

Remote learning – experience and recommendations

In this summary of my remote learning experience in the period 20-31 March, I use professional literature to shine a light on learning and teaching. My intention was to arrive at tentative recommendations about how to structure my remote learning going forward. I have arrived at **four key recommendations** to help me move forward with my remote learning into the summer term.

Recommendation 1: Lead with the learning, not the technology

Christine Counsell, an influential education consultant, was once asked in the 1990s: 'how is email going to revolutionise the teaching of history?' She responded with a polite but firm: 'it won't.'

Let's not overcomplicate learning and teaching. Very often pupils need to do no more than read some information and answer some comprehension questions in order to make progress in their learning. The recent resurgence of '[knowledge-rich curriculums](#)' have reminded us that we need to have some knowledge first before we can do anything with it, such as practice skills*. Email, Flipgrid, OneNote and other platforms will only help if they make pupils' access to information (or skills practice or retrieval practice etc.) easier.

Many of my worksheets are simple (example below) and can be disseminated in a variety of formats. My marking of pupils' work suggests that, by completing these worksheets, pupils have made progress in their knowledge of topics such as Medieval Villages.

<p>4. Most villagers were given some land to farm in return for working for the Lord. <u>What name was given to this type of farming?</u></p>
<p>Answer: Strip <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> farming (because the land was divided into strips _____, with each villager getting his own bit to farm)</p>
<p>5. Most land was used to grow <u>which two crops</u>, used to make the peasants' staple (meaning 'usual') foods - bread and ale?</p>
<p>Answer: Wheat <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> and Barley <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>
<p>6. What was the most important tool in the village, which was helpful for farming? (It was pulled by an ox).</p>
<p>Answer: plough <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>
<p>7. What was the name of the unpopular village tax which meant everyone had to pay 1/10th of everything they produced to the Church?</p>
<p>Answer: tithe <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p>

[Left] I needed my pupils to learn about Medieval Villages so that they could put their later study of the Black Death in context and understand how it could affect different villagers in different ways. There was no better way to do this than to build pupils' knowledge through a simple Q&A sheet. Here I asked pupils to use a video from ClickView to get the information, but they could have easily read some text and then answered the questions.

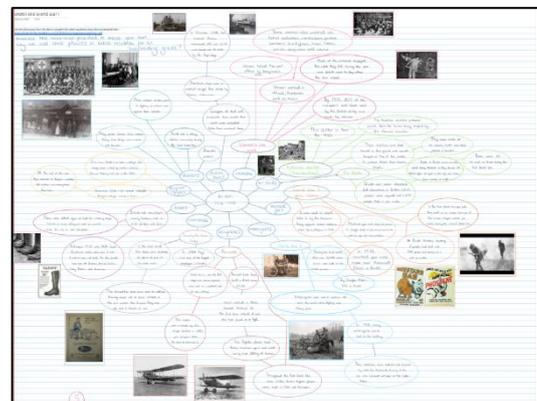
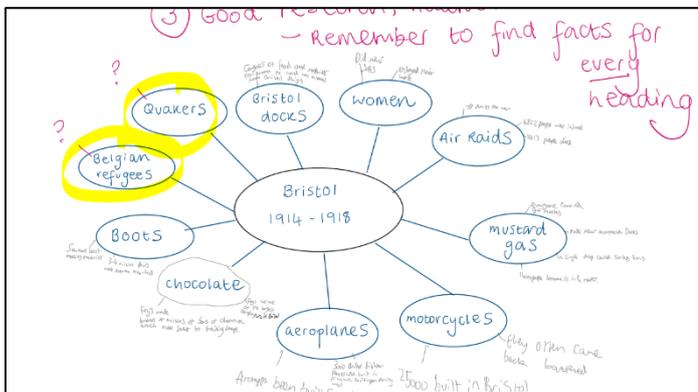
In summary, I will always ask myself: will it help pupils get better *at history*?

If the answer is no, then I'll close my browser window.

*Further reading: Hirsch, E.D. (2017) *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing our children from failed educational theories*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

Recommendation 2: Structure ‘Project Work’ or ‘open tasks’ carefully

During an early remote lesson with some Year 9 pupils, I asked them to complete a mind-map on the local experience of World War I in Bristol. I gave them [a website](#) link, the opportunity to do extra research on the internet, and set them off. The issue with this lesson was that I ended up with a huge difference in the quality and quantity of research.



Student A

It is inevitable that there will be differences between attainment and effort, but this was striking because students A and B have scored very similar levels of attainment thus far. Why was there such a difference here? I can think of **two key reasons** (although there will be countless more: perhaps Student A was ill?). Both issues relate to ‘project work’ in general and are not specific to remote learning, but the temptation to do project-based work is arguably higher with remote learning. Here is why it didn’t work well for me:

1. I had not given pupils any **success criteria** (see Recommendation 3). Consequently, it was unclear that pupils had to write something for every branch of the mind-map, and that they needed to include precise details such as statistics, place names and historical terminology.

I have tried to avoid this problem in my next lesson (an overview timeline task on World War II) by providing success criteria as follows:

Success Criteria	This is how I will mark your work today...				
Your score for today:	1 <i>Very poor</i>	2	3 <i>Good</i>	4	5 <i>Outstanding</i>
How to improve:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete ALL three tasks • Add all 13 dates to your timeline (the main activity), with the full title of the event, month and year. • Ensure all dates are in the correct order • Ensure the timeline is well-presented • For an ‘outstanding’ grade, you could add some extra research to at least 5 events 				

2. I had not created any **tools to assess pupils’ understanding** (see Recommendation 4). Consequently, it is impossible for me to know whether any of the facts that the pupils had dutifully written down had made it into their memories. Had they understood what they were learning? Were my pupils engaged in knowledge *transformation*, or were they simply engaged in knowledge *regurgitation*? Also, did pupils understand *the vital information that I needed them to know*?

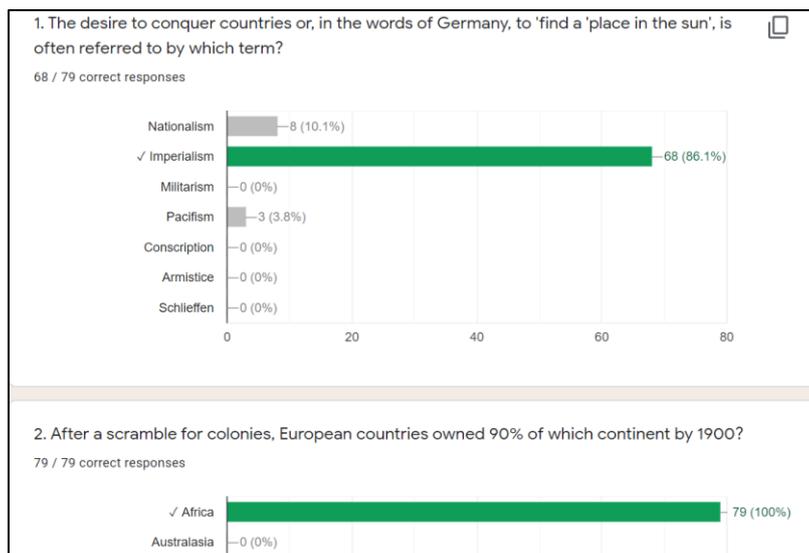
In order to check that my pupils had understood key *substantive* knowledge ('know-what' knowledge), I decided that I needed an assessment-for-learning activity. I would base this on the **five key facts** that I wanted every pupil to take away. I had to make a judgement here about which five facts that I wanted pupils to move from their working memories to their long-term memories (i.e. from 'fingertip knowledge' – facts that pupils need at their fingertips in the single lesson - to 'residue knowledge' – facts that they will need in their future study).

This is where curriculum knowledge and design comes in, and paying careful attention to curriculum scope and sequencing is **crucial** if schools will be closed across the whole of the summer term. We need to ask ourselves: what key knowledge will my Year 9 pupils need to 'take away' in order to make a success of Years 10 and 11 and beyond? **This is why planning lessons carefully at Key Stage 3 is so important.** They are the building blocks for the examination years and cannot be skipped lightly.

I decided to think about this very carefully for my next remote lesson. Pupils had just finished learning about the key causes of World War II. I decided that I wanted my pupils to 'take away' from this study that:

- The **Treaty of Versailles** was created in **1919** and was very **harsh** on Germany (pupils needed this information to understand the Weimar Republic & Hitler's rise to power at GCSE)
- **Hitler** invaded several countries in the **1930s** while Britain and France followed a policy of **appeasement** (more necessary information for pupils to make a success of GCSE).

I therefore designed [a Google Form](#) to assess pupils' understanding of the information that was crucial for later success (I like Google Forms because you can get immediate results on areas that pupils need to work on, as you can see here in my results of a quiz based on World War I):



[Left] *As you can see, some pupils need to recap their understanding of the word **imperialism**, yet they nailed the imperialist expansion of Europe in Africa in the 1890s.*

Independent project work is problematic because if students do not have sophisticated schemas of knowledge about a particular area, then it is very hard for them to work independently in that area. This can result in shallow tasks, where the activity is matched to what the student knows.*

In summary, I **will** continue to set some open research tasks, but crucially I:

- Will vary project-based learning with more specific and discrete tasks
- Will include success criteria and assessment-for-learning activities as a structure and a safety net.

*Further reading: Hendrick, C. and Macpherson, R. (2017) *What does this look like in the classroom? Bridging the gap between research and practice*, London: John Catt. For a summary see [here](#).

Recommendation 3: Plan ahead to make marking more efficient

Students can upload work as soon as they have finished it to an online platform (I use OneNote). It is therefore accessible immediately for me to mark. When I realised that I could mark *every single* piece of work *all the time*, I felt overwhelmed. I reflected that this was probably because I didn't have marking and assessment *in mind* when I set the activities. I therefore realised that I would need to think ahead more carefully about how work could be marked. Recent professional literature encourages teachers to consider which work should be marked in detail, and which can be marked with a 'broader brush', very carefully*. Dylan Wiliam calls marking an 'expensive PR exercise', yet it doesn't have to be. By making small changes to the tasks I set when *planning*, I saved myself a great deal of time when *marking*. Here's how:

A. Insert pre-prepared success criteria to make it easier to mark work.

As shown in Recommendation 2, using pre-inserted success criteria tables can help focus pupils' attention on the quality and quantity of work required. It can also help with marking workload. For example, here I used a success criteria table to mark a pupil's paragraph summarising the causes of World War II (below).

Success Criteria	This is how I will mark your work today...				
Your score for today:	1 <i>Very poor</i>	2	3 <i>Good</i>	4	5 <i>Outstanding</i>
How to improve (World War II, Lesson 2):	<ul style="list-style-type: none">You need to <u>use the PEE structure</u>, including...<ul style="list-style-type: none">A Big Point (telling the reader what the paragraph is about)Evidence (supporting your Big Point)Explanation (showing how your evidence answers the question)You now need to <u>include more precise details</u>, including details about:<ul style="list-style-type: none">The Treaty of Versailles (1919)The League of Nations (set up in 1920)Hitler's actions (in the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia & Poland)Britain's policy of appeasement in the 1930s				

Writing out the targets to help this pupil to move from a 'good' to an 'outstanding' would obviously have taken a much longer time than circling the targets.

Interestingly, disseminating 'success criteria' in a yellow box (so pupils become familiar with the tool) has also helped to improve the quality of the work I have received. It has resulted in fewer issues where I have had to give a score of '1' or '2' and then ask the pupil to re-submit work of a higher quality.

B. Insert opportunities for self-marking.

2. [Introductory questions to the outbreak of World War II](#)

Listen to the **first 3 minutes** of [this broadcast](#) from 3 September 1939. Answer these 3 questions. Then **self-assess** your work by listening to the answers (*put a tick or correct your answer*):

1. What is the name of the British Prime Minister who has finally declared war on Germany?
2. Germany's attack on which country led to Britain's declaration of war?
3. Britain declared war on Germany in conjunction with which other country, who had also promised to help their allies in Eastern Europe?

[Listen to the answers here:](#)



4 An overview o...

Marking pupils' comprehension tasks quickly became very tedious. In class, these comprehension questions can be very quickly self or peer assessed during a plenary activity. I found a way to replicate this in OneNote, by using the Audio tool (bottom left).

Pupils can, of course, just listen to the answers and fill in the gaps. Who will know if they do? But they have still *been introduced to the information* and I can later check their understanding of it in a written task or quiz.

C. Other opportunities for efficiency have included:

- Arming myself with **pre-prepared 'common feedback' inserts** (praise and targets). I can then quickly copy and paste these into pupils' work. I am building a collection of these for the long-term.
- **Making a note of parents' email addresses** where pupils are consistently having problems with uploading or sending work (I will probably need them again...)

To improve:
Try to ensure that there are no gaps in your work by completing all of the tasks very carefully



In summary, planning ahead to make marking manageable should help me to decrease my workload.

*Further reading: Morrison McGill, R. (2016) *Mark.Plan.Teach*. London: Bloomsbury. For a summary see [here](#).

Recommendation 4: Think 'long-term' with assessment for learning activities

Using Microsoft Teams has been very helpful with my smaller sixth form classes, but it is less helpful to allow me to work out how much my Key Stage 3 pupils have understood. Furthermore, without the ability to quiz pupils individually or conduct a whole-class plenary, it is very difficult to assess pupils' understanding and progress remotely. Consequently, I have decided that my assessment-for-learning activities need to be razor sharp, and that effort I put into this now can help me in future years. I particularly like Google Forms.

A. Use Google Forms or other retrieval practice tools to help assess pupils' understanding and give them the opportunity for retrieval practice*.

Any online quiz platform where you can see *which pupils* have done the quiz, *what score* they achieved, and *a question breakdown* (to allow the teacher to identify questions that were repeatedly answered incorrectly) can be very powerful to help the planning of later lessons. The Google Form can be used again and again to help future year groups revise the content straight after the lesson, and again at the end of the year.

B. Use a top student's 'gold standard' of work to help pupils make progress.

Because more of my pupils' work is coming in already 'typed out', here is an opportunity to collect 'gold

standard' work and to disseminate it as a learning opportunity for those who are struggling. Here, I will ask students who struggled with the task to identify what makes this paragraph reach a 'gold standard' in answering the question about what Mansa Musa can reveal about Medieval Africa.

In summary, I will try and embrace the opportunities that arise from remote learning...while also mourning classroom time and teaching pupils face to face – which I dearly miss.

Mansa Musa: gold standard paragraph

02 April 2020 22:56

In this paragraph, I aim to prove that the story of Mansa Musa tells us a lot about Medieval Africa beyond the story of one man. In England, most people don't know much about Medieval Africa so they assume that it was a very simple society; Mansa Musa however proves this wrong. Historians believe that he had twenty four chiefs, called emirs, each governing a different part of his empire. Mansa Musa created a system of honours that rewarded loyalty. This allowed him to leave on his famous hajj without being afraid that they would rise up against him. This does not sound like a simple society! Mansa Musa's story also shows that in Africa they knew how to exploit their rich natural resources. Yes, he was made rich by the goldfields of Wangara, but it still wouldn't have been easy to organise the labour and miners with such an effect as he did. He also managed to exploit the resources of the savannah, giving people a reliable supply of food. Another thing that Mansa Musa's story shows is that in Africa wealth equalled power. For instance, when he arrived in Cairo he had five hundred slaves and each was carrying a baton of gold; even the manes of his horses were decorated with little strands of gold. He sent a gift of *forty thousand dinars of gold* to the Sultan of Egypt. He gave out gold freely to everyone, even making its value decrease! Mansa Musa's story also tells us that religion was very important in Medieval Africa. We know a large portion of people in Africa were Muslims. Mansa Musa's hajj (first announced in **1323**) stirred up huge interest and instilled trust, meaning there was more trade and for the first time Mali was included on a map. I therefore believe that the story of Mansa Musa tells us lots more about Medieval Africa than just the story of one man.

Task: highlight the following precise information in this paragraph in different colours.
(The first has been done for you)

Date(s) Key terms Place names Statistics

*Further Reading on retrieval practice (one of my favourite education books of all time): Brown, P., Roediger, H., & McDaniel, M. (2014). *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.