. Such letters usually did contain some accurate historical detail but were often incoherent, ridden with anachronisms and full of woolly creative flourishes that had no historical value whatsoever. A common sign off was "and then.." followed by a squiggly line to represent that the author had died mid-sentence. The task was further compromised by its inherent inauthenticity. World War One soldiers knew their letters would be censored and so wouldn't have included much of the detail for which I awarded marks. The standard extension to this task, asking children to censor their own letters, was misguided given that the soldiers knew not to include upsetting details and were probably as concerned with keeping up the morale of their families as their generals were. The assessment failed as history because children came away with the false impression that soldiers wrote their letters freely, did not self-censor and were in opposition to a government they were actually more likely to support.

The ongoing technological revolution is, for all the benefits it brings, providing even more opportunities for confused and anachronistic teaching. Tasks in which children are expected to complete Facebook profiles for historical figures or send fictional tweets worry me. Of course, such activities might be defended by saying that anachronisms are explicitly articulated, but this misses the point. 140 character tweets are, at least in part, a product of modern attitudes towards communication and asking students to tweet as a historical personality is to invite misunderstanding and presentism. Worse, by clothing the past in modern garb we rob historical periods of their rich distinctiveness and can easily obliterate any sense of period.

An example of this might be a lesson in which Y9 students are asked to send a tweet from Karl Marx. The first issue with this is the complexity of the task. In effect, children are being asked to summarise his very complex views, rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a characteristically 21<sup>st</sup> century method, for an audience he never had. Presentism is inevitable, which undermines the task itself. The image of a tweeting Karl Marx, while admittedly hilarious, is particularly inappropriate because it side-lines his notorious verbosity and so creates a distortion in the minds of the children studying him.

Approaches like this are based on an assumption that, at least for younger children, creative, active tasks are fun but reading and writing history is boring, but this is as wrong-headed as it is self-fulfilling.

And it isn't necessary. Dressing up history as something it is not in order to make it interesting demonstrates low expectations of both the subject and the students who study it. History in *itself* is engaging. It's the story of massive power struggles, colourful personalities and world changing events. Mounting it in a gaudy frame of inauthentic activity masks profundity and makes it tough for students to appreciate the significance of what they learn. Disguising history as something else also patronises students. Children want to be serious about things that are serious, and like to get better at things that are meaningful. Substituting this for fun for its own sake does students a great

disservice. Of course, some will find the subject more stimulating than others, but the answer to engaging a motivating a disengaged child shouldn't be twisting history into something it isn't. It's pointless and misleading because a child engaged in activities that aren't historical is not doing history.

Curriculums and teachers that proceed down this rabbit-hole make a rod for their own backs. Children learn what is worthwhile and meaningful from the adults around them. My baby daughter is unlikely to grow up with a natural taste for broccoli, but she is more likely to come to enjoy it if she sees my wife and I eating it with relish. If it is implied that writing is boring students come to believe it, making it harder for teachers to get them to do it. This is why a personal bug-bear of mine in observations is when teachers apologise to students for making them do an exam question. *"I know, guys, this is boring but we have to do it."* Of course they will hate it and find it boring if well tell them it is! If we are positive and unashamed about the importance of writing extended answers and the satisfaction that is derived from producing them, children are far more likely to enjoy them.

I'm seeing encouraging signs that this approach is working with my own classes. In a recent Year 8 lesson on the execution of Charles I, we spent time discussing the unhistorical nature of the question "Should Charles be executed?" as opposed to "Why was Charles executed?" Following this discussion the children in the class took great delight in hunting down inappropriate activities in their textbook and were particularly outraged by a task in which students were asked to imagine they were a modern day journalist investigating Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. "Henry VIII would never have allowed that!" Jack almost shouted. The children in this class didn't arrive at this point on their own; they'd been taught why such activities were inappropriate, accepted the logic found applying this new understanding thrilling.

My final issue with the tasks and activities I've described is the problems they create for KS3-4 transition. In many schools, it is accepted that such tasks have no, or at least a significantly reduced, role to play at GCSE. This can lead to students being hoodwinked into choosing history at KS4, because they've, quite understandably, picked up the impression that the subject something it really isn't. This often causes enormous resentment. "It wasn't like this in Year 9! I wouldn't have chosen it if I knew it was going to be like this," is a refrain I've heard far too many times in my career. This often makes teaching KS4, especially to less literate students, a real battle.

This issue cuts across even the traditional-progressive debate and I feel deep sympathy for thoughtful progressively minded teachers who are often too quickly and often wrongly assumed to support some of the approaches I've described. For example, a thoughtful, well planned knowledge based, immersive and carefully structured role-play to deepen historical understanding on the Norman Invasion is in no way comparable to, say, planning a lesson on Henry VIII and his wives based on the format of the Jerry Springer show. In my view the first isn't a gimmick, the second is. Those interested in creative activities that steer well clear of gimmickry could do a lot worse than look here:

[Ian Dawson/Dale Banham: Je Suis le Roi](http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/JeSuisleRoi.html)  
(<http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/JeSuisleRoi.html>)

I haven't always felt this way. When I first joined twitter, I came across a tweet by Michael Fordham in which he described one of his typical lessons. It went something along the lines of "we read two pages, discussed them, and then answered some questions." Knowing nothing about Michael or his

work I sneered, “that might work at some posh ivory tower school” I thought, “but just try doing that here.” When I myself began blogging it was because I thought that teaching history in challenging schools would be inevitably different to teaching in a more privileged one. But the more of Michael (@mfordhamhistory) and too many others to mention I read, the more I realised the misunderstanding was all mine. The way we teach history shouldn’t be influenced by our contexts if this means distorting history into something it isn’t. Instead of shaking our fists at ivory towers we need to build them in all our schools. I think we can. As my teaching has changed I’ve found that students don’t need the engaging crutches and gimmicks I once assumed they did. So now, I imagine a typical Newmark lesson isn’t a million miles away from a Fordham one. Planning is quicker. Learning is faster and I’m glad I’ve come to this realisation with most of my career still in front of me.

Advertisements (<https://en.support.wordpress.com/about-these-ads/>)

# 5 thoughts on “Gimmicks and the danger of bait and switch.”

1. **HARRY FLETCHER-WOOD** *says:*

This is a brilliant summary and I hesitate to try to add to it, but I did realise one more thing in tracking a path very similar to your own. Too often, anachronistic and gimmicky tasks proved incomprehensible to students. For example, I asked students to write a livestream (I think about Hitler’s takeover of power). They didn’t know what a livestream was, so I had to take a chunk of the time I’d planned to have them writing explaining this. So my task did them yet one more disservice: not only did it fail to challenge them or to help them to understand (or love) the subject, it added additional, entirely extraneous confusion.

FEBRUARY 2, 2017 AT 1:01 PM | REPLY

2. **BENNEWMARK** *says:*

Thanks, Harry and glad you liked it. I agree and did think of including what you’ve said but didn’t as it was already probably too long.

I’ve had lots of similar experiences. One that sticks with me was a lesson on which I tried to simulate a newsroom on the day of outbreak of WW1, with ‘reporters’ passing facts to ‘writers’ who passed work onto ‘editors.’ It was awful and near the end I realised, just as you did with the livestream, that they had no idea what a newsroom was. I stopped and tried to teach them which, ironically, was probably the only real bit of learning that happened.

I’m going to have more of a look into cognitive load theory to see if that gives a more scientific explanation of why such tasks so often fail.

FEBRUARY 3, 2017 AT 5:37 AM | REPLY

3. **RON ELLIOTT** *says:*

Very interesting! I’m an English teacher who has always liked watching kids have an ironic or consciously anachronistic take on historical contexts. I assumed that if they were able to do this that it meant that they had gone one step beyond the acquisition of the historical knowledge. Of course – it’s also lovely to see students adapt voice and purpose to different writing and speaking activities but that might be because I am an English teacher who loves History.

This does make me reconsider my own teaching. How can I be more authentic? Make students feel the world of the story in the same way that you make them feel the truth about the past?  
Thanks.

FEBRUARY 4, 2017 AT 7:41 AM | REPLY

4. Pingback: Gimmicks and the danger of bait and switch. | When did I get old?

5. **DAN WHITTAKER** *says:*

Fantastic post, and very true. A few years ago I was criticised in an observation. The observer asked 'what are you learning?'. The kids were doing freeze frames for descriptive writing in English. One kid replied 'freeze frames'. Cue a tick in the wrong column for sharing learning objectives. It stuck in my throat for a while until I realised that the child was right. I wanted learning about descriptive writing but what I got was slick freeze frames which took a lot longer than the actual writing. A poor trade off.

FEBRUARY 5, 2017 AT 12:53 PM | REPLY

