History and Change:

How to help pupils write effectively about the concept of continuity and change in History

The aim of the action research project was to help year 11 pupils understand the complicated nature of continuity and change in History. It focused on a GCSE topic: China 1900-1989. A series of steps were put in place to develop pupils’ conceptual understanding and then their ability to express this understanding in writing.

As an action research project each step required reflection and reaction. The insight gained from each step helped shape and inform development of the project. Rather than a series of individual steps, this project is represented in a spiral manner. The outcome was achieved through the cumulative effect of all steps.

Initial pupil work:
This demonstrated misconceptions that had been highlighted in the literature. For example a propensity to focus on the past as episodic and as individual driven. The diversity of experience and the pace of change was rarely considered.

First Step:
Different pace of change.
The use of a familiar metaphor (a pedometer in the gym) to encourage pupils to consider how quickly changes occurred in China.

Second Step:
Different experiences of change.
Pupils used graphs to investigate and demonstrate an understanding of the changing experience of different groups in society. By putting these graphs together they started to develop an understanding of how change in history could be experienced differently by different groups in society.

Third Step:
The application of vocabulary.
Put in place once conceptual understanding of change had been developed. Creating word tables with “change words” that could be used to demonstrate the different aspects of change that had been studied.

Conclusion: Pupils demonstrated a developed conceptual understanding of the concept of change and continuity in history through effective pieces of writing. Their writing included many different aspects of the concept of change: pace, diversity of experience and extent of change. The repetition of conceptual challenges had helped pupils to gradually build up their knowledge. The initial use of analogy and visual representation allowed conceptual understanding to developed before language was applied. This understanding was finally demonstrated by detailed, nuanced and polythetic writing.