

Research for Teachers

Effective teaching and learning in humanities

published: Fri Mar 18 05:39:59 GMT 2011

- [Overview](#)
- [Study](#)
- [Case studies](#)
- [Further reading](#)
- [Appraisal](#)

What works in humanities teaching and why?

This research summary features a study which looked at the evidence for effective strategies in humanities, and most importantly why they worked:

Aitken, G. and Sinnema, C. (2008) *Effective pedagogy in social sciences: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)*, New Zealand Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand

The researchers looked for evidence of teaching and learning approaches that made a difference to student learning. They included studies from international sources that looked at a range of learning outcomes in the humanities (history, geography, classical studies, economics and social studies). These outcomes related to knowledge, skills, participation, emotions and cultural identity.

The researchers synthesised evidence from 383 studies and from this identified four key aspects of teaching (which they called 'mechanisms') that are important for student learning. These were:

- designing experiences that interest students
- building and sustaining a learning community
- making connections to students' lives; and
- aligning experiences to the outcomes which have been identified as important.

While the evidence demonstrated the importance of each mechanism for promoting student learning, the researchers noted that in practice they did not work in isolation. Effective lessons were likely to include all four of these aspects. The researchers also emphasised the need for teachers to understand why a particular teaching approach is effective. The study therefore provided details of the reasons why each mechanism works and also information about what they do not mean. Examples of the mechanisms in practice in history and geography are included in this summary.

Although the researchers found that the four mechanisms were strongly linked with positive learning outcomes they also pointed out that 'there is no easy 'what works' answer for teachers because 'what works' depends on the context'. For this reason, they suggested that teachers take an enquiry-based approach to the mechanisms. Using this approach would involve teachers in identifying what were the most important learning outcomes for

their students and which of the mechanisms would help their pupils to engage in this learning. They would then find out how using the mechanisms influenced their students' learning.

This research summary describes each of the four mechanisms in turn before going on to explore how teachers can use the mechanisms to best effect. As well as the two case studies taken from the study (in history and geography), a number of independent practitioner case studies are provided to illustrate some of the key messages, such as helping students to make connections between learning and their own lives, and planning activities that interest a diverse range of students.

[Back to top](#)

Overview

Why is the issue important?

For teachers it is important to know which teaching and learning strategies have a positive impact on pupil learning. This research summary describes a study that looked at the evidence for effective strategies in humanities teaching, and most importantly why they worked.

What did the study find out?

The researchers identified four key aspects of teaching (which they called 'mechanisms') that are important for student learning. These are:

- designing experiences that interest students
- building and sustaining a learning community
- making connections to students lives; and
- aligning experiences to important learning outcomes.

The researchers included classroom examples to illustrate these mechanisms and the way that in practice all four mechanisms worked together rather than in isolation. They also noted that teachers needed to take account of their own context in using the mechanisms and recommended that an enquiry-based approach is used to do this.

How did the researchers arrive at their conclusions?

The researchers looked at international research that was relevant to the humanities (history, geography, classical studies, economics and social studies), contained evidence about student outcomes and gave information about the teaching strategies used. From this they identified strategies which were shown to impact positively on pupil outcomes. As the researchers looked at the studies, themes started to emerge which could be grouped into mechanisms. Once all of the studies had been considered, the four mechanisms were identified as making connections, ensuring alignment, sustaining community and designing experiences that interest students.

How was the research designed to be trustworthy?

The researchers used systematic searches with relevant keywords and also searches based on the researchers' own knowledge of the field. Altogether, 383 studies were included in the research. The researchers assessed the quality of this evidence and looked for links between teaching and learning, and outcomes.

What are the implications?

The research showed the importance of teachers:

- evaluating strategies for identifying students' prior learning
- considering the strategies they use to find out about students' cultural knowledge and experiences
- considering the complexity of tasks that they set in group work; and

- considering using an enquiry-based model to investigate the effect of teaching strategies on their students' learning.

It also showed the importance of school leaders:

- auditing the extent to which language is used by school staff to emphasise learning
- promoting staff discussion about why particular approaches work; and
- considering promoting enquiry-based approaches in their school.

What do the case studies illustrate?

The case studies complement and illustrate aspects of what the researchers found worked in humanities teaching. They show how:

- a history teacher used questioning to develop his students' thinking and learning skills
- a school re-designed its curriculum so as to interest and engage its students
- a humanities department used student consultation to help build its learning community
- a geography teacher used ICT to help students make connections between their learning and their own lives; and
- a school developed enquiry-based practices as part of its history and geography teachers' professional development.

[Back to top](#)

Study

What did the researchers mean by interest, community, connection and alignment?

From their review of the evidence, the researchers found that the four mechanisms of connection, alignment, community and interest facilitated learning in the humanities for a diverse range of students. Their research showed that in practice these mechanisms did not operate in isolation but worked together in the classroom.

Interest

The research showed that this mechanism involved designing learning experiences that were interesting for students and involved a range of different types of activities. The researchers found that taking account of the different motivators for the different students in a class and planning activities accordingly was an effective way of enhancing interest. The researchers also found that effective teachers included a range of learning activities in their lessons. Such variety meant learners were more likely to remember the content because they could anchor their memories to a range of different experiences.

Community

The researchers found that this mechanism involved teachers promoting learning communities built around respectful relationships. Their evidence showed that teachers who created effective learning communities specifically helped students to develop the skills of dialogue and planned opportunities for students to practise and use these skills. You may like to read an earlier research summary [Raising achievement through group work](#) which explores how teachers developed talk skills in group work.

The researchers found that another important aspect of developing community was helping students to develop their thinking and learning skills, and providing opportunities for students to make decisions about their learning. In this way student participation and autonomy were increased.

You may like to read case study 1 which shows how a history teacher used questioning to develop his students' thinking and learning skills.

Connection

The researchers found that this mechanism involved teachers connecting the content of learning to students' lives. By doing this they increased the relevance of the learning and encouraged students to look for parallels

between new learning and their own experiences. Students could compare their own experiences with those of other people in different times, places and cultures. The researchers found that connections were enhanced by using language which included all learners and by selecting resources that made diversity visible, for example by showing different genders and cultures.

Alignment

The research showed that this mechanism involved teachers in planning learning activities where links with the intended outcomes were very explicit and visible to the students. In this way the learning intentions and experiences were aligned. The researchers also found that effective teachers identified what students already knew in order to decide which outcomes to focus on. By doing this they could prioritise the important learning outcomes and identify understandings and misunderstandings that might act as barriers to this learning.

The four mechanisms and enquiry

The researchers recommended that teachers used an enquiry-based approach in which they did not simply follow the four mechanisms but used them to investigate appropriate teaching strategies and their impact on student outcomes. The four mechanisms and the enquiry-based approach, which the researchers identified as important, are examined in more detail in a later section of this summary.

How can teachers design experiences that interest students?

Over 100 of the studies included in the synthesis related to designing experiences that interested students. They found that this was important for promoting learning in the humanities. Students attached memories about what they had learnt to the way in which they learnt it. If learning experiences were interesting and engaging the learning became memorable. In order to design experiences that interest students, teachers need to:

- maximise student interest
- meet diverse motivational needs; and
- use a variety of activities.

Maximise interest

Over 80 of the studies included in the synthesis related to maximising interest. The researchers explained that maximising interest leads to student engagement which can increase learning. This can be done through the use of:

- first-hand experiences
- narratives; and
- carefully selected and designed resources.

First-hand experiences of social, cultural, economic and political situations could help to make learning real. The researchers found that narratives in stories have an emotional appeal that engaged students and promoted learning. The design and selection of resources also impacted on interest. For example, using pictures or diagrams helped to maximise engagement.

Meet diverse needs

The researchers found 16 of the studies related to meeting diverse needs. Students are motivated in different ways. What is interesting for one student may not be interesting for another. The researchers found that effective teachers took this into account when planning learning activities. Interestingly, the researchers found that teachers' perceptions about what would be motivating for their students did not always match with the students' perceptions. Encouraging students to make choices about the content and learning activities could be a powerful motivator. However, the researchers noted that this could result in them choosing activities which do not further their learning.

You may like to read the earlier research summary [Consulting pupils about teaching and learning](#) which explores how teachers can find out about students' views about their learning.

Use variety

The synthesis included eight studies that involved using a variety of different types of activity. The researchers found that this helped students to recall the content that was learned through those experiences. The researchers found that learning was promoted when students experienced a variety of learning experiences of different types. This helped to make the learning memorable.

You may like to read case study 2 which illustrates how one school met diverse needs through redesigning its curriculum to include learning experiences which interested students.

What interest does not mean

The researchers noted that interest does not involve:

- simply planning enjoyable activities - experiences need to be aligned to the intended learning
- teachers using their favourite motivational activities - the interests of the students are key
- simply planning meaningful experiences - students need to be debriefed so that the important learning can be drawn out; or
- always planning multiple ways to learn - the key element is planning experiences which give students memorable anchors to help them to recall their learning.

How can teachers build a learning community?

The researchers found that 95 of the studies included in the synthesis related to the importance of building and sustaining a learning community in the humanities. In such communities students learned with and from each other. In order to build and sustain a learning community teachers need to:

- promote dialogue
- establish productive teacher-student relationships; and
- share power with students.

Promote dialogue

The researchers found 42 of the studies related to dialogue in the humanities. These showed that student learning can be facilitated by talking about content with other students. Promoting dialogue between students involved:

- establishing group expectations
- explicitly developing the skills of dialogue
- modelling dialogue use; and
- setting complex tasks.

The researchers found that when students understood the expectations and rules for group work they were able to collaborate effectively. Involving students in the development of these norms was an important strategy. It was also important to explicitly teach talk skills. When teachers modelled the use of dialogue, students were helped to develop these skills themselves. The researchers also found that it was important that teachers gave groups tasks that were appropriately complex. If tasks were routine and did not require peer interaction they were likely to be completed by students working individually. Students were encouraged to interact more effectively when teachers drew their attention to the diversity of expertise required for the task.

You may like to read the earlier research summary [Raising achievement through group work](#) which discusses collaborative and discussion-based approaches to learning in more detail.

Establish relationships

The synthesis included 29 studies that related to the importance of relationships. The researchers found that building respectful relationships with students established a basis for learning and helped to create a sense of community. Effective teachers made sure that these relationships were inclusive and valued diversity in aspects such as colour, gender, and religion. It was also important that the relationships were embedded in learning. The researchers found that modelling learning behaviours was a useful strategy for achieving this.

Share power

The researchers included 14 studies in the synthesis which related to the sharing of power. They found that delegating some decisions to students increased their participation levels. Teachers who made learning and thinking processes transparent helped students to develop the skills needed to participate in decisions about their learning.

What community does not mean

The researchers noted that building a learning community does not involve:

- simply promoting relationships - relationships need to be focused on supporting learning
- simply planning more group work - activities need to be aligned to the intended learning and require contributions from all of the group; or
- relinquishing authority - authority can be delegated to students, but teachers maintain their responsibility and leadership.

You may like to read case study 3 which shows how teachers in a humanities department developed the learning community in their schools by consulting students.

How can teachers make effective connections with students' lives?

The researchers found that over 60 of the 383 studies included in the synthesis related to making connections in the humanities. The researchers found that making connections between learning and students' lives improved students' understanding of important ideas and processes. They explained that this was because the experiences became relevant to the students when they were able to see parallels between new learning and their own lives. Connections were made with students' lives by:

- drawing on relevant content; and
- ensuring inclusive content.

Relevant content

Drawing on relevant content involved:

- embedding cultural knowledge and experiences; and
- making students' own lives a point of comparison.

The researchers found that 33 of the studies they reviewed related to relevant content. The researchers highlighted the importance of including students' cultural knowledge and experiences in lesson content as a means of making connections. Drawing on relevant content also involved making students' own lives a point of comparison. Strategies that encouraged a consideration of similarities and differences between their own experiences and what was being learnt had a particularly large effect on learning.

Inclusive content

The synthesis included 28 studies which emphasised the importance of ensuring inclusive content by making diversity visible through language, content and resources. The researchers noted that teachers could exclude certain groups of students (such as those belonging to different cultures or religions) unwittingly through the

language and resources they used. They recommended that teachers considered the extent to which diversity was represented in their language and the resource materials that they used with their students.

You may like to read case study 4 which illustrates how a geography teacher used ICT to help students make connections between their learning and their own lives.

What connection does not mean

The researchers noted that making connections to students' lives does not involve:

- always beginning from the students' experiences - connections could be made later
- only making the obvious connections with practical relevance
- accepting all opinions and perspectives; or
- never using biased resources - these could act as a springboard to initiate discussion.

How can teachers align experiences to important learning outcomes?

Over 100 of the studies included in this synthesis related to alignment in the humanities. From their review of the evidence the researchers found that 'valued learning will not occur unless learners have sufficient opportunities to engage in learning experiences aligned to that learning (that is, experiences specifically designed to achieve the valued/desired outcomes)'. It is only by doing this that learning becomes fixed in students' memories. In order to align experiences to important outcomes teachers need to:

- identify prior knowledge
- connect activities and resources to intended outcomes
- provide opportunities to revisit concepts and learning processes; and
- attend to the learning of individual students.

Identify prior knowledge

The researchers found that 30 of the studies included in the synthesis related to identifying prior knowledge. They found that identifying students' prior knowledge helped set the direction for learning by establishing what was known and not known. It also alerted teachers to existing understandings and misunderstandings that could inhibit learning. Effective teachers identified prior knowledge by using techniques that specifically explored the type of prior knowledge sought. The researchers found that it wasn't simply enough to collect such information - what was key was that teachers used the information to inform their planning of learning experiences.

You may like to read the forthcoming research anthology *Teachers as creators of curriculum experiences* which explores identifying prior knowledge in more detail.

Align activities

The synthesis included 40 studies which related to aligning activities in the humanities. The research confirmed that learning was promoted when there were clear connections between the learning activities and the understanding the teachers were seeking to develop. The researchers found that this was most effective when the intended understanding was explicitly included in the learning experience. They gave the example of one study which looked at the impact of explicitly aligning activities with the intended outcomes in history. In one class, the students used textbooks as the basis of the learning. In the other class, the students studied the same textbook chapters but were also explicitly taught concepts and problem-solving skills relating to the material. Whilst both classes achieved similar results for recall of factual knowledge, students in the second group were significantly better at transferring their conceptual knowledge to problem-solving scenarios.

Revisit learning

The researchers found that 25 of the studies related to the importance of revisiting learning. The researchers found that learning was enhanced when students had related opportunities to return to learning experiences so that it became embedded in their memories. One study showed that the number and timing of learning

experiences was critical to student learning. Effective teachers provided three to five aligned experiences with not more than two days between each experience.

Attend to each individual's learning

The synthesis included 12 studies related to attending to each individual's learning. The researchers found that students' interests, involvement and background knowledge influenced their engagement, which in turn influenced their learning outcomes. They found that effective teachers took these factors into account when planning learning experiences. In this way they maximised their students' engagement. They also found that the order in which activities were encountered influenced what students learned. The researchers noted that sequencing whole-class discussions before small-group or individual tasks could help students to access the content. By carrying out this whole-class work the teachers could, for example, draw explicit attention to relevant information and resources.

What alignment does not mean

The researchers noted that aligning experiences to important outcomes does not involve:

- simply accessing prior knowledge - the information must be used to inform teaching
- only accessing prior topic knowledge - if the intended learning is about concepts rather than knowledge then prior conceptual knowledge needs to be accessed
- simply providing multiple learning experiences - opportunities need to be aligned to the curriculum goals, revisited and include a number of activity types; or
- planning apparently logical sequences - assessment may reveal that the sequence needs to be adapted to meet specific students' needs.

How can teachers make use of the four mechanisms to their best effect?

Whilst the researchers found that the four mechanisms were extremely important in promoting student learning, they noted that teachers cannot simply follow them as a recipe for 'what works'. They recommended that teachers used an enquiry-based approach to investigate the impact of teaching approaches on student learning in their context. The model of enquiry they suggested consists of three phases:

- focusing enquiry - where teachers establish the priorities for their enquiry
- teaching enquiry - where strategies are identified that are likely to help students achieve the desired outcomes; and
- learning enquiry - where the impact of the strategies is evaluated.

The researchers did not envisage these as a sequence of linear stages but as part of an on-going process in which teachers use the student outcomes from the learning enquiry phase to shape the next steps in enquiring into their own and their students' learning.

Focusing enquiry

In this phase the researchers suggested that teachers establish the priorities for the enquiry. Central to this stage is answering the question 'What is most important and therefore worth spending time on?' This will involve consideration of:

- curriculum requirements
- community expectations; and
- the learning needs, interests and experiences of the learners.

Teaching enquiry

In this phase the researchers suggested that teachers choose the strategies to use with their students to achieve particular learning outcomes. Central to this stage is answering the questions, 'What might work best?' and 'What could I try?' In order to do this, teachers would consider which elements of the four mechanisms they should focus on using.

Learning enquiry

The researchers suggested that in this phase teachers evaluate the impact of the selected strategies on student outcomes. Central to this stage is answering the questions 'What happened?' and importantly 'Why did it happen?' When considering the second question teachers will draw on the four mechanisms. For example, if students are not interested in the content teachers may ask themselves whether this is because the content does not connect to the students' own cultural experiences (connection mechanism) or because they have not been able to have an influence on the way in which they use the content in lessons (interest mechanism).

You may like to read case study 5 which illustrates how one school developed enquiry-based practices as part of its history and geography teachers' professional development. You may also like to read the earlier research summary *Leading learning effectively* which explores how school leaders can promote staff professional learning.

How do the four mechanisms work in practice in geography?

The study included a number of case studies to illustrate the mechanisms. In this example, a researcher carried out observations of a Year 11 class of 30 students and noted that the girls participated less in discussions than the boys. Out of the eleven girls nine were quiet, whilst seven out of the nineteen boys were quiet. On average, girls had only 36 per cent of the interactions with the teacher. The teacher and researcher aimed to increase the girls' participation in a lesson which focused on understanding how people's perspectives are shaped by their culture and lifestyle.

What did the teacher do?

The teacher carried out a lesson which centred around a video featuring a Bangladeshi woman, Daslima, who was trying to decide whether to marry. The students were asked to think about their typical daily timetable. They then watched the video and were asked to compare their daily timetable with Daslima's typical timetable. The students were given time to discuss their ideas with their neighbours. Before taking part in a whole-class discussion the students agreed that they would:

- take it in turns to speak; and
- not interrupt or show a response when others were speaking.

They also agreed that anyone could decline their turn if they did not wish to speak.

Did the girls participate?

The girls' participation levels increased. The researcher noted that:

- the girls in the lesson had 41 per cent of the teacher-student interactions compared to 36 per cent in previous lessons
- five out of 11 girls reported that they had participated 'more' or 'much more'; and
- some of the girls made more extended contributions to the discussions. For example, one student reported that her participation had been 'about the same' but noted that her contribution was of greater length and quality than usual.

What happened to boys' participation?

The researcher noted that:

- boys had 59 per cent of the teacher-student interactions; and
- 17 out of 18 of the boys reported that they had participated 'the same', 'a little less', or 'much less'.

How did the teacher develop connection for the girls?

By asking the students to compare their daily timetable with Daslima's timetable the girls were able to make connections with their own lives. After the lesson, the girls were asked to rate how important the lesson content had been to them. For four of the girls it had had 'some' importance, for four of the girls it had been 'very' important and for three of the girls 'extremely' important.

How did the teacher align the outcomes?

The activities and resources were aligned to the intended outcomes of increasing the participation of quiet girls and developing an understanding of the influence of culture on people's perspectives. The video which

featured a girl of similar age but different cultural background was chosen because it was thought it would interest the girls. The turn-taking strategy was designed to encourage the participation of these normally quiet girls.

How did the teacher build a learning community?

The turn-taking strategy contributed to building a learning community in which dialogue played a central role. Giving the students time to prepare made sure that no one felt that they were 'put on the spot'. As the students agreed that their contributions would not be interrupted they did not feel that they were judged. Respect was also shown for students who did not wish to speak as they were given the option of declining to make a verbal contribution. Students found the turn-taking strategy effective. This is illustrated by one girl who commented: "It was quite good I thought, the way that she went around the classroom and got everyone to say something ... because that way people get used to saying it and they are not really as worried about it and also if you are asking everyone to do it, you don't think oh I'm going to be the only one, if you are not used to calling out or something".

How did the teacher design interesting activities?

The content of the lesson was particularly designed to interest the girls. When the researcher interviewed the girls about why they had participated more their interest in the content was a common theme. For instance, one student commented "I think I answered more than I would have because I found it interesting so I watched it and got involved in it".

How do the four mechanisms work in practice in history?

The study also included this example to illustrate the mechanisms in practice in history. The example shows how a teacher increased the engagement of a group of students by enabling them to make links between their culture and their learning. The students involved were four 17-18 year old girls who had a history of limited engagement with school and low academic achievement. The curriculum focus was on conceptual understandings about the religious practices of Ancient Rome.

What did the teacher do?

The teacher modelled how students could engage in purposeful discussions about their learning with a family member or friend from their culture. She encouraged them to discuss similarities and differences between the religious artefacts, gender roles, rituals and relationships of Ancient Rome with their own culture. The teacher then used one-to-one and small group discussions to help the students reflect and build upon the similarities and differences they had identified.

What was the impact?

Tests done before and after the intervention showed that the students' understanding of the concepts relating to Ancient Roman religious practices had increased. Comments from the students showed that they felt included and empowered by making the connections between their home culture and learning.

How did the teacher develop connection?

The teacher helped the students to connect their learning about an unfamiliar religious and social context with their own lives by helping them to see how to hold learning conversations with family members or friends from their own cultures. This helped the students to see the relevance and allowed them to look for both similarities and differences between the new learning and their own experiences.

How did the teacher align the experiences?

The teacher ensured that the learning activities were connected directly with the intended outcomes. These outcomes related to developing conceptual understanding of the religious practices of Ancient Rome. The teacher helped the students to focus their home discussions on identifying similarities and differences between Ancient Rome and their own culture. The students involved found that these home discussions helped them to clarify their ideas. The in-school discussions which followed were similarly focused on building on the students' understanding of the similarities and differences.

How did the teacher build a learning community?

The learning was built around respectful relationships in which dialogue played a central role. The teacher ensured that the discussions took part either one-to-one or in small groups so that the students felt safe to voice their ideas. The teacher also modelled the use of dialogue ensuring that she demonstrated how students could focus their home discussions on actively seeking out similarities and differences between their own and culture and that of Ancient Rome. She encouraged students to participate by revealing connections to her own cultural experiences. As one student noted "Sometimes the teacher shares with us her own story about her family....It kinda makes you feel confident to share your own story...".

How did the teacher design interesting activities?

The teacher designed the learning activities so that the students could focus on the aspects that most interested them. For these students religious beliefs and rituals were more engaging than artefacts and relationships. By taking part in discussions at home and at school memorable experiences were created too which students could anchor their learning to.

How was the research designed?

This study set out to find what works in humanities teaching (history, geography, classical studies, economics and social studies) and why. The researchers searched through international research that was relevant to the humanities, contained evidence about student outcomes and gave information about the teaching strategies used. They looked for evidence of outcomes relating to: knowledge, skills, participation, affective elements and cultural identity. They used systematic searches in which relevant keywords were used and also searches based on their own knowledge of the field. Throughout this process, they sought sources which involved a diverse range of students (for example in terms of gender and ethnicity) and a wide range of contexts. Altogether, 383 studies were included in the review. The researchers assessed the studies for the quality of their evidence in terms of their description of pedagogy and outcomes, and their description of the link between the two.

The researchers synthesised the evidence to identify strategies that had a positive impact on pupil outcomes and to develop explanations of why these strategies worked. As the researchers looked at the studies, themes started to emerge which they grouped into mechanisms. These mechanisms developed progressively as they looked at further studies. Sometimes the findings from a study caused the researchers to elaborate or collapse a particular mechanism. Once all of the studies had been considered the four mechanisms were identified as making connections, ensuring alignment, sustaining community and designing experiences that interest students.

The researchers developed case studies to illustrate the mechanisms in action in a range of contexts. These were developed from the researchers' reports with a focus on teasing out the reasons why a strategy worked. In order to ensure that the cases interpreted the research correctly the reports were checked by the original researcher.

Some implications for teachers and leaders

Teachers may like to consider the following implications relating to what the researchers found works in humanities teaching:

- The researchers found that identifying students' prior knowledge helped set the direction for learning. Could you work with a colleague to develop strategies for identifying students' prior learning such as using questioning or concept maps? Which strategies are most effective? How do you align these strategies to the type of prior learning you are trying to identify (for example knowledge, concepts or skills)?
- The researchers found that embedding students' cultural knowledge and experiences in content helped them to see the relevance of the learning. You may like to consider the strategies that you use to find out about students' cultural knowledge and experiences such as asking students to bring in artefacts from home. Which strategies are most effective? What have you learnt about the different experiences your students bring to their learning?
- The researchers found that students learn through dialogue and that this was promoted in group work by giving tasks which are appropriately complex and require peer interaction. You may like to consider the nature of the tasks that you have set in group work. How do you gauge whether they are set at an appropriate level of complexity? How do you

ensure that they require the contributions of all members of the group?

- The researchers promoted an enquiry-based model where teachers could investigate the effect of teaching strategies on their students' learning. Could you work with a colleague to discuss ways in which you may identify the impact of a particular strategy on students' learning? For example, you may investigate the impact of using stories on students' understanding of the learning content.

School leaders may like to consider the following implications:

- Modelling learning behaviours was found to be a useful strategy for developing students' participation and learning. Could you evaluate the language that is used by the teachers in your school? To what extent does the language emphasise learning? You may want to work with your staff to develop a bank of useful phrases such as 'what have we learnt from this?'
- The researchers noted that it is important for teachers to understand why a particular approach works. How do you ensure that staff have the time to reflect on and discuss the reasons why a particular strategy has resulted in learning? How do you monitor your staff's understanding of effective teaching and learning?
- The researchers promoted an enquiry-based model in which teachers investigated the impact of teaching approaches on student outcomes. You and your Senior Leadership Team (SLT) may like to consider ways of promoting this approach. How do you encourage your staff to look at the impact of particular teaching approaches on student learning? Could the SLT model such an investigatory approach with a particular aspect of learning?

Gaps in the research

Gaps - of basic premises, related issues, methods, analysis and/or interpretation - that are uncovered in a piece of research also have a useful role in making sure that future research can fill in the gaps and build cumulatively on what is known. If research is also to inform practice, it needs to be convincing to teachers, and to take account of their views of its adequacy; so practitioners' interpretation of the gaps and follow-up questions are crucial. We think the following kinds of studies would usefully supplement the findings of this research:

- further research into the links between particular teaching approaches in humanities and student outcomes. The researchers found that this was particularly needed in geography, economics and early years education
- more detailed research into the strength of the evidence on each of the mechanisms
- more detailed research into the experiences of particular groups of students in the humanities
- research into the relationship between teacher content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge; and
- research into strategies (such as project work and community learning) that are popular in the humanities, but for which there is little or contradictory evidence of impact.

What is your experience?

Do you have any evidence regarding effective teaching and learning in the humanities? Do you have action research or enquiry-based development programmes that are designed to explore what schools and teachers can do to effectively support learning, such as investigating effective strategies for finding out about students' prior understandings? We would be interested to hear about examples of effective approaches which we could perhaps feature in our case study section.

Your feedback

Have you found this study to be useful? Have you used any aspect of this research in your own classroom teaching practice? We would like to hear your feedback on this study, which we can share and use to inform our work. Click on the link 'Tell us what you think' on the left to share your views with us.

[Back to top](#)

Case studies

We have chosen five independent case studies to complement and illustrate aspects of this study. The five case studies describe how:

- a history teacher used questioning to develop his students' thinking and learning skills
- a school re-designed its curriculum so as to interest and engage its students
- a humanities department used student consultation to help build its learning community
- a geography teacher used ICT to help students make connections between their learning and their own lives; and
- a school developed enquiry-based practices as part of its history and geography teachers' professional development.

Case study 1: Building a learning community - developing thinking skills

We chose this case study because it shows how one teacher used thinking skills to help build a learning community in which students had an awareness and understanding of themselves as learners. The study took place in a mixed comprehensive which catered for students from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The class involved were a top-set Year 8 history class. The teacher wanted to develop the students' thinking and learning skills through the use of effective questioning and encouraging students to reflect on their thinking (meta-cognition).

What did the teacher do?

The teacher provided opportunities for the students to study the background of the reign of Queen Mary I. They were then asked to assess three courses of action open to Mary regarding the religious problems that she faced. These were to:

- try to reform and improve the Catholic Church
- make an alliance with a Catholic country; or
- try to force Catholicism on the country.

The teacher asked the students to make a decision on which course of action they would advise Mary to follow. They were asked to answer questions about their choices. These were structured around 'who', 'what', 'why' and 'how'. For example, the teacher asked them 'Why did you arrive at your decision?' and 'How did you arrive at your decision?'

After this individual task the students worked in groups to make a collective decision about which course of action Mary should take. Again they were asked to explain why and how they had arrived at their decision. Following this activity, the teacher set the students homework in which they were asked to respond to the question: 'Do you find this type of thinking (meta-cognition) helpful?'

What did the teacher find out about using this approach?

The teacher found that the students:

- thought the approach was rewarding and engaging
- liked the structure of the questions they had been given
- enjoyed discussing their rationale for making a decision as a group
- recognised that they could apply the method in other circumstances
- developed historical analysis skills; and
- developed an awareness of their own role in directing their thinking and learning.

Below are some examples of some of the comments the students made.

'I find this way of thinking very different and interesting. It is not often that people delve deep into their own minds and question their own thinking instead of others. I like the fact that it is different to anything that I have done before, and I believe that by using this method it challenges the mind and in time helps it to grow.'

'I find this step-by-step way of thinking quite convenient and it also makes me think about my final decision.'

'If you look back at how you worked out an answer, you can check very precisely for mistakes and see if you've gone wrong. You can then use the method you use in your head to do other question. In all, I think this is really helpful.'

What conclusion did the teacher reach?

The teacher concluded that effective questioning played an important role in enhancing the meta-cognitive skills of the students. It helped them to become aware of their own thinking and learning.

Price, A. (2008) *Effective questioning: stepping-stones to meta-cognition?*, Summary prepared for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, National Teacher Research Panel. Available at: www.ntrp.org.uk

Case study 2: Designing experiences that interest students

We chose this case study because it shows how a school redesigned its curriculum to interest its students. In particular it incorporated opportunities for students to make choices about their learning which led to increased student motivation. The school tracked the progress of a target group of students to monitor the impact of the curriculum on their achievement. Improved standards were noted for all of the students in the group, with particular progress made in writing. The school involved was a two-form entry primary school situated in a new town community. Previously it had attempted to adapt its curriculum to meet the needs of its students, but staff felt that the curriculum was still something that was delivered to the students, rather than something they could fully engage with. Additionally, the staff wanted the new curriculum to include elements of a learning skills programme (which they had already worked on as a school) and to encourage the students to broaden their horizons.

What did the school do?

The teachers chose six themes consisting of 'who we are', 'living in the past', 'sharing the planet', 'the world around us', 'keeping fit and healthy', and 'how the world works'. National Curriculum requirements were incorporated into each theme. In-service training (INSET) days were used for staff to plan projects for each year group and to incorporate strategies from the Building Learning Power programme (www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk/). The 'sharing the planet' theme was chosen as a particular focus for developing strategies to motivate students and increasing student awareness of global issues. The staff produced a common set of aims which they used to plan their topic. The deputy head acted as a mentor during the planning process. A group of target students was identified in each class. These were students who were not 'on-track' to achieve their target grades.

At the initial lesson the students were shown a PowerPoint presentation showing various images with a global theme. The teachers used open-ended questioning to find out the students' thoughts and questions about the images. Following this, staff were provided with extra time to create compelling learning experiences for their students. For instance, in one class, work on recycled materials was planned so that it led to a full scale fashion show.

The teachers incorporated choice into the lessons. Students were able to make decisions about the content and presentation of their learning. Students were also given choices in the home learning aspect of their work. Open-ended projects were set. These clearly outlined the expected outcomes and allowed the students to make choices about the way in which they achieved these. For example, they were able to choose how they presented their learning through the use of models, PowerPoints presentations and posters.

What was the impact of the approach?

The school noted that this new approach to the curriculum led to:

- raised levels of student motivation particularly for home learning
- increased student engagement in lessons
- increased staff motivation

- improved standards for the target group of students particularly in writing; and
- the development of students' values as global citizens.

The raised level of motivation was a particular feature of the project. One student commented, "I like doing big projects. You have lots of time, it's fun...I like standing up at the end and presenting all my work...it's good listening to other presentations."

What conclusions did the staff reach?

The curriculum project led the staff to conclude that:

- giving students a choice in their learning can lead to increased motivation
- using a broad theme at the start of a topic such as a range of images can be a useful way of gaining information about students' values and prior learning
- setting homework that focuses on a theme and has an element of choice can be motivating for students
- providing time for staff to think about their planning can help to develop staff confidence; and
- setting up opportunities for staff to be mentored through the planning process can help to develop confidence and thinking.

Haydon, L. (2008) *Engaging primary school learners through a creative curriculum*, Summary prepared for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, National Teacher Research Panel. Available at: www.ntrp.org.uk

Case study 3: Building a learning community through student consultation

We chose this case study because it shows how a humanities department used student consultation to help build the learning community in their school. The high school involved aimed to engage students in making decisions about their learning. The geography, history and religious studies teachers, a lead researcher and the head of year worked with students to investigate ways of improving student learning. In doing this, students were able to develop a relationship with their teachers that was embedded in learning and empowered them to share decisions about their learning.

What did the school do?

A sample of nine Year 10 students was selected. These included a representative mix of boys and girls and a range of different abilities. Day workshops were organised where staff and students gave their views about learning. The students were also interviewed individually by the researcher about various aspects of their learning.

The issues that the staff and students explored included the following questions:

- Is there a gender issue about learning?
- How do students perceive departments and why?
- What do students like/dislike about teacher styles?
- What are the effective teacher styles?
- How do students want humanities staff to communicate to them about their learning?
- How do students like to learn?
- What will students do to achieve success?

In addition, a teacher set up a number of Year 9 and Year 11 focus groups. These considered the way in which the classroom and school learning environments could be improved.

What did the feedback from the students show?

The feedback from the students indicated that they:

- wanted respect and wanted to be involved in their education
- had clear ideas about what was good teaching
- did not tolerate poor learning environments
- had mixed feelings about the value of target setting; and
- understood how they could influence their progression through Key Stage 4.

Students' comments about wanting to be involved in their education included:

'Teachers should listen to pupils!' and 'We are adults so why do most of them treat us like primary school kids?' The comments about good teaching particularly focused on making lessons more interesting by increasing the amount of group discussions. One student commented: 'We learn by talking.'

They noted that they wanted a learning environment which was colourful and inspirational.

How did the school act on this feedback?

The staff used the feedback from the students in a number of ways. These included:

- adjusting the target-setting process to allow students to be engaged in the setting of their own targets
- organising for staff and students to work together improving the humanities block teaching areas; and
- participating in a follow-up project which aimed to develop student leadership opportunities.

The staff revised the target-setting process so that students could use their Key Stage 3 average point scores and predictions of future grades to set their own targets. As one member of staff noted, "[the students] had a much clearer understanding of the targets and were motivated by the element of ownership and choice yet realistic about their capabilities". The humanities block was repainted in brighter colours, motivational posters were displayed and the desks rearranged in collaboration with the students. The follow-up project aimed to involve the students in participating in decisions about their learning.

What did the teachers conclude?

The teachers concluded that it was vital to listen to the views of students and work with them as 'equal partners in building a school where adults and students alike are proud to be working'.

Cox, I. (2003) *Developing student leadership in a Networked Learning Community*, National Teacher Research Panel. Available at: www.ntrp.org.uk

Case Study 4: Making connections with students' lives through the use of ICT

We chose this case study because it shows how a teacher in a school used ICT to help the students make connections between their geography learning and their own lives. The teacher taught a Year 1 class in a small rural first school. He wanted to develop their understanding of 'place' in geography through the use of ICT. The students' baseline assessments indicated that they were in the normal range of achievement for their age although three of the students needed support for language and literacy learning.

What did the teacher do?

The teacher planned opportunities for the students to take digital photographs around the school and village. Back in the classroom students used these to make detailed drawings. This helped the students to think about a setting that was familiar to their own lives.

The teacher had also set up email links with an 'e-pal' in this country. The students met their 'pal' on a joint school trip. The students sent their e-pal a picture of the view from the classroom window. The e-pals were

asked to respond with photographs of the views from their classroom windows. This allowed the students to make comparisons between the familiar views in their own lives and the unfamiliar views of their e-pals. The students found it extremely motivating that others were looking at the picture they had taken.

The teacher built upon this comparison by setting up correspondence with six people around the world. These were located in London, Gloucestershire, Wales, Cork, Pennsylvania and Japan. The students were encouraged to use email to find out about these different places. In addition to emails, postcards were sent to the children from these different locations. The teacher had hoped to involve some teachers from the different localities and their classes in this correspondence but this was not possible.

In addition to these activities the students were asked to take soft toys on their holidays and send postcards back to the class from themselves and the toy.

How did the students respond?

The students' responses showed that the email contact enhanced their understanding of place. For example, when simply viewing a postcard sent from a holiday destination one student commented 'It's nice and sunny, a long way away, it's summer and there are old buildings and some houses...'.

In contrast, the postcards which were viewed alongside the correspondents' emails tended to produce an appreciation of a location as a place to live in. This is illustrated by one student's response... 'It's a place in Ireland that's 450 miles away and a lot of people live there, your friend is called Paul...he looks for water-boatman...there's farms and countryside and a big hospital...people work in the university and on the farms and in the shops...'.

What was the impact?

The teacher found that all of the students reached the expected learning outcomes in terms of their understanding of place. Observations showed that the students made good progress in their use of geographical language.

What did the teacher conclude?

The teacher concluded that although it would have been possible to use conventional cameras and mail, the digital cameras and ICT allowed more rapid and synchronous communication. This facilitated comparisons between the students' own lives and the learning of place.

Storey, C. (2000) *Using ICT to support the teaching of 'Place' in geography*, National Teacher Research Panel. Available at: www.ntrp.org.uk

Case study 5: Developing enquiry-based practices as part of teachers' professional development

We chose this case study because it shows how one school developed enquiry-based practices as part of its history and geography teachers' professional development. The school involved was a three-form entry 9-13 middle school situated in an area of social and economic deprivation. The school aimed to investigate whether in-service training (INSET) of four non-specialist teachers of Year 6 had an effect on students' learning.

What did the school do?

The school organised six hours of INSET focused on teaching quality. In these sessions teachers were asked to:

- reflect on their own practice
- discuss their understanding of effective teaching

- consider national expectations; and
- discuss recent research in teaching and learning.

Research findings and national guidance (such as that from Ofsted and QCA) was used to develop a picture of best practice. This included key points such as:

- effective teachers understand how students learn
- effective teachers use a range of strategies according to students' needs, and understand why and how these strategies impact on students' learning; and
- successful schools have a culture which supports and encourages teachers.

The leaders of the training sessions tried to encourage a culture of reflective experimentation. In this, teachers were supported in using theories and findings from research to plan strategies that could be used in the classroom. They were encouraged to experiment with these strategies and then reflect on their impact. This led to further reading and experimentation. To facilitate this process, teachers formed supportive pairings and then watched each other teach. They discussed their observations, reflected on their practice, and sought ways to improve.

What impact did the approach have?

The teachers felt that the approach helped them in a number of ways. These included:

- being specific about learning objectives
- using key questions to promote and extend learning and focus the lesson; and
- using end-of-lesson plenaries to share their findings with one another.

Pupils were observed to have developed in a number of ways. These included:

- being clearer about what was expected
- being more confident about their learning; and
- becoming increasingly creative in the approach to their work, and taking more risks.

What supports the development of an enquiry-based approach?

The school identified a number of INSET activities that supported the development of enquiry-based practices. These included:

- providing summaries of research
- planning opportunities for teachers to observe each other
- encouraging teachers to reflect on specific teaching strategies
- giving opportunities for teachers to carry out research; and
- focusing the enquiry on a teaching and learning issue which addressed the students' needs.

Teachers felt that the process of introducing enquiry-based practices was facilitated by the school:

- giving time and support for INSET
- having leaders who drove forward change and anticipated teacher discomfort in 'unlearning' previous approaches; and
- allocating resources for collaborative professional development.

Clayton, T. (1998) *Did Pupils' learning in History and Geography increase as a result of a specific inservice training (INSET) intervention focused on teaching quality?*

, TDA, London. Available at: www.ntrp.org.uk

[Back to top](#)

Further reading

Aitken, G. and Sinnema, C. (2008) *Effective pedagogy in social sciences: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)*, New Zealand Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/goto/BES

Related research

Anthony, G. and Walshaw, M. (2007) *Effective pedagogy in mathematics: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)*, New Zealand Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand

Related TLA research summaries

- [Collaborative mathematics](#)
- [Effective talk in the primary classroom](#)
- [Leading learning effectively](#)
- [The impact of collaborative CPD in the classroom](#)
- [Teachers' professional learning](#)
- [Raising achievement through group work](#)
- [Consulting pupils about teaching and learning](#)

Summaries of research

[Themes: Speaking and Listening \(DfE website\)](#)

Includes downloads on:

- How does classroom discussion affect students' learning?
- Improving the quality of pupils' talk and thinking during group work

Resources

[Research taster: How can teachers make group-work work?](#)

[Research taster: What do children think of their experiences of the curriculum?](#)

[Research taster: What's in their heads: how can we find out about students' conceptions in science?](#)

[Back to top](#)

Appraisal

Aitken, G. and Sinnema, C. (2008) *Effective pedagogy in social sciences: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES)*, New Zealand Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: www.educationcounts.govt.nz/goto/BES

Robustness

'Effective pedagogy in social sciences' forms one of several reports emanating from the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) Programme. The BES Programme was established to systematically identify, evaluate and synthesise relevant evidence about teaching where there is a link with enhanced learner outcomes.

In this case, the researchers focused their search on studies which provided data on teaching and learning in social science subjects (history, geography, classical studies, economics and social studies). They identified relevant international studies through systematic searches of databases, following sources referred to in retrieved studies (snowball sampling) and drawing on their own and advisers' connoisseurial knowledge of the research field.

Studies were assessed for their reporting of outcomes relevant to the social sciences, as well as the quality of evidence in terms of their description of pedagogy, description of outcomes, and their description of the link between the two. The researchers excluded studies which made no reference to pedagogy or learning outcomes.

Altogether, 383 studies were included in the synthesis - 242 of which made clear the link between practice and outcomes. The remaining studies either provided contextual information, for example, background on curriculum, or included information on student learning trajectories in the social sciences.

The researchers analysed individual studies to identify emerging themes common across the findings - for example 'provide opportunities to revisit concepts and learning processes'. Themes were then grouped into 'mechanisms'.

The researchers identified four 'mechanisms' that explained effective strategies for diverse learners in the social sciences. These were:

- design experiences that interest students lives
- build and sustain a learning community
- make connections to students'; and
- align experiences to important outcomes.

Relevance

The findings are a reminder of the approaches to curriculum design and enactment that can support the embedding, making sense, and application of subject knowledge. The four mechanisms overlap significantly with the six key areas identified in QCDA's Building the Evidence Base for the 21st Century Curriculum project. For example, building on prior learning is identified as a theme in the QCDA project and as an important element of alignment.

Applicability

Teachers and school leaders may like to reflect on each of the four mechanisms of supporting learning in the social sciences, which the researchers found, in respect to their own practice and curriculum planning:

- connecting new subject content to students' lives through exploring and drawing on students' cultural heritage in ways which acknowledged this as worthy content for the curriculum - and developing resources accordingly, to build meaningful bridges between what happens in school and in students' lives
- aligning experiences to important outcomes to help students make sense of new knowledge and commit it to long-term memory which means exploring what learners know and can do already in relation to the subject content, providing opportunities to revisit concepts, and focusing on the learning of individual students
- building a learning community (particularly important in schools with large numbers of children from low socio-economic backgrounds) through teachers responding to and respecting students' ideas and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning, as well as modeling learning behaviours, and promoting learning dialogue, for example through group work; and
- generating interest in students to help make learning more memorable by paying attention to learners' different

motivations for learning, providing a variety of activities, and using activities designed to arouse interest, such as problem-solving.

Writing

While the report is extensive, containing a large number of illustrative examples from the research and the classroom, the authors have put a lot of thought into making it navigable. The findings are illustrated by easy-to-follow graphics, summarised in the introduction, and developed in more detail in colour-coded sections. The authors have also developed nine illustrative cases from practice reported in the research, fleshed out in consultation with the original researchers. The writing style is relatively jargon-free and easy to follow.

[Back to top](#)
