The gradual transformation of historical situations: understanding ‘change and continuity’ through colours and timelines

The small-scale research that Yosanne Vella reports in this article was driven by concern to help pupils develop ‘big picture’ visions of the past and to engage effectively with the idea of change as a process rather than an event. The strategy that she adopts – asking groups of students to colour in a timeline recording their judgement in response to a range of sources – is a deceptively simple device that enables all her class to engage in a real historical controversy. While the specific question that she tackled (relating to religious change in medieval Malta) is obviously of particular relevance to her own context, the principles that underpin her approach can be widely applied in developing overviews that make the processes of change and continuity visible and open to debate.

Although change and continuity obviously lie at the heart of any approach to history, effective teaching about these processes inevitably presents us with significant challenges. Young people need simultaneous access both to sufficiently long-term perspectives to see change as a process rather than an event, and to a close-up view with enough detail for them to understand what that change actually meant for those living through it. A further demand is the need to acknowledge both elements – recognising that changes in one sphere of life can co-exist with continuities in others. As Ben Jarman noted, when looking with Year 7 at change and continuity in the treatment of Jews in medieval England, these particular concepts are much ‘more slippery’ than others. ‘Christine Counsell has described them as the ‘elusive prey’.‘

Denis Shemilt’s classic work back in the early 1980s still remains one of the best points of reference, providing important indications of the different possible levels of thinking that pupils might demonstrate in relation to these fundamental concepts.\(^3\) Figure 1 provides a summary of his findings, as outlined by Sansom.\(^4\) These levels are graded; with pupils at Level 1 not thinking in a historical way at all, while Level 3 represents the highest achievement of pupil reasoning with regard to change and continuity. Of course these are just patterns. As Sansom warns, ‘the boundaries between these levels are not precise – these are points on a continuum – and pupils are not consistent in their levels of understanding.’\(^5\) Such inconsistency in history pupils’ thinking is today familiar both to history teachers and to researchers. Peter Lee and his colleagues also noted the wide discrepancy between pupils, observing that ‘some 7-year-olds perform at a higher level than some 14-year-olds on at least some of the tasks.’\(^6\) I have noticed this in my own work, and in light of my experience, I definitely prefer:

\[\textit{an image of cognitive development in history, not as a sudden spark that triggers off an ability, but really as a process which may be compared metaphorically to a faded image that becomes sharper in focus the older the child gets. There is a specific role for the adult as well as for peers, and that is to make that already existing image come out brighter than before.}\]

This does not mean, however, that a haphazard management of pedagogy is advisable; on the contrary, an understanding of pupils’ current levels of achievement and of the potential for development, along with structured teaching methods intended to support progression from one to another, are both extremely useful. Therefore, with Shemilt’s levels in mind, I started to create activities which would support pupils’ learning. I wanted my strategies to be grounded in a sound understanding of historical pedagogy and my approach drew on many of Terry Haydn’s suggestions as summarised below.\(^8\)

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Yosanne Vella

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1. Emphasis on the overview
2. Imaginative presentation of changes in the form of illustrated time-charts, time-lines, diagrams or graphs.
3. Comparative exercises on 'similarity' and 'difference'.
4. Comparison of the implication of change for identified people living at the time or at contrasting times.
5. Encouragement of speculation.
6. Use of hypothetical questions.

The paradox that if one wishes to emphasise 'overview' it can be best to go for 'depth' has been clearly demonstrated by Dale Banham's work. Historical learning tends to flourish best when a topic is taught at leisure over an extended period, and Banham, for example, provided compelling arguments for spending eight weeks on the reign of King John - ensuring that pupils' learning is carefully organised to enable them to appreciate the concept of change, identifying shifts in political structures and ideas. Nested within his in-depth study of a single reign were important 'mini-overviews' which further developed pupils' knowledge and understanding of key themes of medieval England. This was an amazing achievement and one which I find fascinating. One can only look in awe from a far physical and pedagogical distance (Malta being around 2300 kilometres from Britain and 20 years behind with regards to history pedagogy). However, my own ambition was somewhat different. Despite the numerous challenges, I wanted to attempt to teach ideas associated with the concept of 'change and continuity' effectively within the strict confines of one 45-minute history lesson. It may be the very opposite of teaching over the kind of extended period that Banham proposed, but it did meet with some success; and teachers struggling with an inadequate allocation of curriculum time may find it helpful.

A history lesson in a Maltese classroom

In Malta, medieval Maltese history is usually taught in Year 7 (11-year-olds) or Year 8 (12-year-olds). One of the themes under this topic is 'Religion in Medieval Malta' and I thought this would be an ideal vehicle through which to teach the concept of 'change and continuity'. As a teacher trainer at the University of Malta's Faculty of Education, I am not a regular class teacher in one specific school. However, my research in history pedagogy requires real classroom situations and I have therefore established a relationship with a number of teachers in different schools who allow me to conduct history lessons and try out particular activities. In this case I asked permission from the head of a co-educational private school, in which the current history topic being studied was 'Medieval Malta', ensuring that the exercise that I proposed fitted well within their curriculum. The activities developed here were taught to a mixed Year 7 class, consisting of 22 pupils, with various levels of prior attainment. The school records of these pupils showed that they were a very mixed bunch, some obtaining full marks in their class and homework while others tended to score average or low marks. A handful had various assessment marks missing because they rarely handed in work.

I did not want to make the mistake of giving an overview 'lecture' on how religious changes occurred on the Maltese Islands over a thousand years, a trap into which history teachers easily fall when faced with teaching about long periods of time. The lesson needed to make use of Sansom's 'tools of thought' - that is, conceptual thinking - merged with knowledge, which could be re-assembled into what Gorman describes as 'a coherent process which defines the historian's craft in a way that will allow pupils to see it in its entirety'.

Figure 1: Change and continuity – the analytical aspect of time

These levels represent a summary by Sansom of Denis Shemilt's findings about the different kind of understandings that students seemed to have of change and continuity.

**Level 1**
Changes are unrelated; they do not transform the story.

**Level 2**
- a. Change is a series, a long causal chain extending back to a 'first cause'.
- b. Everything which happened in the past is an antecedent to the present.

**Level 3**
Historical change as the gradual transformation of a situation; only some aspects of a situation change, and then may do so trivially or radically.
I introduced the lesson by using a large timeline (Figure 2) set up on the whiteboard and quickly reminded the pupils of the following basic information that was already marked on it:

1st century: St Paul (Christian) came to Malta A.D.60
5th century: Vandals (who tolerated Christianity) took over Malta A.D.455
6th century: Byzantines (Christian) took over Malta A.D.533
9th century: Arabs (Moslem) took over Malta A.D.870
11th century: Count Roger (Christian) took over Malta A.D.1091.

Since two religions dominated throughout the medieval period – Christianity and Islam – I put up the two charts shown in Figure 3 on separate corners of the white board. I told the pupils that in medieval Maltese history we have a mystery about which historians cannot agree. The big question is whether the Maltese remained Christian right through from the first century up to the present day or whether they became Moslems for a time and then reverted to Christianity. How complete was this change and how long did it last?

I then displayed flashcards, as shown in Figure 4, summarising what the historians have to say, presenting the views of
Wettinger in contrast to those of earlier historians, such as Gian Francesco Abela. Pupils voted at that point as to who they thought was right. Within the class of 22 pupils eight thought that ‘we’ had always remained faithful to Christianity while 14 thought that ‘we’ turned to Islam for a time. I told the pupils that we could only make a sensible judgement if we worked as historians, so we must look at the evidence. I therefore gave them a set of sources (a sample of which is presented in Figure 5) and the class worked in groups of three or four, to which they were essentially assigned at random as they clustered together with their friends. (See, for example, Figure 6).

Each group was given a collection of the sources and a smaller copy of the timeline that I had put up on the whiteboard. After reading and discussing their sources the groups each had to colour in their timeline using light green, green or dark green to indicate the periods when they thought the Maltese were Moslems, or in light orange, orange, or dark orange when they thought the Maltese were Christian. The shade of colour depended on how certain they felt and on how reliable they thought the sources relating to that period were.

It is difficult for pupils and even for adults not to imagine change in history as abrupt ‘happenings’ or events. Definitely in Malta the popular misconception is that key points in history which denote the arrival of a new coloniser meant that suddenly the old influences magically disappeared and the incomers brought a complete and abrupt change. Just a few examples from Maltese history illustrate the point: one minute Malta was Carthaginian then it became Roman; then it switched from Byzantine straight to Arab rule; and then suddenly everyone changed to Christianity again with the arrival of the Normans. Similar kinds of switches were assumed to occur with the arrival of the French in 1798 and then the British in 1800, until in 1964 we all became independent. This is, of course, a highly distorted, facile view of how change happens in history; previous influences co-exist with the new and they take a long time to fade away, if ever they do. We are the end result of all that came before both ethnically and culturally.

From my experience, one way of avoiding this superficial view of historical change is to present timelines to pupils in colour. The beauty of colour is that like historical periods, colour can fade in and fade out, producing a spectrum of dark colours which slowly wane, weaken and transfigure into another colour. In this way colour can represent something extremely abstract like change and continuity over time in a concrete tangible way, and so do away with abrupt episodic images of the past. It also has the great advantage of making visible the differences in pupils’ interpretations of the sources, allowing for very easy comparison of the different spectrums that they had produced, each representing the same historical period.

Comparison of the pupils’ views

The last 20 minutes of the lesson were taken up discussing the pupils’ timelines (shown in Figure 7), which were in turn stuck on the whiteboard and which were initially accepted as possible interpretations based on the sources.

Figure 4: Flashcards used to summarise the claims of two eminent historians about the religious history of medieval Malta

"Maltese Christianity can be traced back directly and continuously to the 1st century. From the coming of St. Paul right up to today."

"There is nothing to indicate the continuity of Christianity from the late 9th century to the 11th century on the Maltese Islands. In all probably Christianity died out during Arab times except for occasional captives."
Malta has palaeo-Christian catacombs from around the 4th century A.D. Some of these have antechambers used for liturgical services as well as artefacts such as oil lamps with Christian symbols.

'Seeing, then, the Christian slaves coming out of the city, filled with joy at their unexpected freedom, the Count shed tears. The slaves carried in their right hand crosses of wood or reeds, whichever material they found handy, and with exclamations of Kyrie eleison, they cast themselves at the feet of the Count. Therefore the Count, having thus added the city to his lands welcomed the slaves on his ships. As he fast departed on the return journey, he was, however, troubled that the excessive weight of the slaves could cause the ships to sink. But the hand of God, in whom we trust, lifted the ships with the waves...

'In spite of his fears, while he was speeding back home in this way, the Count, noticing in the distance an island which bears the name of Gozo, ordered the sails to be directed towards it, so he might attack it. Upon landing he pillaged the place and carried away booty and added it to his lands...

'Once he returned to Sicily he gave the slaves the option of either returning to their place of origin or to remain in Sicily where he offered to build them a house out of his own money. All slaves freely chose to return to their several homes.'

An account written by Gaufredes Malaterra, Count Roger's secretary who came to Malta with him. A.D. 1091

There is the signature of a bishop of Malta on an important document of Pope Vigillus. The year is A.D. 553 and his name is Bishop Julianus of Malta.

There is archaeological evidence that shows that a Moslem mosque was built in the 9th century A.D. on the Byzantine basilica at Tas-Silg, Marsaxlokk.

In A.D. 592 the Pope asked Bishop Lucillus of Malta to take care of some trouble the Maltese Christians had got into. Some clerics had leased land from the Church and had not paid the agreed rent. There was a lot of money involved and the Pope dismissed Bishop Lucillus.

Letter of Pope Gregory dated A.D. 592

An Arab coin from A.D. 1079 bearing the name of Malta on it.

Pope Gregory ordered the Leader of Sicily to sort out the affairs of the Maltese community. This probably means that Malta was under the authority of the Sicilian diocese.

Letter of Pope Gregory dated A.D. 592

A list of Sicilian Bishops showing a bishop of Malta.

Dated at the beginning of the 9th century A.D. the last record we have of the Sicilian dioceses before Arab rule.

"When he (i.e. King Roger I, the son of Count Roger, who conducted a second invasion some 30 years after his father's first invasion) saw, on the one hand, these inhabitants invoking only the heresiarch, the .............. (insulting remark about Islam) he banished from the country their shikhs, with all their households and black slaves, not indeed a few. He, on the other, brought out into the open the pious inhabitants of the place Together with their Bishop; Who, having departed from the Pact of old, Got rid of the indeed hated things by which they used to invoke Mohammed."

Part of a poem written by a Sicilian exiled on Gozo and written most likely between A.D. 1135 and A.D. 1151. Today it is found as a copy, probably made in the 18th century.

I, wretched me,....to what end have I been flung in the midst of trackless seas Where the children of godless Hagar live,
Not enjoying even little comforts, I, woe betide me, not drinking any wine (not even for the good of my stomach),
I, wretched me, having the greatest scarcity of all necessities, I poor devil, rather getting drunken on (non alcoholic) beer?"

Part of a poem written by a Sicilian exiled on Gozo and written most likely between A.D. 1135 and A.D. 1151. Today it is found as a copy, probably made in the 18th century.

A list of bishops during the Vandal period in Malta does not show a bishop for Malta.

Notitia provinciarum et civitatum Africae A.D. 481

'Maltese Moslems 681
Gozo Moslems 155
Maltese Jews 25
Gozo Jews 8
Christian Maltese 47
Christian Gozitans 203
Giliberto Abate census of Maltese islands around A.D. 1241

The Island was 'rich in everything that is good and in the blessing of God' An Arab contemporary description of Malta 9th/10th century A.D.

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Group One produced clear-cut transition points and pupils decided that we were all Christian except for the Arab period in our history when everyone became Moslem, before reverting back to Christianity in the twelfth century. This view represents change in a very episodic way, although the pupils did make the cut-off point a hundred years after Count Roger (a Christian) took over Malta. They said they thought it took some time before we all became Christian again which does show some indication of looking towards change as a process rather than as a sudden event. However, this view still shows little appreciation of what preceded or followed each sudden ‘transition’ point, or of the fact that real change in history generally happens slowly over time.

Group Two produced a much more interesting timeline. In some periods they mixed their orange with green because, as one boy in the group said, ‘we don’t think everyone changed their religion, people might still be Christian in secret in Moslem times, although we think some did change too’. Group Three also thought this was the case, explaining that this is why they had decided to scribble and to smear some green over their orange.

Interestingly, Group Four produced a timeline with only a few areas coloured in. After going through the sources they had found them too contradictory and so decided that they could only give an indication of the important dates when key people arrived and left. They refused to commit themselves further, arguing that this was all that one could say for sure; and even within those boxes they actually combined the colours depicting a mixed situation in which some Maltese could be Christian while others were Moslems. In my opinion this shows sophisticated thinking too, for their conclusion is that one cannot reach a definite or certain conclusion. At present this is the academic reality too, for this topic is highly contested. Godfrey Wettinger’s interpretation is most definitely not accepted by all. I think this group is well on their way to getting used to the idea that the history lesson is the place where you learn to tolerate uncertainty.

Group Five had most problems understanding the sources as well as the historical background. They coloured at random and made a basic mistake in colouring green the first century A.D. when Islam did not yet exist. We therefore discussed the point that no Maltese could actually have been Moslem in that period. Through discussion of the sources we also concluded that we can establish with some certainty that the vast majority of the Maltese were Christian by the fifteenth century.

Unfortunately with this group the exercise was far from successful. It was clear they had not given much thought to what they were meant to do, and I’m not sure how much they understood of the correction that was offered in response to their timelines. However, their mistake about Islam in the first century proved incredibly helpful in clarifying the thinking of the whole class. When their timeline was displayed on the whiteboard and I asked pupils to identify and explain the one obvious mistake, my question was initially met with silence. All the pupils were very hesitant and it was only after much prodding in the form of several sub-questions from me that they slowly gave the answer. Even when I asked ‘When was Mohammed born?’ none of them could remember this from previous work with their class teacher. I therefore wrote the answer ‘6th century’ on the board and asked one pupil to show me where that would be on the large timeline. Eventually several children framed the response that Malta could not have been Moslem in the first century since this predated the prophet’s birth.

Unfortunately, it is probable that at this point Group Five were made to feel stupid and their reaction was to laugh and to start packing away their things (although the bell had not yet gone yet). This was a powerful lesson to me about the importance of creating a classroom environment in which it is safe to ‘fail’. While their decision had been wrong – it had served firstly to alert me to the problem of making assumptions about pupils’ prior knowledge; and it had helped the pupils to recognise that while the sources we had examined could not provide definitive answers to questions about the speed and extent of change, the evidence could quite clearly rule out certain interpretations. While that particular group would perhaps have benefited from more time to repeat the exercise, and from the kind of support that a teacher who knew them well could have given them as they worked through the sources, the fact that they could contribute their ideas through the visual medium we had used, offered enormous potential to strengthen
Figure 7: The timelines produced by the different groups

**Group one timeline**

**Group two timeline**

**Group three timeline**

**Group four timeline**

**Group five timeline**
everyone's understanding, and the value of their mistake in highlighting what everyone still needed to learn should have been acknowledged.

At the end of the lesson we voted again, and this time only two voted in favour of Gian Francesco Abela's idea that the Maltese remained Christian throughout the medieval period while the rest of the class decided that probably it was a very mixed situation. The pupils agreed that the sources seemed to indicate that there were moments when one religion dominated amongst the population and moments when the other did. I was very pleased with having achieved this level of reasoning among the pupils. This was an understanding that I would classify as falling within Shemilt's Level 3: an appreciation of 'historical change as the gradual transformation of a situation' in which 'only some aspects of a situation change, and then may do so trivially or radically'.

Crossing the theory/practice divide

I tried in this exercise to create a small-scale practical solution to the problems of teaching the 'big picture'. I was careful not to let go of the conceptual process of history, while at the same time keeping in mind the key research in history education referred to above. As Howson has argued, if our pupils are to develop sophisticated understandings of the world, it is important that we learn to combine 'classroom experience with "big picture" teaching, a formative approach to pedagogy, engagement with the philosophy of history and engagement with the findings of empirical research into history education'.

Teaching factual knowledge is fairly straightforward in history. The pupils might have forgotten that Mohammed was born in the sixth century, but they could be reminded or given the information again. It derailed the process but only momentarily. The tricky and difficult pedagogy comes when one has to deal with conceptual understanding. This lesson represented one attempt to address some of the difficulties associated with teaching change and continuity. Despite its limitations, not least the lack of time available to gain deeper understanding, it actually worked better than I expected. My biggest fears — that the pupils would find the sources too hard and not understand how to transfer their interpretation onto the timeline — did not materialise. On the contrary, different patterns emerged on the timelines and the pupils accepted that all timelines could be a valid possible interpretation as long as basic factual information was respected. Evidence is not the same as information; the validity of claims made within particular sources depends on the nature of the source, who has written it and with what perspective, when it was written, for whom and in what context. It was their decisions about the sources with regard to these very important questions that produced the variations in the timeline. I found this very encouraging; demonstrating that it is possible to move away from traditional narrative approaches while still giving an overview of a theme in a historic period.

References
10. Gian Francesco Abela is considered to be the father of Maltese history. His books were written in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and are found in four volumes called Della Descrizione di Malta. Abela and his Maltese successors tended to assume that the Bible story of St Paul's shipwreck (Acts 27-28) meant the conversion of the Maltese from pagans to Christians marked a situation that endured to their own time (implied but never stated). The island, he suggests, was left uninhabited for a millennium. Although Albert Mayr, a German historian, first challenged this notion in an article published in Historisches Jahrbuch in 1896, this was ignored by Maltese historians. Only in the 1980s did Godfrey Wettiger, a medievalist at the University of Malta, begin a serious attack on the traditional paradigm with such publications as 'The Arabs in Malta' (1984) in Report and Accounts, 1984, and 'The Arabs in Malta' (1986) in Malta Studies of its Heritage and History, both published by Mid-Med Bank Limited. The quotation I used in the class activities is from a personal conversation with Wettiger. (Since this conversation Wettiger has presented new evidence and a conference paper entitled Malta in the High Middle Ages. Drawing on work by Arab historians such as Al Qazwini, Al Haqal and Al Andalus, he claimed it was highly probable that the assault conducted by the Arabs in 870 A.D. saw a total annihilation. The island, he suggests, was left uninhabited for more than a century and then slowly re-populated by the Moslem Arabs.)
11. It is interesting that the pupils and the researcher so often used the word 'we', indicating a strong identification with the Maltese in the past who were strongly assumed to be connected to the Maltese today. The term 'we' seems to be referring to an indigenous mythical or real population, that we apparently imagine existed and essentially remained entirely separate from the invaders. This kind of identification has been widely discussed within the education community. See, for example, Camerero, M. (2011) Constructing Pastness: Teaching history and memories in global worlds Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
12. This tendency is discussed, for example, by Peter Lee in his chapter 'Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History' in Banham, J.D. and Donovan, M.S. (eds) How Students Learn: history, math and science in the classroom Washington, DC: National Academy Press.