



Supporting High Achievement and Transition to Higher Education Through History Virtual Academies

**Teaching Development Grant
Round 5
Final Report**

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1. Aims

The project set out with three core aims, which were

- to provide opportunities for high achieving 16-19 year old historians in participating schools and colleges to enrich and enhance their experience of learning about historical interpretation;
- to forge links between academics and school and college pupils and teachers;
- to explore a key issue raised in the literature on school / HE transition in History, namely differences between school and college pupils' and university teachers' understandings of historical interpretation (Booth (2005) and Hibbert (2006)), through a practical case study.

As will become apparent below, our aims evolved over the course of the project.

The project addressed these aims by setting up 'virtual academy' (Chapman: 2006(a): 15-16) discussion boards through which second year Advanced Level school and college students were encouraged to engage with interpretations problems and to interact with academic

historians.¹ The discussion boards focused on historical interpretation and set out to encourage students from participating schools and colleges to compose answers to interpretation questions and to discuss their answers with each other. The students received formative and summative feedback from academics that aimed to foreground explicit reflection on historical interpretation.

The project yields two distinct types of outcome, for the participating students and schools and colleges on the one hand and for the wider history community on the other.

The outcome for the participating students arose directly from their participating in the discussion board, which aimed to enrich their educational experience and enhance their understanding of historical interpretation, and therefore to ease their transition into higher education courses in history should they wish to pursue them.

The outcome for the wider history community will arise from the dissemination of the analysis of student outcomes from the project, a task that this report begins. The project will yield three types of data that are likely to be of value to the wider history education community, as follows:

¹ As will become apparent below, the project expanded in its second year to involve AS students also.

1. data about student thinking about interpretation problems, generated by analysis of pupil contributions to the discussion boards;
2. data about the impact of discussion boards on pupil responses to interpretation problems, generated through analysis of the ways in which and the extent to which students' responses changed during the discussion board process;
3. comparative data about discussion board design and the impact of design on student outcomes, generated by comparing the two discussion board processes that this project enabled.²

This report begins the process of disseminating these outcomes and the analysis reported here is preliminary and exploratory and this report is more concerned with the description of the project than with the exhaustive analysis of outcomes. The analysis that follows is also the grant holder's preliminary analysis. The intention is to develop a more systematic analysis of outcomes in future papers and presentations and, in the spirit of collaboration that this project embodies, to develop a joint analysis of outcomes.

² The two discussion board structures that were developed during this project are described at pp.11-33 below.

2. Practical and Theoretical Contexts

It is frequently observed that AS and A2 history and university history are increasingly disconnected and that 'links between schools and higher education are no longer as strong as they once were' (Institute of Historical Research, 2005). This project aims to make a modest contribution to the strengthening of links between these two areas of history education and the project exemplifies and reflects upon one way in which this outcome might be achieved.

There are many good reasons why we should aim to develop close connections between these two sectors of history education, and not least to ease transition from school to university study (Booth, 2005; Hibbert, 2006; Alkis, 2005; Benjamin, 2005)³ and this study aims to contribute to 'dialogue between the two sectors' (Evans, 2003, p.21) about a particular area of historical learning, namely, historical interpretations or historiography.

Studies suggest that historical interpretation or historiography is an area where greater inter-sector dialogue would be particularly helpful

³ There are many other reasons for seeking to connect the two sectors: school history has a lot to contribute to higher education pedagogy (Evans, 2003; Booth, 2003) and school history needs to connect with cutting edge scholarship and new interpretations of history to remain vital (see, for example, Poole, 2007, Huggins, 2008 and Kansteiner, 2009). Recent case studies that aim to link sixth form and university history are reported in Chapman and Facey (2009) and Chapman and Hibbert (2009).

(Booth, 2005; Hibbert, 2006) and not least because thinking about historical interpretation is closely linked to thinking about the nature of history as a discipline.

There is now a significant body of history education research literature on the pedagogy of historical interpretation (for example, Lee, 2004 and Lee and Shemilt, 2004; Seixas, 1993 and 2000; Boix-Mansilla, 2005; Hsiao, 2005), on the nature of historical thinking (Wineburg, 2001, 2005 and 2007) and on developing the understanding of historical interpretations amongst trainee history teachers and history undergraduates (for example McDiarmid, 1994 and McDiarmid and Vinten-Johansen, 2000). This project is informed by this work and will aim to draw on it in the analysis of project outcomes.

This project aims also to contribute to a developing area of history pedagogy, namely the use of online discussion to promote historical thinking (Booth, 2003, pp.107-8). There has been considerable research and practitioner interest in this area of teaching and learning ranging from work with Key Stage 3 and GCSE pupils (Thompson and Cole, 2003, Moorhouse, 2006, Martin, Coffin and North, 2007; *Arguing in History* (n.d.), Snape and Allen, 2008, Martin, 2008) to work with A level pupils (Historical Association, 2006; Chapman and Hibbert, 2009) and work in initial teacher education (Phillips, 2008, pp.206-215; Lee, 2006, Lee and Enriquez, 2006 and Rogers, 2006).

Discussion boards are, of course, a potentially highly effective way of bringing people together cost effectively and they have been used precisely to bridge divides between school and higher education (Thompson and Cole, 2003, Historical Association, 2006). This study aims to explore ways in which discussion boards can be used to bring school history and university history closer together.

3. Project Participants

This project was a collaborative one that aimed to bring together a range of people and institutions working in history education: history academics, history teachers and lecturers, 16-19 year old history students and a history education academic. Participants were recruited by the grant holder on the basis of existing contacts in the history education community.

The grant holder, Arthur Chapman, is a history education academic working in teacher education at the University of Cumbria (2005-2008) and The Institute of Education, University of London (from September 2008), who has some experience of university history teaching, extensive experience of sixth form history teaching and an ongoing research interest in the pedagogy of historical interpretations.⁴

Two highly experienced and eminent academic historians took part in the project in both 2007/8 and 2008/9: Eric Evans, Emeritus Professor of History at Lancaster University who, in addition to university teaching and research, has extensive experience of history education more

⁴ The grant holder has published practice focused articles in this area of pedagogy (Chapman, 2003, 2006(b), 2007 and 2008) and is engaged in doctoral research on 16-19 year old students' understandings of historical accounts. The questions and texts used in this project are based on instruments developed as part of this research (Chapman, 2001). See note 10 on p.16 below.

broadly,⁵ and Dr Robert Poole, Reader in History in the University of Cumbria.

Katy Allen, Head of History and Lancaster Girls Grammar School and Judith Smith, Tutor in History at Godalming Sixth Form College took part in the project in 2007-8 and in 2008-9 and Dr Jane Facey, Head of History at Esher Sixth Form College, took part in the project in 2008-9.

In 2007-8 the project the intention was that 28 students attending four institutions would take part, however, this proved not to be possible for practical reasons. Fifteen A2 students took part in the project and, with one exception, these were Advanced Level (A2) students, who were also preparing for the Advanced Extension Award (AEA), attending Lancaster Girls' Grammar School and Godalming Sixth Form College.

In 2008-9 the project was offered to 76 students, all but 4 of whom took part, attending Lancaster Girls Grammar School, Godalming Sixth Form College and Esher Sixth Form College. As will be noted below, recruitment to the project was deliberately more flexible in 2008-09 and although the majority of these students were A2 students, some of whom were also following an AEA course, some participants were AS students who were also following an AEA course.

⁵ For example, as the author of A level textbooks, as an AS and A2 examiner and chair of examiners.

4. Ethical Considerations

This project involved working with human subjects and therefore raised ethical questions about working in the interests of participants, gaining informed consent, securing confidentiality and other matters. The project was subject to ethical approval prior to commencement by the University of Cumbria research ethics committee and to ongoing ethical review by the grant holder. The project also involved inter-institutional working and the need to negotiate access and to safeguard the interests of institutions as well as individuals also arose.

The informed consent of student participants was secured through an information sheet and a consent form. The anonymity and privacy of individual participants were protected through the use of generic log-ins for individual students or student groups (where a log in was shared) and virtual learning environments were configured so that individual email contacts were not available through the site.⁶ In order to ensure that the discussion boards were conducted in an atmosphere of supportive collaboration all participating students were asked to agree to abide by 'discussion rules' and the moderator read and scrutinised posts during the discussion board process to ensure that the rules were adhered to.

⁶ Students were anonymised on the discussion boards (through usernames such as Lancaster 6) and institutions have been anonymised in this report (posts are reported as Student 12 or Student Group 1, for example).

5. Project Description

The project ran in the Easter term of two academic years 2007/8 and 2008/9. The original intention was that it would last for one year only, however, the fact that the project was less costly than anticipated, since it was possible to run it using available virtual learning environments at no cost, meant that it was possible to run it over two years within budget.

Running the project over two years provided an opportunity to experiment with form and structure. The 2008-9 discussion board built on and developed the 2007-8 structure in a number of ways.

In both years of the project, discussion board facilities were provided over the web using Blackboard, the institutional VLE at both the University of Cumbria and the Institute of Education. Participating students, academics and teachers were all provided with log-ons to a 'course' created for the project (History Virtual Academy) which contained page structures reflecting the structures of the discussion boards and which also contained key documents as embedded Word files.

5.i The 2007-8 History Virtual Academy (HVA)

Individual students from two institutions were paired up and each pair constituted a discussion group. Students could only access the discussion group that they were assigned to.

Participating students were asked to complete a series of tasks on which they would receive feedback and also to comment on each other's posts in a structured way.

Figure 5.i.a. summarises these tasks and the 2007-8 discussion board structure.⁷ The students taking part in 2007-8 were all A2 students and, with one exception, they were following Advanced Extension Award (AEA) courses: in 2007-8, therefore, the project functioned as an AEA group activity.

⁷ It was originally intended to have a more complex structure, including a pre-course task that would allow student understandings of historical interpretation to be base-lined prior to the historiography task, however, practical difficulties necessitated a revision to the structure. It was possible, nevertheless, within the actual structure, to measure change in student thinking by comparing posts at Stage 1 and at Stage 5.

Figure 5.i.a. The History Virtual Academy (HVA) Structure 2007-8

HVA Stage	Explanation
1. Historiography Task (1)	Students were asked to read two contrasting historical accounts and to answer two questions by making one post in answer to each question.
2. Academic feedback	Students received individual feedback on each question from participating academic historians.
3. Moderator feedback	The moderator posted generic feedback on both questions
4. Peer feedback	Students were asked to make one post for each question to the other student in their group.
5. Historiography Task (2)	Students were asked to revisit their original posts and re-post answers to the two questions in the light of the feedback that they had received from each other and from academics and taking account of the guidance in the moderator feedback.
6. Academic feedback	Students received individual feedback on each question from participating academic historians.

The Virtual Academy ran for a number of weeks either side of the Easter holidays in the spring of 2008.⁸

The academic historians provided individual feedback on student posts at two points in the academy structure. The grant holder acted as a moderator, reminding students of tasks and deadlines for their

⁸ The Easter holidays caused unforeseen problems and explain the fact that fewer students took part than was originally intended. The school holidays took place in different weeks in Lancashire and Surrey, on the one hand, and in Cumbria, on the other, making it difficult for Cumbrian schools to take part.

completion and giving generic feedback at one point in the process (Stage 3).

Prior to and then in parallel with the first phase of student activity, participating teachers and academics and the grant holder engaged in an online discussion of the problems that students might experience when completing the academy tasks and about how students might be helped to solve these problems. This discussion informed the generic sheets of advice posted by the moderator at Stage 3.

Compared to the task structure of the 2008-9 Virtual Academy, the 2007-8 task structure was a simple one. Participating students were asked to read two short texts (Appendix 1) and asked to answer two questions about the texts (Figure 5.i.b.).

Figure 5.i.b. The History Virtual Academy Questions

Question 1

How might you explain the fact that these historians say such different things about the Ranters?

Question 2

If you had to choose between these two historians' interpretations how might you do this?

Once they had made their initial posts, the students each received individual academic feedback (see the academic posts in Appendix 2) and generic guidance from the moderator in the form of a sheet of ideas

to use when thinking about each question and when giving feedback (Appendix 3). Students were then asked to give feedback to the student that they were paired with and, once they had received feedback, to modify their original posts by re-posting answers to the two questions. Once this process was complete, students received individual final feedback on their posts. Finally, once they had received this feedback, students were asked to make a post evaluating the Virtual Academy experience (see Appendix 4). Appendix 2 exemplifies the discussion process and task structure of the 2007-8 Virtual Academy.

The task that the students were asked to complete presented them with an interpretation problem. Students were asked to read and analyse two historical accounts about the same past phenomenon (the Ranter)⁹ that said strikingly different things about it. The question asking the students to explain how two such differing accounts could arise required students to explicitly develop and articulate ideas about why historians write what they write and hence to articulate a model of historical practice. The question that asked students to explain how they might choose between the two accounts asked students to explicitly develop and articulate procedures for evaluating historical accounts and therefore to articulate a normative model of historical writing. Both the questions and the task texts drew closely on ongoing research by the grant holder

⁹ Topic choice was discussed with participating teachers before the HVA began in 2007-8: a number of possible topics were suggested (including the Ranter, Peterloo and The Indian Mutiny) and the Ranter topic was chosen.

on 16-19 year old students conceptions of history and historical accounts.¹⁰

5.ii The 2008-9 History Virtual Academy (HVA)

In July 2008 a meeting was held to review the 2008 Virtual Academy.¹¹ All participating teachers and academics felt that the exercise had been a valuable one and that it should be repeated, with modifications and refinements in 2008-9. A number of changes to the task structure and the practical organisation of the academy were suggested and finalised through email correspondence in the weeks prior to the start of the 2008-9 exercise.¹²

It was felt that the exercise would work more effectively with a greater number of participants and efforts were made by the grant holder to involve a greater number of students in the academy (see p.9 above).

The 2007-8 Virtual Academy structure had been devised by the grant holder and reflected the grant holder's assumptions about how to

¹⁰ Ongoing doctoral research at the Institute of Education, University of London. The questions were developed in 2000/2001 (Chapman, 2001) and the task texts were developed and used in conjunction with the 2000/2001 questions in 2001/2.

¹¹ One participating teacher was unable to attend the meeting, however, email input was given and the results of the meeting were communicated by telephone and email.

¹² One important recommendation was not implemented: it was intended to run the second academy in September or October 2008, however, practical difficulties, linked to the grant holders change of place of employment, prevented this.

approach this area of historical learning.¹³ The online discussion between the grant holder and participating teachers and academics that took place before and in parallel with the first element of the academy began a process of discussion about task design that continued in email and face to face evaluation of the academy. As a result of these discussions revisions to the task structure were suggested and these were debated further in the run up to the 2008-9 academy when tasks were finalised: whereas the 2007-8 structure had been solely constructed by the grant holder, the 2008-9 structure was therefore a co-constructed one.

One revision to the structure of the academy was organisational. In 2008-9 the students had been paired up prior to the start of the exercise and organised into groups on this basis. This was problematic in two senses. Firstly, only fifteen students actually took part, a number that cannot be evenly split, and the original pairings had to be reorganised once the process had started. Secondly, posting academic feedback to individual students was felt likely to be less effective than group postings: it was felt that a group posting would draw students attention to what other students had written, and thus encourage peer-learning, and that this would also avoid the repetition of observations in individual feedback. Group rather than individual posting was also

¹³ Although an outline structure had been circulated in draft prior to the start of the exercise, which included the task questions, and although the topic of the academy had been negotiated with participating teachers, the task texts had not been circulated. As has been noted above, the grant holder's approach to task design was based on their own prior and continuing work in this area (Chapman, 2001 , Chapman, 2006(b)).

chosen because it was felt that individual feedback would be too onerous to provide given the larger scale of the 2008-9 academy which had more phases than the 2007/8 academy and a greater number of participants.¹⁴

In 2008-9, 30 student log-ons were created, 10 for each of the three participating sixth forms, and that the HVA was organised into two large discussion groups of 15 log-ons each. Each institution had five log-ons in each of the two discussion groups. Each participating academic was to feed back to one large group discussion group each. Whereas in 2007-8 students had only been able to view the discussion group they were assigned to, in 2008-9 students could view both the discussion groups and they could read all student group posts.

Whereas in 2007-8 two AEA groups had been asked to take part in the course, in 2008-9 participation was deliberately more flexible, in part to ensure that all students had actively chosen to take part but also to ensure that participating teachers could organise matters in ways that were most suitable to their particular context. The participating institutions were free to allocate their 10 log-ons to students in ways that best suited the institutions and in most cases each log on represented a group of students working collaboratively. A range of students across the full ability range took part in 2008-9 therefore

¹⁴ In Stage 1 alone (see Figure 5.ii.a.), for example, posting individual feedback to student posts would have required sixty posts to be made.

including high achieving AS and A2 student groups and mixed ability A2 classes.

This structure of the 2008-9 academy is summarised in Figure 5.ii.a. and explained below.

Figure 5.ii.a. The History Virtual Academy (HVA) Structure 2008-9

HVA Stage	Explanation
1. Historiography task (1) (One week)	Students were asked to answer two general questions about variation in historical interpretation.
2. Academic feedback	Group feedback from participating academic historians on both question was posted to the two groups.
3. Document task (Two weeks)	A collection of documents was posted to the VLE and students were asked to answer one question about the documents and to feedback on other students' posts.
4. Moderator feedback (midway through stage 3)	Generic moderator feedback was posted to both groups on both questions.
5. Historiography Task (1) (Two weeks)	As in 2008, students were asked to read two contrasting historical accounts and to answer two questions by making one post in answer to each question. The same accounts and the same questions were used.
6. Moderator feedback (midway through stage 5)	Generic moderator feedback was posted to both groups on both questions.
7. Academic feedback	Final group feedback on both questions and adjudication.

In the Stage 1 of the academy the students were asked to answer two questions (see Figure 5.ii.b.). These questions were intentionally

very similar to the two questions that had been used in 2007/8 (at Stages 1 and 5) and that were to be re-used later in 2008-9 (at Stage 5). The purpose of asking these questions was to provide a baseline against which to measure change in the ideas that the students drew upon when explaining variation in interpretation and in the ideas that they drew upon when evaluating differing interpretations over the course of the exercise. The questions also aimed to start students thinking about these issues.

Figure 5.ii.b. The History Virtual Academy Questions Stage 1

Question 1

Why do historians often come to differing conclusions about the past?

Question 2

How can you choose between differing historians' accounts of the past?

Once the students had completed this element of the exercise they received group feedback on their posts from the participating academic historians. This feedback was to be posted for the start of Stage 5, where students were asked to tackle similar questions and where, therefore, they could make use of this feedback.

At the evaluation meeting in July 2008, it had been agreed that the 2008 task had been a valuable one and that we should re-use the task

texts and questions, however, concerns were expressed about the lack of background knowledge that the students had to work with. This was a problematic issue since participating institutions were following different courses at AS and A2 and it was not possible, therefore, to focus the academy on a topic that all students would have prior knowledge of from their AS and A2 studies. It was also felt that, given the demands of students' examination courses, it would not be reasonable to expect students to research a new topic simply for the purposes of this exercise.

It was agreed that we should provide students with contextual information about the topic and that we would preface the historiographic element of the HVA (Stage 5) with a documentary element (Stage 3). It was felt that engaging with the evidence and arguing about what might be claimed on the basis of it would help students understand the processes of interpretation and argument that are involved in constructing accounts about this topic and that this understanding would help their thinking about the historical accounts that they would be presented with in Stage 5.

In Stage 3 of the academy, therefore, the students were given a collection of documents on the Ranters (see Appendix 7)¹⁵ that reflected the kinds of archive material that exist about the Ranters and a context

¹⁵ These documents, which included text and visual material, were selected from Ranter documents reproduced in Cohn (1993) and pamphlet literature about Ranters reproduced in Davies (1986). Appendix 7 contains two of the 6 documents used.

sheet (see Appendix 6) providing some background material on the period and asked to answer the following question.

Figure 5.ii.c. The History Virtual Academy Questions Stage 2

Assume that you are historians beginning to research the Ranters and that you have *only this collection of sources available to you* at this stage.

What *initial conclusions is it reasonable* to come to about the Ranters solely on the basis of the information you have been given?

The intention of this question¹⁶ was to focus students on history as a process of argument grounded in evidence. The question also sought to prevent students from treating the HVA as a research exercise and setting out to accumulate new information on the Ranters: the point was to use what they had and to look at it closely and to debate what could be concluded on the basis of it.

It was originally intended that the participating academics would feedback at each stage of the academy. This proved difficult to manage, however, given the tight timings and the fact that during Stage 3 of the HVA the academic historians were reading through and composing replies to the student posts in Stage 1. The moderator therefore

¹⁶ This question, like the 2008-9 HVA structure more generally, was very much co-constructed and was revised and developed through email discussion between the grant holder, participating teachers and academic historians.

provided generic feedback during Stage 3 to encourage participation and also to provide formative input that drew students' attention to ideas that had emerged in posts made already and to pose questions for students to consider (see Appendix 11).

Stage 5 of the HVA, which repeated elements of the 2007-8 structure, began with a group post to each discussion group providing academic feedback on student posts in Stage 1 of the HVA (see Appendix 9). As has been noted, the questions in Stage 1 (see Figure 5.ii.b. above) and the questions in Stage 5 (Figure 5.ii.d below) were intentionally very similar so that feedback from the first two questions could function as guidance for working on the second two questions and also to enable change in student ideas over the course of the exercise to be assessed. The questions used in Stage 5 (Figure 5.ii.d. below) in 2008-9 were identical to those used in Stage 1 and Stage 5 of the 2007-8 HVA although new instructions were added.

Figure 5.ii.d. The History Virtual Academy Questions Stage 3

Question 1

How might you explain the fact that these historians say such differing things about the Ranters?

Please use only the information you have been given on this site when answering the question and focus on what Historian A and B actually say.

Question 2

If you had to choose between these two historians' accounts of the Ranters how might you do this?

Please use only the information you have been given on this site when answering the question and focus on what Historian A and B actually say.

The additional instructions reflected the intention, explained above, that the students should focus on the material in the texts and regard this as an exercise in close reading and reasoning rather than as a research exercise. The students were also explicitly instructed to 'use the feedback from Week 1 to help' them develop their answers and to '(a) make a post and (b) reply to another group's post'. Although the students were not explicitly instructed to refer back to the document element of the academy, it was hoped that, having seen the kinds of material available in the archive, the students would demonstrate awareness of the issues of interpretation that this evidence raised.

The two historical accounts that had been used in 2007-8 were re-used with some minor modifications: the attribution of the texts was

changed, further minimising the information that students had available: whereas in 2007-8 students had been informed that the texts were written in different decades, in 2008-9 no information was provided. This was an intentional decision made as a result of email discussion between the grant holder and participating teachers and academics. Although it was argued that students ought to know more about the historians, in order to understand the role of personal and contextual factors in historical writing, it was agreed that we should aim to prevent simplistic explanatory moves that contextual information might support and focus the students on the detail of what was argued in the two accounts themselves rather than on text attribution.

Again, the moderator provided generic feedback, commenting on both groups, during Stage 5, to encourage participation and debate and to provide formative feedback drawing students' attention to ways of responding to the question that had emerged in other responses and to pose questions for students to consider (see Appendix 11).

Finally, once all posts had been completed, the participating academics provided group feedback on the posts made by their respective groups and these were posted to the academy. There was also an adjudication process and a 'best group' in each of the two discussion groups was identified, on the basis of the quality of their posts across the exercise as a whole, and the results were posted to the site.

After they had completed their final posts, students were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire (Appendix 13) and participating teachers and academics were asked to comment on the process by email for the purposes of project evaluation.

5.iii Academic and Moderator Posts 2007-8 and 2008-9

As has been noted this project set out to provide a challenging learning experience for participating students that would develop their thinking about the nature of history and about historical interpretations and that would provide an opportunity for sixth form students to interact with university historians and thus to gain insights into university history.

The previous two sections of this report have described the HVA structures developed in 2007-8 and 2008-9: this section will explain and exemplify academic and moderator contributions to the discussion boards.

In both years, it was the role of academics to 'feedback on discussion' rather than to engage in discussion. This feedback was of

two kinds, formative feedback during the discussion process and summative feedback at the end of the discussion process.

Feedback implies criteria with which to feedback and against which performance can be measured, or, at least, a normative model of practice. We did not start out with explicit criteria or with an explicit model for students to work to when completing their posts, however; and a model of the forms of thinking that we wanted to encourage emerged during the course of the academies through academic and moderator posts and also through students' comments on each others' posts. There were good reasons for operating in this way. Firstly, establishing criteria at the start of the HVA might have inhibited student posts, particularly if these criteria had been extensive. Secondly, the HVA had a discovery dimension: one purpose of this exercise was to gain an insight into the ideas that students brought to such exercises and we needed, therefore, to start from the students' ideas.

Appendix 8 contains a complete set of student and academic posts from one of the 2007-8 groups¹⁷ and illustrates how academic feedback functioned in 2007-8. The historians' feedback to students did a number of things, as the following posts from this discussion group illustrate.

¹⁷ It will be recalled that in 2007-8 groups consisted of a pair of students who were asked to feedback on each others posts and who received academic feedback on their posts.

There are two good points here. Student 3 emphasises the importance of evidence, Student 13 says evidence alone doesn't explain different views. Either could be right in this case. Having read some of this debate, I'd offer a third perspective for consideration.

Historian 1 was concerned with 'history from below', and looked everywhere (including among Ranter texts) for evidence of popular movements that had been overlooked. He found a lot that has not been contested as well as the Ranters. Historian 2 is more a historian of religion and ideas. He was interested in people's ideas about what happened (or to what they thought happened). He looked at mostly the same evidence for a different purpose, and found he didn't need to assume that there were real Ranters in order to explain how the texts about them got written. (A bit like how sightings of wild beasts on the Devon moors in August tells us more about what the popular press do in the summer 'silly season' than about wildlife on the Devon Moors).

This argument has never really been resolved. Can it ever be, do you think? I wonder what you would need to resolve it?

This post begins by encouraging the students by praising their posts, which are also summarised. The post then introduces new information and a new perspective and an analogy to aid comprehension of this new perspective.¹⁸ Questions are then posed to encourage further discussion and debate.

This is an effective answer which makes use of both sources. You clearly find text 2 more persuasive. You might have asked yourself whether the evidence you choose was almost bound to lead to the conclusion you reach. As you say in the 1st answer, the two texts are doing something different. Text 1 takes the existence of Ranterism as a given; Text 2 challenges this. Thus, far more of the second text is likely to be overtly critical and aware of source limitations. Text 1 is more concerned with what Ranters believed

¹⁸ The post also draws students' attention to the idea that historians are in the business of proposing and debating *explanations of the evidence* remaining from the past (Goldstein, 1976).

and why they were seen as a threat. In essence, Text 2 is saying that these are the wrong questions, because you have to take a step backwards and ask more fundamental questions first. So, you are quite right to say that the two writers use evidence in different ways but surely it behoves the writer of Text 2 to be much more sceptical of the evidence. It's almost bound to be the case that the author of Text 2 will concentrate much more on substantiation - or, in this case, why assertions about the Ranters have been taken uncritically for far too long.

So, while I happen to agree with your conclusion, I might have made some more contextual comments about the different purposes, drawing lightly on the territory of the first question, to explain not only my preference but why it was always likely that any answer which requires folk to consider the nature and typicality of evidence would lean towards Source 2.

But an interesting, engaged answer.

Whereas the first academic post cited above sought to provide formative feedback, and to feed into further posts, this post came at the end of the academy. Again, praise is provided, however, this post functions more as a commentary on the student's post, in which critical analysis is modelled and advice given, than as a stimulus to further discussion.

In addition to academic feedback on individual posts, generic guidance was provided by the moderator on how to approach the two task questions. This advice had a number of sources (see the introduction to Appendix 3) and included normative statements about historical practice such as the following:

Historians aim to make *warranted* claims about the past and to do this through arguments *grounded* in *reasoning* and the critical consideration of *evidence*. It is important to read our two interpretations very closely and to reflect on *both* evidence *and* argument.

The majority of the generic input consisted of questions designed to help students think critically about competing historical claims, such as the following:

- Are the historians asking the same questions or are they in fact answering different questions about the past? (It is possible to set out with different aims - to set out to describe something in the past, to explain it, to evaluate it and so on.)
- Do the historians examine the same source materials as they pursue their questions about the past?
- Do the historians ask the same questions of their source materials?

Appendix 9, 10 and 12 contain examples of academic posts from 2008-9. Feedback was whole group rather than individual.

Again, the historians' feedback to students did a number of things, as the texts in the appendices show. Students were thanked and praised as a group for their contributions and individual groups' arguments were noted, praised or discussed and questions were asked to encourage students to take ideas further or to consider additional issues that had not been addressed, as in the following extract from Appendix 9:

I liked the development of the idea about the historian's 'country of origin' which appeared in Group 1's post, because a lot of recent historiography concerning the role and development of Empires is strongly influenced by nationalist perspectives. You might want to reflect on whether historians writing about Empire from within the UK are these days excessively defensive about the role of the British Empire. Might it be over-influenced by 'context' in the light of evidence available? This is a very contentious topic.

Academic feedback also summarised and sought to move students on by critically reflecting on approaches that could be taken to problems as in the following extract from Appendix 10:

It's easier to spot possible flaws or bias, harder to work out how to counter it. I notice three main types of answer to this one.

1. Assess the historian.
2. Assess the accounts.
3. Assess the evidence.

1. Assess the historian. Several posts emphasised identifying the beliefs and bias of the historian who wrote the piece. It certainly helps – as E H Carr once said, if you want to study history, first study the historian. But is this the most efficient way to go about things?

If you wanted to evaluate the results of two conflicting sets of medical tests, would you begin by looking at the personal background of the testers, or would you check their evidence?

Group rather than individual feedback meant that a number of answers could be discussed simultaneously. The hope was that this would allow good ideas to be pooled. Questions that could be asked were summarised by drawing attention to questions that had been asked in one or other of the student groups and additional questions were also

raised that had not been posed in many of the student posts, as in the following example, from the moderator feedback (Appendix 11).

There is one clear issue that most of the posts could consider further – as well as thinking about what information we can extract from documents and about the conclusions that we can base on that information, it is very important to think about what the documents are. Group 2 raises this question, as a question about provenance, in their comments on Group 11. I think it is worth everyone thinking about this in greater detail. Some of these documents are described as works by Ranters and some of the documents are something else entirely. What kind of publication, for example, is the *Ranter's Monster*?

Summative feedback at the end of the exercise is exemplified in Appendix 12. Summative feedback operated very much as the formative feedback did, summarising useful suggestions that had emerged in student posts, but also, like the 2007-8 summative feedback, providing a commentary on ideas that had emerged, noting their strengths and limitations and posing further questions, as in the following extract:

It's not invalid also to note that subjective elements come into judgments like this. This approach is very neatly encapsulated by Group 12, which notes the huge difficulties involved in coming to a definitive judgment on a subject now 350 years old and on which relatively little evidence survives. 'Let's push the boat out and be adventurous', says this Posting. You get further imaginatively by trying the answer the questions in the mind of Historian A (largely: what kind of people were these Ranters and why did they seem to be so important for a brief period?) than by taking the negative view offered by Historian B (in effect: to begin with the assertion that 'as a group' – perhaps an important caveat which no one seems to have commented on – the Ranters 'are a fiction' and then pouring the coldest of cold water on the evidence which does survive). This approach is valid but the reasons for offering a personal view need to be made explicit alongside the

acknowledgement that the two historians are trying to do different things.

In addition to whole group summative assessment, an overall judgment was posted to the site, in the form of an announcement, identifying which student group in each of the two discussion groups was felt to have made the most effective contribution overall. The following exemplifies the final judgment on Discussion Group 2:

How to choose a best group from all this? I could choose any one of four or five with good reason. Perhaps my favourite post was Group 17's late contribution. In the end though I will go for Group 27, if only because their insight that knowledge is not threatened but in fact formed by argument is so very appropriate a motto for this fascinating exercise! Thank you all for such a stimulating debate.

6. Project Evaluation

The data set generated by this project is a large and complex and will be systematically analysed in forthcoming papers and presentations. A provisional and exploratory evaluation is offered below under the following headings:

1. Student Participation in the project
2. The impact of participation in the HVA on student thinking
3. Student evaluation of the project.

6.i Student Participation in the HVA

Student participation in the 2007-8 and 2008-9 virtual academies will be assessed as follows:

1. by examining the number of students or student groups that participated;
2. by examining the number and length of discussion threads that emerged;
3. by examining the interactions that the posts represented and exploring the degree to which the boards enabled discussion.

How Many Students and Student Groups Participated?

Figure 6.i.a. reports the number of students or student groups that participated in the two virtual academies. The table compares actual total participation with theoretical total participation (or the number of participating students or student groups that we planned to involve).

Figure 6.i.a. Participation in the History Virtual Academies 2007-8 and 2008-9 (students and groups of students)¹⁹

	2007/8	2008/9
Theoretical total	28	30
Actual total	15	27
Actual total and a percentage of theoretical total	53.6%	90%

As the figure indicates, we were much more successful in engaging the intended number of students in 2008/9.

Figure 6.i.b. analyses the number of posts that were made during the virtual academies. The figure also reflects the differences in academy structure: as noted above, the 2007/8 structure required students to post answers to the same two questions twice, amending their ideas in the light of feedback they received, whereas the 2008/9 did not (hence the lack of data for 2008/9 in the Revised Posts rows of the figure). The

¹⁹ It will be recalled that in 2008/9 log-ins were allocated to groups rather than individuals and that 72 of the 76 students to whom the academy was offered took part and that these students were split between 30 'groups'. In 2007/8 log-ins represented individual students rather than groups of students.

figure measures actual participation by actual participants (the 'actual' totals) against the total number of posts that could have been made by actual participants if all participants had completed all the posts that the HVA tasks asked them to complete (the 'theoretical' totals).

Figure 6.i.b. Posts made to the History Virtual Academies in 2007-8 and 2008-9 (students and groups of students)²⁰

		2007/8	2008/9
Posts	Theoretical Total	30	135
	Actual Total	30	101
	Actual total as a percentage of theoretical total	100%	74.8%
Replies to posts	Theoretical Total	30	162
	Actual Total	25	63
	Actual total as a percentage of theoretical total	83.3%	38.9%
Revised posts	Theoretical Total	30	N/A
	Actual Total	12	N/A
	Actual total as a percentage of theoretical total	40%	N/A
Overall total	Theoretical Total	90	297
	Actual Total	67	165
	Actual total as a percentage of theoretical total	74.4%	55.6%

²⁰ This table reports student posts only, it does not report posts made by the academic historians and the moderator.

This figure supports the conclusion already drawn about the greater participation rate achieved in 2008/9. The figure also suggests that in both years students were more willing to make posts than to reply to posts. It is also apparent that student participation declined markedly over time (as the drop from a 100% making initial posts 40% making revised posts in 2007-8 illustrates).

Figure 6.i.c. analyses the posting rate of individual students (2007/9) and of student groups (2008/9) who took part in the academies. Posting rates indicate percentage task completion (to achieve a 100% posting rate a participant would have to complete all the tasks set).²¹

Figure 6.i.c. Posting Rate of Participating Students and Student Groups 2007-8 and 2008-9

Percentage of possible posts made	2007-8 Students (N=15)	2008-9 Student groups (N =27)
Over 100%	0 (0%)	3 (11.1%)
75%-100%	7 (46.7%)	3 (11.1%)
50%-75%	6 (40%)	8 (29.6%)
25%-50%	1 (6.7%)	8 (29.6%)
1%-25%	1 (6.7%)	5 (18.5%)
Totals	15 (100%)	27 (100%)

Figure 6.i.b suggests that although the 2008/9 HVA succeeded in intensely engaging 3 of the students (all of whom made two more posts

²¹ It will be recalled that participants were asked to make 6 posts in total in 2007-8 and 11 posts in total in 2008-9.

than they were asked to do), the 2007-8 HVA was more successful in engaging most participants: in 2007-8, 86.7% of participants made had a posting rate of more than 50% whereas the figure for 2008-9 was 34.8% lower (51.9%).

Did the boards succeed in generating sustained discussion?

One of the key purposes of the HVA in both years was to encourage discussion, which has been defined as 'a dialogue between two or more people about a particular topic or shared inquiry' (Lee and Enriquez, 2006, p.11). The agenda for discussion in both virtual academies was given by the questions and we were seeking to encourage the students and student groups to engage in historical argument about their answers to these questions. As a minimum, discussion must involve at least two statements, or in this case posts, and the posts must be related. The number of discussion 'threads' emerged during the academies will be identified below and the dialogic links that obtained between posts in discussion threads will be examined.

Constructing a 'discussion count' for the two virtual academies is not a straightforward matter. The 2007-8 HVA was more tightly structured than the 2008-9 HVA: whereas students were paired up in

2007-8 and explicitly instructed to post to each other,²² in 2008-9 there were two large groups with fifteen student groups in each and the instructions to post did not stipulate to whom students were to reply: the 2007-8 structure therefore encouraged threads made up of two posts and the 2008-9 structure did not. In the 2007-8 structure student interaction was more formalised than in 2008-9 in the sense that pairs of students interacted by feeding back to nominated individuals in reciprocal ways. In the 2008-9 students were free to post where they pleased in the large discussion groups of which they were part. The reciprocal feedback structure of the 2007-8 board also makes the definition of 'thread' problematic since a case could be made for thinking in terms of paired threads rather than individual threads in this case.

Comparing the two virtual academies is further complicated by differences in the form of moderator and academic feedback took in each exercise: whereas in 2007-8 participating academic historians fed back directly into individual threads, in 2008-9 posts were whole group and made as new threads rather than as contributions to student discussion threads.²³ It is possible to separate the historians' posts from the student posts, however, as, with one exception where a student directly

²² Some explanation of how 15 students can be paired up is necessary. One student was paired with two others and asked to post twice. This was not ideal but a response to (a) the fact that fewer students than expected actually took part and (b) a response to the fact that this student was prolific in their posting.

²³ In 2007-8 the participating academic historians made a total of 48 individual posts to the discussion board. In 2008-9 the participating academic historians made a total of 7 group posts. In 2007-8 the moderator made 2 generic posts to all groups and in 2008-9 the moderator made a total of 4 generic posts to the discussion boards.

responded to academic feedback, the students received feedback from the historians and were asked to respond to this and to the other feedback they received by modifying their answers rather than by engaging in discussion with the historians.

Figure 6.i.d. examines the number of posts in individual discussion threads in the 2007-8 and 2008-9 academies and compares the two years.

Figure 6.i.d. The Incidence and Length of Discussion Threads in the 2007-8 HVA and 2008-9 HVA²⁴

Thread lengths	Thread incidence 2007-8 (N = 30)	Thread incidence 2008-9 (N= 103)
6 posts	0 (0%)	1 (0.97%)
5 posts	0 (0%)	2 (1.94%)
4 posts	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3 posts	4 (13.33%)	11 (10.68%)
2 posts	18 (60%)	27 (20.21%)
1 post	7 (23.33%)	62 (60.19%)
0 posts	1 (3.33%)	0 (0%)
Total	30 (100%)	103 (100%)

²⁴ The 2007-8 data in this table is for Stages 1-4 of the discussion board structure (see p.13 above) when students were tasked to post comments on each other's work: in Stages 5 the students were simply asked to post their 'final answers' rather than to post to each other. There was scope for discussion at stages 1-4 only.

It is apparent that the 2008-9 structure enabled a greater number of sustained discussion threads, made up of more than 3 posts, than the 2007-8 structure it is also apparent that the 2007-8 structure was more successful in generating dialogue than the 2008-9 structure: whereas the majority (73.33%) of the 2007-8 threads were made up of more than one post, the majority (60.19%) of the 2008-9 posts consisted on one post only and were therefore monologic rather than dialogic.

What kinds of dialogue emerged in the threads? Five threads were sampled from the threads that consisted of two or more posts in the data set for 2007-8 and 2008-9, on a stratified random sample basis,²⁵ and analysed in terms of text features of the posts.²⁶ The codes developed to analyse the posts are explained in the paragraphs that follow.

Text was coded as 'question' when, as in the following example from a post by Student Group 4, a question was asked: 'Are the Ranters just a group of religious dissidents lumped together under one roof?'²⁷

²⁵ Robson, 1993, pp.138-9. Threads were selected from the strata given in Figure 6.i.d..

²⁶ The analysis that follows is informed by the analytical categories developed by the Open University's Arguing in History project (Coffin, 2007, pp.40-42; Martin, Coffin and North, 2007, p.36), however, the analysis offered here is impressionistic rather than systematic and does not follow the rigorous analytical protocols that Arguing in History developed (such as quantification using 't unit' analysis (Coffin, 2007, pp.23-24; Martin, Coffin and North, 2007, p.34).

²⁷ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Discussion Group 1, Weeks 2-3, Question 1, Thread 5

Text was coded as making a 'claim' where a proposition or conclusion was advanced, as for example in Student Group 10's statement that the Ranters 'were extremely religious and god was seen as a 'leveller' and it seems they were rejecting authority in a time of no authority.'²⁸

Text was coded as making a 'concession' where a claim made by another group was recognised as either valid or partly valid and text was coded as making a 'counter-claim' where an alternative to a claim advanced by another group was articulated: the following statement, from a post by Student Group 27, consists of a concession followed by a counter-claim: 'Although we agree that a balanced argument can be very persuasive, there is also the possibility that an argument that may appear balanced has misrepresented the opposing argument.'²⁹

Text was coded as 'agreement' where it expressed acceptance of a claim that had been advanced, as for example, in Student 9's response to Student 6's post in the 2007-8 data set: 'I totally agree with you here, how historians chose to interpret words written, and the different emphasises they make will undoubtedly effect their conclusion dramatically.'³⁰

²⁸ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Group 2 Discussion Board, Weeks 2-3, Question 1, Thread 3.

²⁹ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Group 2 Discussion Board, Weeks 1, Question 2, Thread 1.

³⁰ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Week 1, Question 2, Students 6 and 9.

Text was coded as articulating a 'qualification' when it modified the degree of certainty with which a claim was advanced as in the following observations that Student 6 made prior to articulating claims about period influences on historian: 'Not knowing more about these historians is slightly limiting in terms of what we can say for we are subsequently without knowledge of their reputations or any detail which give an insight into their psychology, which is indeed the factor which influences interpretations most of all.'³¹

Text was coded as 'retraction' where a post withdrew a claim that had already been advanced, as in the following example: 'Since writing the answer to the question... I think that the dates when the texts were written does not help in explaining why the historians interpret the texts differently.'³²

Text was coded as 'support' when it provided reasons or evidence in support of a claim that a post was advancing, as in the following example: 'there is also the possibility that an argument that may appear balanced has misrepresented the opposing argument. A historian may suppress strong evidence which opposes their own argument, and instead only mention weaker opposing evidence to imply that the

³¹ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Week 1, Question 2, Students 6 and 9.

³² 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Week 1, Question 1, Students 2 and 12

opposite view is not as valid as it actually is.³³ The second sentence here is coded as supporting the proposition in the first sentence.

Text was coded as 'recommendation' where elements of a post offered advice as in the following example: 'Two key areas you should look at for coming to a decision between these two interpretations should be argument and assumption.'³⁴

Text was coded as 'praise' where a student expressed approval of a feature of another students' post, as for example in the following reply by Student 13 to a post by Student 3: 'the point you make about choosing the historian who has the most credible use of evidence is a good one.'³⁵

Figure 6.i.e. counts the incidence of text coded using these categories in the two thread samples.

³³ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Group 2, Week 1, Question 2, Thread 1.

³⁴ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Week 1, Question 2, Students 11 and 8

³⁵ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Week 1, Question 2, Students 3 and 13.

Figure 6.i.e. Coding Student Discussion Threads: Dialogic Moves Identified in the 2007-8 HVA and 2008-9 HVA Data Samples³⁶

	2007-8 Sample	2008-9 Sample
Agreement	11	5
Claim	17	24
Concession	0	3
Counter-claim	0	13
Praise	4	0
Qualification	1	1
Question	1	4
Recommendation	10	7
Retraction	1	0
Support	25	28

It is apparent that both thread samples include interaction between the students: all the text features, apart perhaps from 'claim', clearly entail dialogue. However, there are notable differences in the kinds of interaction in the sample posts from the two academies.

The samples contain student posts that were essentially concerned with assessing how effectively another student post in a thread had answered the question that the students had been asked to address.

³⁶ The 2007-8 data in this table is for Stages 1-4 of the discussion board structure (see p.13 above) when students were tasked to post comments on each other's work: in Stages 5 the students were simply asked to post their 'final answers' rather than to post to each other.

Replies in these posts consist frequently of praise and of advice on how to improve answers to the questions. The following post, from the 2007/8 thread sample, exemplifies posts of this type.

Excellent identification of the assumptions each historian has made about the existence of the Ranters. Good identification of the broader use of evidence in text 1. Perhaps more could be mentioned about the reliability of the sources in helping to decide which interpretation you chose.³⁷

Threads of this type might be better described as 'appraisal' threads than argument threads: the posts are not explicitly concerned with establishing or refuting a claim and more concerned with assessing an answer that has been proposed. The 2007-8 sample contained more instances of praise, agreement and recommendation and more appraisal threads.

The following thread, from the 2008-9 sample, like the example just discussed, focuses on how to answer a question. However, we can clearly see an argument developing here: rather than simply offering recommendations, this post argues about how best to approach the question.

I interpreted this question to mean, how is it possible for the reader to choose between differing accounts of the past. In this light, perhaps it would be possible to manipulate your point about the presence of counter arguments, as a factor in establishing the validity of an historian, thus facilitating the choice between two differing accounts. Having said that, I also believe it is unfair to

³⁷ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Week 1, Question 2, Students 14 and 4

suggest that in order to be a 'good historian', one must present the counter-argument, as many historians with substantiated arguments, have formed their own opinions through the study of primary and secondary source material and therefore present their ideas with reference to this, as opposed to undermining an opposing view.³⁸

The following two examples, from different threads in response to the document interpretation question posed in the 2008-9 academy, exemplify posts that clearly were argument threads and contain counter-claims, which were only found in the 2008-9 sample.

In response to your comment on the ex-Ranter in paragraph three it could be considered a vested interest in making the Ranters look bad rather than a change of view. The source does not say how he came to be an ex Ranter and it is possible that he was avoiding imprisonment as document 5 shows Ranters were being indicted therefore he could have been protecting himself.³⁹

Although you feel the Ranters were religious, I would have to disagree with you as Doc 4 shows their mocking of the Last Supper shows that had no respect towards Christianity and Jesus. If they were religious, then it was only towards their own views of committing sin and wandering in nudity. Rather than being religious I think the more correct term for them is radical and as you have suggested even people in society did not see them as religious. Moreover, as doc 6 suggests the Ranters were known for making a mockery out of religion as in the case of Mary Adams who claimed to be the Virgin Mary clearly shows. It is without a doubt that their ways were very blasphemous and by breaking all the conventional rules of Christianity and forming their own extreme views only confirms that they were a group who were not religious.⁴⁰

³⁸ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Discussion Group 1, Weeks 1, Question 2, Thread 1

³⁹ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Discussion Group 1, Weeks 2-3, Question 1, Thread 5

⁴⁰ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Discussion Group 2, Weeks 2-3, Question 1, Thread 3

These two posts are clearly engaged in argument about what claims the source materials can ground and consist in challenge or concession, counter-claim and support, rather than in recommendation.

As has already been noted, the 2007-8 academy generated a greater proportion of discussion threads than the 2008-9 academy. The analysis above suggests, however, that the 2008-9 discussion board was more successful, where it did generate threads, in generating argumentative ones, characterised by argument features, such as counter-claim, rather than appraisal features, such as praise.

It is likely that the addition of a document question that asked the students *themselves* to advance conclusions, and the student grouping structure that did not pair students up, played a role in enabling greater emphasis on claim and counter-claim. This is not a conclusive assessment, however, as the following exchange of posts from the 2007-08 boards, not contained in the thread sample above, clearly shows.

Author: Student 3

Date: Wed Mar 12 2008 15:49

Thread: Different Evidence and Different Interpretations

As modern day historians such as Richard Rex have proven other highly respected historians such as Elton to be inaccurate due to advancements in factual evidence and interpretations of this evidence. One such example is the revisionist view of Mary Tudor, put forward to challenge the traditional thesis of her being more brutal and less tolerant than any other Tudor monarch, being

giving the name 'Bloody Mary'. As time passes by, new evidence will most likely be uncovered or furthermore, different historians will interpret this evidence in different ways. Text 1 is an argument put forward by an English historian in the mid 1970's whereas text 2 is an argument put forward ten years later in the 1980's, possibly enabling the second historian to have more evidence.

Author: Student 13

Date: Tue Mar 25 2008 13:04

Thread: Different Evidence and Different Interpretations

I have noticed that we both agree that new evidence may have been found that opposes the view in Source 1. However I feel that historians cannot prove each other to be wrong, rather the differing views mean that a debate is created between the two historians, which is then open for discussion between others. In my opinion, Text 2 is not proving Text 1 wrong, it is putting forward another view.

Author: Student 3

Date: Thu Apr 03 2008 14:04

Thread: Different Evidence and Different Interpretations

Although I would agree that text one may be putting across a different point of view from text two, yet saying 'historians can never prove each other wrong' is a huge sweeping generalisation. There will always be areas of history where the evidence can be accredited to either side of an argument with no real definitive answer, yet in contrast there is a massive amount of history that can be proved correct due to the substantial weight of evidence in favour of it being true. Historians can definitely prove each other wrong, my studies of the 'Good' Duke of Somerset have found that revisionist historians have enough evidence that he was not a 'Good' Duke by any means and that he, not the Duke of Northumberland was the 'Bad' Duke. On this subject, the evidence is vague and I would agree that you could argue it either way, yet this is not the same for all topics of history.

This exchange of posts clearly shows that there was scope within the 2007-8 structure for argumentative discussion.⁴¹

⁴¹ The context for these posts is given in Appendix 2 where the threads are reproduced in full.

6.ii Developing Students' Thinking about Interpretation and Accounts?

Although doubts are occasionally expressed about the value of engaging school students with interpretations and historiography (Starkey, 2005), there is widespread agreement in the history education community that it is desirable and, indeed, necessary to cultivate student understanding of the discipline of history and engage students in critical reflection on historical interpretations and accounts (Seixas, 2004, Boix-Mansilla, 2005 and Wineburg, 2007), particularly in our contemporary context where multiple and conflicting accounts of the past and present compete for pupils' attention (Wineburg, 2007). Understanding interpretation is a key objective of the secondary school curriculum (QCA, 2006, QCA, 2007 (a) and QCA, 2007(b)) and a reflexive awareness of the nature of the discipline of history and an emphasis on 'historiographical and methodological awareness' are both central to the habits of mind that all history first degrees should aim to develop in students (QAA, 2007, pp.5-6).

As has been noted, there is an important body of international research on students thinking about historical interpretations and accounts. History education research in the UK (for example, Lee, 2004; Lee and Shemilt, 2004) and internationally (for example Barca, 2005 and Hsiao, 2005) both suggest that students tend to hold default

epistemological positions, based on everyday ideas and experience, that can inhibit their understanding of the nature of history and of the fact that historical accounts and interpretations are inherently multiple and variable. Developing pupil understanding of the nature of history and of historical accounts, the research suggests, involves challenging an objectivist epistemological position for which there can only be one legitimate account of a past that is fixed and given and which it is the role of historical accounts to neutrally and comprehensively report. Research on school to higher education transition (Booth, 2005; Hibbert, 2006) suggests that objectivist conceptions of historical knowledge and historical knowing are common amongst undergraduates also and that such ideas can be a barrier to smooth transition to successful undergraduate study. Both sixth form and undergraduate history education have a common interest, therefore, in seeking to understand the range and the nature of the ideas that sixth formers hold about historical interpretation.

The participants in the HVA are not a representative sample of 16-19 year old history students in the UK and their postings to the discussion boards of course also reflect the questions that their posts were replies to: the observations that follow are subject to both sample bias and task effects, therefore. The HVA postings nevertheless present opportunities to explore the ideas that a group of predominantly A2 students drew upon when faced with interpretation problems and

therefore present an opportunity to reflect on questions relevant to transition from school to higher education more broadly.

Two questions will be explored together below:

- What ideas about historical accounts were apparent in student and student groups' initial responses to the problems that the virtual academy set them?
- Did students' ideas develop between their initial posts and their final posts?

Random samples of 5 students (2007-8) and 5 student groups (2008-9) who completed both initial and final posts were identified and the posts were analysed.⁴² The answers that these students gave to an explanatory question about accounts in the first stage of their respective academies are analysed below and compared with their answers to a corresponding question in the final stage of their respective academies. The comparison is not a perfect one because the academies had different structures. The analysis of 2007-8 posts compares initial and revised answers to the following question: 'How might you explain the fact that these historians say such different things about the Ranters?'. The analysis of 2008-9 posts compares answers to the question 'Why do

⁴² The sample will therefore only be representative of students who completed the whole HVA process and will be biased by this fact. As has been noted, this paper is exploratory and provisional: subsequent analysis will attempt a more exhaustive exploration of the 2007-8 and 2008-9 data sets.

historians often come to differing conclusions about the past?', posted in Stage 1 of the academy, with answers to the question 'How might you explain the fact that these historians say such different things about the Ranters?' posted in Stage 5 of the academy.

Explanatory moves were identified in the sample of student responses and coded so as to enable comparison using the codes explained and exemplified below. The codes inevitably simplify the ideas that the students deployed in order to enable comparisons to be made between student responses. Figure 6.ii.a. summarises the coding of the sample of responses.

Figure 6.ii.a. Explaining Account Variation: A Comparison of a Sample of 2007-8 and 2008-9 Posts.

The numbers in the table indicate how many of the sampled posts drew on the ideas listed in the first column.

Explanation for account variation: accounts vary because –	2007-8 Stage 1 Question 1 N= 5	2007-8 Stage 5 Question 1 N= 5	2008-9 Stage 1 Question 1 N= 5	2008-9 Stage 5 Question 1 N= 5
Historians’ backgrounds or existing beliefs can affect their objectivity	1	1	5	2
Historians can use different sources	2	0	4	3
Historians can interpret or evaluate evidence in different ways	3	4	2	4
Historians can write different kinds of text	0	1	0	1
Historians can contextualise events or issues in different ways	1	1	0	1
Historians can define terms in different ways	2	2	0	1
Historians sometimes have to work with sources that are limited and hard to interpret	2	3	0	0
Historians can be motivated by the desire to develop innovative explanations	0	1	0	0

The ‘Historians’ backgrounds or existing beliefs can affect their objectivity’ code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

There are a few factors which can influence a historian's interpretation of past events. One factor is their individual political views; some historians will manipulate historical evidence to accommodate their personal, political agenda. For example, a

Conservative would dismiss Chartism as a trivial organisation, who can never succeed against the upper-class government.⁴³

The ideas identified here clearly imply that differences in interpretation are a function of bias and hence, perhaps, that were it possible to eliminate bias, interpretations should converge. This idea is likely to be compatible, therefore, with objectivist notions of historical accounts and with the suggestion that were it not for subjective biases on the part of historians there might indeed be one account of the past. Ideas like this were most prevalent in the 2008-9 sample and particularly in the Stage 1 2008-9 posts.

The 'Historians can use different sources' code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

Historians are unlikely to draw their conclusions from exactly the same evidence base and hence from this discrepancies may arise.⁴⁴

Again, ideas like this were most prevalent in the 2008-9 sample and in the Stage 1 2008-9 posts. The implications of such observations for students' underlying understanding of historical accounts are likely to vary. In the case cited, an observation about variable evidence is linked to an inferential conception of historical practice and therefore implies an active role for the historian in the construction of historical meaning.

⁴³ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student Group 9

⁴⁴ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student Group 30

The 'Historians can interpret or evaluate evidence in different ways' code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

The same sources that one argues for its existence the other uses to argue against its existence. So the issue is not only availability of evidence, but the analysis and interpretation of evidence used to show different things.⁴⁵

Ideas like this were prevalent in both the 2007-8 sample and the 2008-9 sample and more prevalent in the Stage 5 posts than the Stage 1 posts. It is apparent in the example above, that this idea is compatible with a pluralist view of historical interpretation: evidence does not speak for itself and its meaning has to be constructed through argument.

The 'Historians can write different kinds of text' code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

The main and indeed striking difference between these historians' views concerns the existence of the Ranters and perhaps further than this what it was they represented. Therefore perhaps one reason these historians say such different things concerning the Ranters lies in the focus of what they are saying. Historian A appears not to question the existence of the Ranters, seemingly accepting their existence as a given, their focus being centred more closely on the beliefs of the Ranters themselves. Historian B on the other hand calls in to question the existence of the Ranters claiming that 'The Ranters are a fiction', something their argument is intent on proving.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student 4

⁴⁶ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student Group 30

Ideas like this were found in one post in both samples and only in the Stage 5 posts. It is apparent again that this idea is compatible with a pluralist view of historical interpretation: histories vary with the choices and assumptions of their authors; a notion that is incompatible with the objectivist notion that the past ought ideally to speak for itself and with only one voice and that recognises that in so far as the past 'speaks' at all in historical accounts, what it says is partly determined by the questions that we choose to ask it.

The 'Historians can contextualise events or issues in different ways' code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

The context has also led to a situation where the opinions of historians can vary so wildly over one issue. 1 places a lot of weight on the fact that 'there were many groups of religious radicals active in Britain' to support the view that Ranterism existed. 2 places more weight on the general moral and political turmoil of the time – and uses this to suggest that the climate was right for people to Rant, but not for a movement of Ranters to form. This has led, for example, for differing interpretations of the Blasphemy Act 1650 – as a result of the importance 1 places on the other religious groups, he does not demand a 'direct mention' of the Ranters in the Act, whereas the other does.⁴⁷

This idea occurred in posts by one student in the 2007-8 sample (in both their Stage 1 and Stage 5 posts) and in one of the 2008-9 sample posts. Again, this idea is compatible with a pluralist view of historical interpretation: histories vary because constructing history involves constructing context and making meaning, or, as Leon Goldstein puts it, 'constituting' the past (Goldstein, 1976, 1996).

⁴⁷ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student 1

The 'Historians can define terms in different ways' code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

Another source of the differences in their views may also be found in terms of identifying what is actually meant by the term Ranter. For Historian B the term refers to a handful of individuals who produced works that could be labelled with this title and who did not necessarily practice what they preached. They also see Ranters as a fabricated myth created by the mood at the time. For historian A on the other hand Ranters were more than this, they were a collective movement of people who were blasphemous and wanton in their ways.⁴⁸

Ideas like this were most prevalent in the 2007-8 sample and were found in two students' answers at both Stage 1 and Stage 5. The example cited is the only example from the 2008-9 sample. The notion that *historians'* definitions play a role in construing the meaning of the past seems clearly incompatible with objectivist notions of historical practice and to imply that constructing accounts of the past is a matter of constructing meaning and an interaction between variable interpretive frameworks in the present and the remains of the past.

The 'Historians sometimes have to work with sources that are limited and hard to interpret' code was developed to code ideas such as the following:

Limited evidence does not allow for an argument that can be fully explored.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student Group 30

⁴⁹ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student 14

Ideas of this kind were identified in the 2007/8 post sample only and were more prominent in the Stage 5 than in the Stage 1 posts. Like the previous code that made reference to sources, observations such as this are likely to have variable meaning. An observation like this might well be compatible with simplistic notions of historical accounts – with, for example, that notion that if only the evidence were ‘unlimited’ our accounts could be complete. Student 14, however, clearly has a more sophisticated understanding of the role of evidence, as the following observation, from their initial draft of this question indicates:

For example, text 1 uses quotes from contemporary plays and that people were ‘alleged’ to have said certain things. In which case, if the historian in text 2 does not take these sources as part of their evidence then indeed the amount of evidence that the Ranters existed could be minimal.⁵⁰

As this observation shows, Student 14 is clearly aware that, far from speaking for itself, evidence has to be constituted as evidence by historians: not only does evidence not speak for itself, evidence only becomes evidence through a process of historical meaning making. The phrasing is instructive here – evidence is the *historian’s* evidence and not a given.

The ‘Historians can be motivated by the desire to develop innovative explanations’ code was developed to code one Stage 5 post in the 2007/8 sample in which the following observations occurred:

⁵⁰ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student 14

Also historians seek to challenge perceptions and accepted beliefs in order to expand the full possibilities, and gain a more fuller insight into the time period, whilst remaining in what is known to be true in the evidence available. For instance Text 2 seems to challenge Text 1's view on the Blasphemy Act, and provides alternative reasoning to why people thought they existed, 'Ranterism were fuelled by opponents of the English Revolution and supporters of the King: it suited their purposes to present the new regime created by the revolution as one that spawned sinning, swearing, irreligion and depravity' This looks into the context of the time much deeper, and looks at the broader events in this period of history to see how they might shed new light on the issue.⁵¹

Subjectivity is often invoked in ways that are compatible with objectivism and in ways that make subjectivity a vice in historical reconstruction. Entirely on the contrary, this example makes historians' desires and motivations active elements in the construction of knowledge rather than impediments to it.

The 2007-8 and 2008-9 post samples contain a range of ideas, as the above discussion shows. It is apparent from Figure 6.ii.a., however, that these ideas are not evenly distributed: most strikingly, seven of the nine instances of the 'Historians backgrounds or existing beliefs can affect their objectivity' code are found in the 2008-9 sample.⁵²

How far did the explanations for account variation that students' offered at Stage 1 and Stage 5 change? Four of the five posts in the 2007-8 sample modified their explanations for account variation between

⁵¹ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student 4

⁵² Whether these are task effects or sample effects is a point that cannot be determined without a more systematic analysis than the one offered here.

Stage 1 and Stage 5 of the academy. I will cite two examples of answers that changed.

We have cited Student 4's Stage 5 answer in relation to 'innovation' above. Highly unusually, Student 4's answer remained substantially unchanged and their Stage 5 post differed from their Stage 1 post only in having material on innovation added to it rather than by being rewritten. Student 4's Stage 1 post was, however, a highly sophisticated post as the following extract, coded under the 'definition' code, shows:

So it can be seen that definition is an issue, it is unclear what the Ranters actually were, as Text 1 says 'It is very difficult to define precisely what the Ranters believed.' So it is hard to prove whether the Ranter movement existed or whether it was just the views held by some people between 1649 and 1651. It can certainly be said that some people held some extremist and unusual views for the time, 'described as atheists, denying the existence of God'. But whether it is quantifiable to say this was a movement is questionable. Text 1 takes quotes from the sources of describing the kind of behaviour that could merit being labelled a Ranter but is vague and ambiguous ranging from the poor mocking the upper class, to anti-religious views and activities. Whereas text 2 states that 'a movement needs adherents and followers to deserve the name' Which essentially is the main issue relating to the Ranters, there is no evidence to show that there were members, leaders, organisers etc. so can it be classed as a movement or simply a viewpoint?⁵³

Posts like this illustrate the sophistication of the ideas that some of the students brought to the virtual academy and also that, for some students at least, the experience added relatively little to their thinking.

⁵³ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student 4

In this case, the outcome is one additional idea rather than a major revision of ideas.

On the other hand, and in almost an inversion of the case of Student 4, Student 3 revised their response dramatically. We have already cited Student 3's Stage 1 answer on page 49 above. It will be recalled that the post essentially amounted to the application of prior knowledge (of revisionist observations about Richard Rex). Their Stage 5 answer was the following:

Superficially, the historians say such different things about the Ranters because the historian writing source one is arguing for their existence whereas the historian writing source two opens with the line 'the Ranters are fiction'. Text one is more of a narrative about the Ranters existence with little hard evidence to back up this viewpoint. The historian uses such terms as 'according' frequently and although he does relate to direct pamphlets and writings, he cannot make it certain that evidence such as the 'Blasphemy Act' of 1650 directly related to the Ranters. This evidence in particular is one of disagreement between the historians, as the historian writing source two clearly states that there is no historical evidence that the 'Blasphemy Act' of 1650 is directly related to the Ranters and furthermore, argues that authors such as Coppe, detailing what it took to become a Ranter did not necessarily guarantee a 'Ranter movement' at all.

Although historian one does explain the 'supposed' existence of the Ranters, his evaluation is limited and his evidence isn't substantial enough. Text two is quick to explain how the mere lack of evidence on this subject is weighted heavily towards his statement that 'there was no movement at all' and I think this is fundamentally why the two historians differ.

It is possible that the writer of text one saw the Ranters as a 'general movement' whereas the writer of text two has looked at what evidence there is and decided that the evidence favours the

view that there wasn't really a movement at all, just isolated cases of Ranterism.⁵⁴

This response clearly engages with the detail of the texts in ways that Student 3's initial post did not and there are sophisticated ideas here – for example the notion that this controversy relates to the interpretation of evidence and also to the definition of terms: for some students, therefore, the academy process led to substantial changes in response.

Three of the five posts in the 2008-9 sample developed differing explanations for account variation between Stage 1 and Stage 5 of the academy and two did not. I will cite one example of each category of student.

Student Group 30's Stage 1 post was almost entirely concerned with bias and the first paragraph of their post was cited in the discussion of the first of the codes in Figure 6.ii.a. above. The remainder of their Stage 1 post was the following:

A possible explanation for historians' differing conclusions about the past could perhaps lie in the subjective nature of their views. Any preformed opinions or assumptions a historian might entertain may act to influence their interpretation of evidence. A historian with the preconceived notion that Henry VIII was a tyrant for example, may interpret evidence so as to strengthen this notion. Similarly historians' own religious and or political affiliations may lead them in the direction of a particular conclusion when studying the reformation for example. Many historians set out with a clear

⁵⁴ 2007-8 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student 3

aim which they intend to prove, the temptation being to see only this reflected in what they discover. The different sources historians use is also likely to be a contributing factor, as very few sources can claim neutrality and therefore caution must be exercised during their examination. Historians are unlikely to draw their conclusions from exactly the same evidence base and hence from this discrepancies may arise. Similarly the time period in which a historian is working may also play its part. As new evidence may come to light in later years this may enable historians to shed a different light on a certain issues.⁵⁵

This response, which was coded as explaining variation in terms of existing beliefs affecting objectivity and using different sources, clearly interprets historical subjectivity as a form of distortion. Their Stage 5 post has already been cited in the discussion of definitions above and the remainder of their Stage 5 post makes reference to a range of considerations, including the role of presuppositions, for example:

It seems that the differences in these historians' views truly comes down to how indeed they have interpreted the evidence; whilst historian A takes it at face value historian B goes beyond this looking at the wider context of the era in which the Ranters were supposed to have existed and herein the differences lie. It may be easy to find evidence concerning the Ranters' beliefs and practices if that is what you are looking to find, similarly a more in-depth or rather critical look at this evidence may reveal other factors to take into consideration that lie beneath the surface.⁵⁶

In contrast, Student Group 13's answer remains essentially identical in both Stage 1 and Stage 5. Their response at Stage 1 is summarised by the following paragraph:

⁵⁵ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student Group 30

⁵⁶ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student Group 30

Therefore the underlying reason to why historians come to differing conclusions about the past is because to select a manageable and readable (or even to create a conclusion) they must be selective about the material and the opinions they include. This selection of material differs for each historian (and is often directed or influenced by either the point they are trying to make or personal opinions) and this difference is what creates different conclusions.⁵⁷

At Stage 5, Student Group 13 endeavoured to explain variation in terms of selection but concluded that there were too few sources to allow selection to play a role – ‘historians must use at least there to construct their arguments’. The second element of their Stage 1 explanation was then deployed:

Thus one must consider the socioeconomic or political views each historian may have, and indeed any ‘point to prove’ they may have.⁵⁸

It would appear, therefore, that the academy process did not add to Student Group 13’s repertoire of candidate explanations for account variation.

The discussion of student posts above supports two conclusions.

Firstly, it is apparent that many of these students demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of historical knowledge production, in their

⁵⁷ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 1, Question 1, Student Group 13

⁵⁸ 2008-9 Virtual Academy, Stage 5, Question 1, Student Group 30

explanations for account variation, and that they were aware of the role that meaning construction and active historical thinking play in historical interpretation: these students were more than capable, therefore of engaging meaningfully with historical interpretation and, in this instance, objectivist notions of history knowledge and historical knowing may be less of an impediment to transition between school / college and university history than they have been found to be in other studies (Booth, 2005 and Hibbert, 2006).⁵⁹

Secondly, the analysis of the two samples of Stage 1 and Stage 5 posts suggests that the virtual academies were successful in developing student thinking: 4/5 of the 2007-8 sample and 3/5 of the 2008-9 sample offered differing explanations for account variation at Stage 1 and Stage 5 of the academies suggesting that exercises like this can help develop student thinking.

⁵⁹ It is worth repeating, however, that the participants in the HVA are unlikely to be representative of the broader population of AS and A2 history students and also that the sample analysed is unrepresentative of HVA participants (the sample was made up of students who completed the academies).

6.iii. Student Evaluation of the HVA

What did students make of the virtual academy experience, did they feel that the exercise was successful in achieving its objectives and what suggestions for improvement did they make?

Efforts were made to collect student evaluation data in both 2007-8 and 2008-9, however, the 2007-8 data collection was not systematically planned in advance and was largely unsuccessful. Three of the 15 active participants in the HVA posted feedback on their experiences (see Appendix 4). In 2008-9 evaluation data collection was systematically planned and a survey was embedded in the VLE (see Appendix 13): the questionnaire was completed by 17 of the 30 student groups.

The 2007-8 data is overwhelmingly positive: the students all remark on the value of the exercise and on the fact that they enjoyed it and one student, clearly felt that the academy had broadened their historical experience and suggested that more activity of this kind sustained over a longer period would be welcome. One of the three respondents comments that the timing of the academy was not ideal, however, although another respondent notes that this was not problematic for them. Patchy posts in response are also noted in one response.

Again, the 2008-9 data is overwhelmingly positive: the questionnaire data, summarised in Figure 6.iii.a., suggests that the majority of those students who responded had found the exercise valuable and that the HVA was therefore a success. The questionnaire data was anonymous: although it was possible to note who had completed it, it was not possible to correlate comments with post activity in the HVA.

Some examples of student comments, under each question, are reproduced below.

Figure 6.iii.a. Student Evaluation of the 2008-9 HVA: Summary.

This table abbreviates questionnaire questions for reasons of space. The questionnaire is reproduced in full in Appendix 13.

	Yes	No	To extent an	No answer	Other
Question 1: The HVA helped develop thinking about historical evidence and interpretations?	14 (82.4%)	0 (0%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (5.9%)	0 (0%)
Question 2: Interaction with academic historians: a useful and enjoyable experience?	11 (64.7%)	2 (11.8%)	4 (23.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Question 3: Interaction with students in other sixth forms: a useful and enjoyable experience?	9 (52.9%)	3 (17.6%)	3 (17.6%)	0 (0%)	2 (11.8%)
Question 4: Did the HVA provide insight into what history involves in higher education?	11 (64.7%)	2 (11.8%)	3 (17.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (5.9%)
Question 5: Can you suggest any improvements to the HVA?	16 (94.1%)	1 (5.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As the statistics indicate, the HVA was an overwhelmingly positive experience for students and one that they felt helped them develop their historical understanding: no respondents stated that they had not

developed their understandings of evidence and interpretation through the exercise and only two of the seventeen offered qualified assessments. I will cite two of the 15 positive responses and one of the qualified responses.

Yes, it helped greatly with our analytical skills, providing and opportunity to think 'outside the box'. It pleased me significantly.

Yes - I have certainly developed my thinking about how far it is possible for an historian to be objective and the benefits that can come from historians interpreting evidence in different ways (such as the debates that this can result in).

I think to an extent it has, it's helped me think more about the different aspects that need to be considered when looking at a source but largely it was already stuff that I knew or had an awareness that needed to be doing, it just kind of jogged my memory a bit.

Again, the majority of the students found engaging with academic historians a positive and enjoyable experience, although two students did not and four offered qualified assessments. I will cite one example of each kind of response.

I did find this both useful and enjoyable. The comments made were helpful and encouraged me to think about the topics from different perspectives, which made the exercises that we did in subsequent weeks more useful.

Didn't feel we had any personal interaction, it would have been useful to have individual comments, but overall there was general feedback available.

Yes, but I feel that the feedback came at an awkward time and in too much of a 'block' situation where if I wanted to fully understand what their points were referring to and to help me come up with my own judgements about this I would have had to keep flitting between peoples responses rather than being able to see the direct response to the specific point made by a student.

The reservations that were expressed relate to the group nature of the feedback that was offered in 2008-9. Clearly there is a trade-off between the size of an academy and the value of the experience for students. It is probable also that the 'two discussion group' structure adopted in 2008-9 was also too big and that smaller groups might have made it easier to follow feedback and to relate it to the posts that it commented on.

The majority of the students found engaging with other students a valuable experience, although three students did not and three offered qualified assessments. I will cite one example of each kind of response.

Yes it was helpful to see how other students our age are able to use their historical skills to interpret their views, and see how we can use this to better our work.

We were disappointed to not receive any responses, we think that the regulator could have done something to enforce it.

To some extent it was useful, but there wasn't a large amount of interaction. Any replies to posts, if there were replies, seemed to be based on opinion without justification.

In addition, two students side-stepped the question by noting that there was not much interaction or, as one respondent put it:

I found that although there was a large opportunity for debate, few students actually replied to points raised and so we could not really 'interact' with them as such.

It has already been noted, in the analysis of posts to the two academies, that the majority of 2008-9 'threads' were single post threads so student reservations about this element of the exercise and understandable and are likely to be shaped by the extent to which they received replies to posts.

Again, the majority of students felt that the exercise had given them insight into what history might involve in higher education although two students did not and three made qualified responses.

The work we have participated in has really improved our insight into higher education and the type of debating and analysis is involved, giving us a head start into high study.

I think that yes, to an extent it does give an idea of the questions and problems of history that must be considered when studying at a higher level

No, it felt like a continuation of our A level... unit... however the only difference was that we did not know the topics which can be seen as preparing us for the range of topics at university.

One student sidestepped the question by noting that they already had a very good idea of what was involved in history at university, having gone through the process of university application.

All but one of the students suggested improvements to the Virtual Academy. Nine students suggested that the discussion board set up (see Appendix 5) needed improvement, as in the following example.

Make the website far easier to access and use. If ease of access is achieved then an active debate may follow. This would make the whole experience more successful, enjoyable and useful.

Six students suggested that the timing of the exercise should be changed and that this would make it more successful.

It would be better if the HVA took place at a different time of the year because there was great pressure on students at this time and so it did not take priority.

Ten students also observed that interaction within the academy could be improved – either between students or between students and academics and some students also suggested that individual feedback would make the experience more valuable and stimulating.

7. Conclusions

The precedent discussion has suggested that this project has been worthwhile and successful in a number of respects but also drawn attention to a number of limitations and areas for further development.

The student evaluation data, particularly the 2008-9 data, suggests that students found the virtual academies valuable and that the majority of respondents enjoyed taking part in them. The analysis of student posts also supports the conclusion that the academies had a positive impact on student understanding, although, given the exploratory nature of the analysis to date, this conclusion must remain tentative.

Evaluative comments by participating teachers also support the suggestion that the academies added value and extended students thinking, as the following comments, drawn from email correspondence about the 2008-9 academy, indicate:

I do generally feel that the students have enjoyed the challenge and the response of other students has been stimulating in various ways.

I thought the HVA was a valuable exercise to get the students thinking historically out of their specific exam content. It meant that we were having conversations in class on the nature of

evidence and historical interpretation which would otherwise not have occurred, and which developed their thinking.

There is a strange relationship between us as teachers and students we are expected to say certain things and be exam orientated. They, as students, have their own code through which they interpret what we say and the pointers we give, but when we bring in the unknown student peer and the unknown academic there is a completely different response. Real concern arrives about how to express views and what constitutes a valid view. This is the first time they will have this sort of contact and it is excellent preparation to draw from in the early stages at university.

Teacher comments also support the observations made by students in their recommendations for improvements. March and April are not ideal times at which to run exercises of this kind,⁶⁰ and it is likely, as one student response to the questionnaire indicated, that a virtual academy would have the greatest impact when students are beginning to make decisions about university study.

Other suggestions in the student feedback were also supported by teacher observations. Although it is not possible to conclude definitively, given the limited student evaluation data for 2007-8, it seems probable that aspects of the design and construction of the 2008-9 may have reduced student engagement with the boards. It will be recalled that the majority of the threads in 2008-9 were single-post threads. Student and teacher comments on both the design of the discussion pages (see

⁶⁰ The intention had been to run the exercise earlier in the academic year, as suggested in the discussions of July 2008, but practical constraints intervened (see note 12 on p.16).

Appendix 5) and on the use of group feedback arrangements both indicate clear ways in which the improvements might be made.

There are two further considerations of a general nature that merit mention.

The virtual academy, particularly in 2008-9, provided a forum for collaboration between colleagues working in different phases of history education and the dialogue that this involved was surely a valuable process in and of itself: the virtual academies draw attention to the scope that e-learning and e-mail communication provide for collaboration of this kind.

Furthermore, this project suggests that the discussion boards through which exercises of this kind operate, provide a very valuable research tool that can inform thinking about both student ideas and teaching and learning in history. Student posts and discussions, such as those that have been cited at length in this report, can potentially give us real insight into student thinking as well as into the design of teaching and learning experiences that can help develop it.

8. Dissemination

As has been noted, the intention of this paper is in large part descriptive: it aims to give a detailed account of the teaching and learning activities and processes developed with the support of this Higher Education Academy Teaching Development Grant. The data set that the two virtual academies generated is a highly rich and complex one and the paper has only begun the task of analysing it and noting the implications for practice that may arise from it.

The analysis reported here is the grant holder's provisional analysis and it is both necessary and fitting, given the collaborative nature of this enterprise, to develop, and no doubt to supersede, this analysis through joint reflection and analysis. The process of analysis and dissemination will be taken forward in a number of ways: further analytical papers and joint papers analysing aspects of the academy are planned.

The provisional analysis reported here will be disseminated further through a workshop on virtual academies at the Schools History Project annual conference in July 2009 and the intention is also to present a provisional analysis of the academy process and outcomes through conference presentation in the autumn of 2009.

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10. Appendices

Appendix 1. Task Documents 2007-8

These documents are instruments developed by the grant holder in another context.⁶¹

The texts were deliberately unattributed, although there were dated. Experience suggested that students would seek to use attribution information to explain account variation and the aim was to close off this avenue of explanation and to encourage the students to use the detail of the texts to explain variation. The texts are presented below as they were used in 2007-8. In 2008-9 the 'Background information' was replaced with a 'Context' sheet and the dating given here was replaced with the labels Historian A and Historian B.

⁶¹ Ongoing doctoral research conducted at the Institute of Education, University of London. These texts were used to collect data on 16-19 year old students' understandings of historical accounts in 2001/2. The first text was created by simplifying and synthesising text in Christopher Hill's *A World Turned Upside Down* (Hill, 1975). The second text was based on Aylmer's summary (Aylmer, 1987) of J.C. Davies' arguments about Ranters (Davies, 1986).

THE RANTERS

Background Information

In the years during and immediately after the English Civil War there were numerous groups of religious radicals active in Britain. There has been considerable debate amongst historians about the beliefs and relative importance of these groups. These texts relate to controversy about one of these groups in particular -- a group called the Ranters.

Line Number	Text 1
	Based on arguments advanced by an English academic historian in the mid-1970s.
1 5	<p>It is very difficult to define precisely what the Ranters believed. Most of the evidence is from hostile witnesses and the Ranters had no recognised leader or organisation. Nevertheless, for a brief period between 1649 and 1651 there was a group which contemporaries called Ranters. We hear constant reference to them in the years following the King's execution in 1649 and, a contemporary play announced in 1651, 'All the world is now in a Ranting humour!'</p>
10 15	<p>According to Bunyan the Ranters denied the existence of sin. Some are described as atheists, denying the existence of God. Samuel Fischer stated that the Ranters denied 'that there is any second coming of Christ at all'. According to Ephraim Pagitt they argued that everything came from nature not from God and drew the conclusion that all things were pure including 'hideous blasphemy and continual whoredom'. John Holland quoted a Ranter as arguing that God was in every 'man, beast, fish, fowl, every green thing from the highest cedar to ivy on the wall' in 'this dog, this cat, chair, stool, and tobacco pipe'. At one Ranter meeting of which we have a hostile report, the mixed company met at a tavern, sang anti-religious songs and partook of a communal feast. One of them tore off a piece of beef, saying 'This is the flesh of Christ, take and eat.' Another threw a cup of ale in the chimney saying 'There is the blood of Christ.' Even their enemies expressed what is almost a grudging admiration for Ranter high spirits: 'they are the merriest of devils for songs, drinking, music, bawdy and dancing'.</p>
20 25	<p>Ranter promotion of swearing and blasphemy was symbolic of their belief in freedom from moral restraint. Abiezer Coppe was alleged to have sworn for an hour on end at a church altar and to have concluded: 'a pox on God and all your prayers!' Swearing was an act of defiance, both of God and of middle-class society. It was a proclamation of equality and a protest against middle class attempts to control the pleasures of the poor. Coppe's 1649 pamphlet <u>Fiery Flying Rolls</u> made the Ranter challenge abundantly clear: 'Have all things in common, or else the plague of God will rot and consume all that you have!' he pronounced.</p>
30	<p>The authorities were not slow to respond to the Ranter challenge. Coppe's pamphlet was condemned to be publicly burned and the Blasphemy Act of 1650 was aimed especially at attacks on religion and morality. Ranters were expelled from the Army in 1649 and 1650 and Cromwell declared of a Scottish Ranter that 'she was so vile a creature as he thought her unworthy to live'. Ranters were not willing martyrs however, and the movement faded into obscurity from 1651.</p>

Line Number	Text 2 Based on arguments advanced by an English academic historian in the late 1980s.
1	The Ranters are a fiction. The evidence for their existence as a group is minimal and that evidence comes, almost without exception, from persons writing against ‘Ranting’. The direct evidence for the existence of Ranterism is almost non-existent.
5	Historians who argue that the Ranters were a real phenomenon have only four direct Ranter sources from which to construct their arguments – and one of these sources is anonymous. What do these sources allow us to conclude? Certainly, there were authors, such as Coppe, who set out beliefs that could be called Ranter – in the sense that they denied religion, advocated sinning and so on.
10	These texts do not prove the existence of anything resembling a Ranter movement, however. We have no evidence of any substance to suggest that Ranterism was anything more than a series of postures struck by a handful of writers. We do not even have compelling evidence that these authors themselves practised the beliefs that their pamphlets expressed. Coppe, for example, changed his name, became a physician and was eventually buried in 1672 in a churchyard in Barnes.
15	Furthermore, there is no compelling evidence of an organised movement seeking to put into practice the beliefs expressed in these pamphlets. A movement needs adherents and followers to deserve the name and there is next to no direct evidence of such adherents and followers in the case of the Ranters.
20	It is true, however, that there was much talk about Ranters in 1649-51 and for some years afterwards. Most of this talk comes from the lips of writers condemning Ranting. What can we conclude from this? There was a moral panic about Ranterism – collective fantasy and paranoia gripped public discussion and debate. In part this was fuelled by the gutter press: tales of Ranterism made good copy and amounted, in the hands of some of the more imaginative hacks, to a form of ‘soft-porn’. In part tales of Ranterism were fuelled by opponents of the English Revolution and supporters of the King: it suited their purposes to present the new regime created by the revolution as one that spawned sinning, swearing, irreligion and depravity. Once the seeds of the Ranter myth had been planted by these sources, others pitched-in. The authorities had to be seen to respond to this new ‘problem’ and they were quick to condemn Ranting. Religious radicals and non-conformists condemned Ranterism also – since if they failed to do so they feared that they too might be branded as Ranters.
25	
30	
35	Ranting disappeared rapidly not because it was suppressed but because it had never really existed. The government’s grip on reality was never entirely lost. It is true that they enacted a Blasphemy Act in 1650 but, crucially, the Act made no direct mention of Ranters.

Appendix 2. The 2007-8 HVA: A Complete Discussion Group

Question 1: How might you explain the fact that these historians say such different things about the Ranters?

Please click on the link on the left of this page entitled 'Ranter Texts' and read the pair of texts in the document that you will find there. Once you have done this please post an answer to the question above. To do this enter this forum, click on 'Add a new thread' and then post your comments.

Date: Wed Mar 12 2008 15:49

Author: Student 3

Subject: Different Evidence & Different Interpretations

As modern day historians such as Richard Rex have proven other highly respected historians such as Elton to be inaccurate due to advancements in factual evidence and interpretations of this evidence. One such example is the revisionist view of Mary Tudor, put forward to challenge the traditional thesis of her being more brutal and less tolerant than any other Tudor monarch, being given the name 'Bloody Mary'. As time passes by, new evidence will most likely be uncovered or furthermore, different historians will interpret this evidence in different ways. Text 1 is an argument put forward by an English historian in the mid 1970's whereas text 2 is an argument put forward ten years later in the 1980's, possibly enabling the second historian to have more evidence.

Date: Tue Mar 25 2008 13:04

Author: Student 13

Subject: Re: Different Evidence & Different Interpretations

I have noticed that we both agree that new evidence may have been found that opposes the view in Source 1. However I feel that historians cannot prove each other to be wrong, rather the differing views mean that a debate is created between the two historians which is then open for discussion between others. In my opinion, Text 2 is not proving Text 1 wrong, it is putting forward another view.

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Date: Wed Mar 26 2008 17:26

Author: Poole, Robert

Subject: Re: Different Evidence & Different Interpretations

There are two good points here. Student 3 emphasises the importance of evidence, Student 13 says evidence alone doesn't explain different views. Either could be right in this case. Having read some of this debate, I'd offer a third perspective for consideration.

Historian 1 was concerned with 'history from below', and looked everywhere (including among Ranter texts) for evidence of popular movements that had been overlooked. He found a lot that has not been contested as well as the Ranters. Historian 2 is more a historian of religion and ideas. He was interested in people's ideas about what happened (or to what they thought happened). He looked at mostly the same evidence for a different purpose, and found he didn't need to assume that there were real Ranters in order to explain how the texts about them got written. (A bit like how sightings of wild beasts on the Devon moors in August tells us more about what the popular press do in the summer 'silly season' than about wildlife on the Devon Moors).

This argument has never really been resolved. Can it ever be, do you think? I wonder what you would need to resolve it?

Date: Thu Apr 03 2008 14:04

Author: Student 3

Subject: Re: Different Evidence & Different Interpretations

Although I would agree that text one may be putting across a different point of view from text two, yet saying 'historians can never prove each other wrong' is a huge sweeping generalisation. There will always be areas of history where the evidence can be accredited to either side of an argument with no real definitive answer, yet in contrast there is a massive amount of history that can be proved correct due to the substantial weight of evidence in favour of it being true. Historians can definitely prove each other wrong, my studies of the 'Good' Duke of Somerset have found that revisionist historians have enough evidence that he was not a 'Good' Duke by any means and that he, not the Duke of Northumberland was the 'Bad' Duke. On this subject, the evidence is vague and I would agree that you could argue it either way, yet this is not the same for all topics of history.

Date: Thu Mar 13 2008 14:36
Author: Student 13
Subject: differing views of sources

It could be that the author in Text 1 has viewed the sources about the Ranters in a different light from the author in text 2; Tex 1 seems to be interpreting sources with the Ranters in mind as a group that were definitely around after the civil war, rather than interpreting the sources in an attempt to discover whether the sources actually prove the group existed.

Text 2 was written around ten years after Text 1. It is therefore possible that the author of text 2 was or is a revisionist historian who felt the need to update information about the Ranters, and may have found new information that seems to disprove the Ranters existed.

The two texts may have been written with completely different audiences in mind; for example, text 1 is much more informative so may be a piece for a textbook, whereas Text 2 gives much more opinion so may have been a section from a debate.

Date: Wed Mar 26 2008 17:27
Author: Poole, Robert
Subject: Re: differing views of sources

Actually my posting about question 1 is probably more relevant to question 2. Have a look at it if you're still thinking about question 2 and see what you think.

Date: Thu Mar 20 2008 10:48
Author: Chapman, Arthur
Subject: Stage 2 instructions

Hello both: please can you feedback to each other on your answers to our questions (see the Stage 2 link for instructions).⁶² Many thanks.

Date: Fri Apr 11 2008 18:17
Author: Student 3
Subject: Final Answer Question 1

⁶² At Stage 2, the students were asked to make use of two sheets of generic feedback when feeding back to each other and revising their posts. These sheets are reproduced in Appendix 3.

Superficially, the historians say such different things about the Ranters because the historian writing source one is arguing for their existence whereas the historian writing source two opens with the line 'the Ranters are fiction'. Text one is more of a narrative about the Ranters existence with little hard evidence to back up this viewpoint. The historian uses such terms as 'according' frequently and although he does relate to direct pamphlets and writings, he cannot make it certain that evidence such as the 'Blasphemy Act' of 1650 directly related to the Ranters. This evidence in particular is one of disagreement between the historians, as the historian writing source two clearly states that there is no historical evidence that the 'Blasphemy Act' of 1650 is directly related to the Ranters and furthermore, argues that authors such as Coppe, detailing what it took to become a Ranter did not necessarily guarantee a 'Ranter movement' at all.

Although historian one does explain the 'supposed' existence of the Ranters, his evaluation is limited and his evidence isn't substantial enough. Text two is quick to explain how the mere lack of evidence on this subject is weighted heavily towards his statement that 'there was no movement at all' and I think this is fundamentally why the two historians differ.

It is possible that the writer of text one saw the Ranters as a 'general movement' whereas the writer of text two has looked at what evidence there is and decided that the evidence favours the view that there wasn't really a movement at all, just isolated cases of Ranterism.

Date: Wed May 07 2008 09:04

Author: Evans, Eric

Subject: Re: Final Answer Question 1

The first sentence here is a very strong one. It summarizes the question as a whole very well. How do we explain? Well, the two sources are doing quite different things. I think from there, though, that you could have developed the argument just a little more persuasively. You should say a bit more on how the different *purposes* the two sources affect what is said. Source 2 just has to be more critical of the evidence because its purpose is to argue that Ranterism was just a figment of the collective imagination. I would have said more about the nature of the questioning which source 2 goes in for.

The second half of the answer rather drifts into cross-reference which picks out difference well enough but which doesn't always home in on how these differences explain the quite different approaches to Ranterism. When you say that source 1 provides a limited evaluation with insubstantial evidence, also, you should give examples. They will help the explanation. It's precisely that observation (which source 2

would obviously agree with) which needs matching up to the line taken in source 2.

Date: Thu May 15 2008 12:22

Author: Poole, Robert

Subject: Re: Final Answer Question 1

You point up well the sharp difference between the two openings. But later on you seem to suggest that historian A took view A because he believed the Ranters were real, while historian 2 interpreted the same evidence differently because he believed Y. But surely these beliefs are the result rather than the cause of the differing interpretations? Or are you arguing that preconceptions are more important than detailed judgements? You identify this issue implicitly - how to resolve it?

Question 2: If you had to choose between these two historians' interpretations how might you do this?

Please click on the link on the left of this page entitled 'Ranter Texts' and read the pair of texts in the document that you will find there. Once you have done this please post an answer to the question above. To do this enter this forum, click on 'Add a new thread' and then post your comments.

Date: Wed Mar 12 2008 16:01

Author: Student 3

Subject: Choosing between two historian's opinions

If one was to choose between two historian's interpretations, they would need to scrutinize both arguments in detail. This would enable one to evaluate the sources and decide whether or not they would agree, challenge or modify the argument put forward, using their own research and thesis to do so. For example, if one was to agree with the argument put forward that the Ranters did exist and were influential in upsetting domestic policy in the seventeenth century then they would choose the historian that had evidence which supported what they would argue themselves. In studying history, one must have a viewpoint, of course supported by hard evidence so that they can differentiate between other opinions.

However, if one does not have a viewpoint as they have no in-depth knowledge of the subject, they should choose the historian with the most credible source of evidence and argument.

Date: Thu Mar 27 2008 15:07

Author: Student 13

Subject: Re: Choosing between two historian's opinions

the point you make about choosing the historian who has the most credible use of evidence is a good one, I also made a point about this. I think it also depends on how balanced an argument is, because although as you said, it is good to have a viewpoint on something, the other side of the story must be considered.

Date: Thu Apr 03 2008 14:14

Author: Student 3

Subject: Re: Choosing between two historian's opinions

It is fundamentally important to have evidence which source two displays whereas source one is more superficial, containing little if any evidence, possibly just an opinion. I also feel that 'looking at the other side of the story' is slightly irrelevant because in this exercise we are simply comparing two sources without any real background knowledge of our own in the subject, and need to decide which is more credible based on hard evidence/facts in the sources presented to us.

Date: Thu Mar 13 2008 14:45

Author: Student 13

Subject: Text Choice

If I had to choose between the two historian's interpretations, I would be likely to choose Text 2. Although it seems much more opinionated than Text 1, it has a fairly balanced argument and discusses the possible flaws to Ranting Sources; it is this balanced argument which has led me to choose Text 2.

Date: Thu Mar 13 2008 14:52

Author: Student 13

Subject: I answered the question wrong! REAL answer, don't read the other one.

If I had to choose between the interpretations I would first examine how many sources they had pulled their information from, and how they had chosen to use these sources. I would also look at how balanced the arguments are in each Text, and which audience the texts are aimed at.

Date: Mon Mar 31 2008 10:41

Author: Evans, Eric

Subject: Re: I answered the question wrong! REAL answer, don't read the other one.

Yes, OK, but it's now time to ditch the conditional tense! You ARE now being asked to choose!! I think it's important that you note the kind of evidence the two writers are using (what similarities and what differences) what appear to be the main PURPOSES of writing (Is Text 2 going beyond a negative job in respect of the evidence used by the author of Text 1?) and how effectively the two authors develop their arguments. For this, there needs to be a fair bit of engagement with the content of the sources. Yes, it's clearly better to do this when you have detailed knowledge of the context but I think you can get a fair way just by working on what the authors have given us. The debate so far is perhaps rather too speculative/theoretical.

Date: Fri Apr 11 2008 18:44

Author: Student 3

Subject: Final Answer Question Two

If I had to choose definitively between these two historians' interpretations I would choose text two as this source gives the most convincing explanation of the commonly agreed facts of the situation. Although both agree that most evidence comes from those who were against the Ranter movement, I feel that text one is too narrative, as evidence is minimal and assumptions are made that aren't backed up with definitive evidence or very precise dates. The language, such as 'according to' and 'alleged' is frequently used and I feel it shows uncertainty in what the historian is arguing. Not enough of his claims are warranted and I feel text two is more convincing because the historian realises that there simply isn't enough evidence to argue *for* the existence of the Ranters. He is also quick to point out that the little evidence there is is only from people writing against Ranters, rather than merely their benefits/benefits as an organisation.

Furthermore, both historians use evidence in different ways, but as this evidence is uncertain I find the historian writing source one to be fairly un-comprehensive in his argument. Crucially, the 'Blasphemy Act' of 1560 has no direct mention of the Ranters, argued by historian two which opposes the speculative statement in text one, referring this document specially to the Ranters. 'The Blasphemy Act of 1650 was aimed especially at attacks on religion and morality', this statement clearly shows no direct mention of the Ranters and could have been aimed at any number of groups during a time of civil unrest.

'We hear constant reference to them in the years following the King's execution in 1649 and, a contemporary play announced in 1651, 'All the world is now in a Ranting humour!' Again these lines in particular are

not backed up by any hard evidence, and the title of the play isn't even mentioned, so I find it hard (without any background knowledge) and merely using the evidence in front of me to agree with his viewpoint. Although historian two does agree that authors such as Cope certainly existed (here the same author is used as evidence by both sources) he is quick to evaluate this person, something which text one does not do. He uses hard evidence such as 'Coppe, for example, changed his name, became a physician and was eventually buried in 1672 in a churchyard in Barnes', to assert his viewpoint that it is questionable whether these people even believed in what their pamphlets were saying anyway! Ultimately, text one is too much of a narrative and the historian tries to argue a viewpoint where the evidence is weighted against what he is saying (due to the fundamental fact that there isn't much evidence at all), leading him to make assumptions rather than careful evaluation. Text two, written a decade or so later is simply more comprehensive as the historian realises that the lack of evidence gives support to his viewpoint that there was never really a movement at all, and any supposed evidence in source one is either discredited by the second historian or modified to show a more contemporary viewpoint of the 'Ranter movement'.

Date: Wed May 07 2008 09:12

Author: Evans, Eric

Subject: Re: Final Answer Question Two

This is an effective answer which makes use of both sources. You clearly find text 2 more persuasive. You might have asked yourself whether the evidence you choose was almost bound to lead to the conclusion you reach. As you say in the 1st answer, the two texts are doing something different. Text 1 takes the existence of Ranterism as a given; Text 2 challenges this. Thus, far more of the second text is likely to be overtly critical and aware of source limitations. Text 1 is more concerned with what Ranters believed and why they were seen as a threat. In essence, Text 2 is saying that these are the wrong questions, because you have to take a step backwards and ask more fundamental questions first. So, you are quite right to say that the two writers use evidence in different ways but surely it behoves the writer of Text 2 to be much more sceptical of the evidence. It's almost bound to be the case that the author of Text 2 will concentrate much more on substantiation - or, in this case, why assertions about the Ranters have been taken uncritically for far too long.

So, while I happen to agree with your conclusion, I might have made some more contextual comments about the different purposes, drawing lightly on the territory of the first question, to explain not only my preference but why it was always likely that any answer which requires

folk to consider the nature and typicality of evidence would lean towards Source 2.

But an interesting, engaged answer.

Appendix 3. Generic Moderator Feedback 2007-8

This feedback was designed to give participating students a shared frame of reference of questions to use when revising their answers to the two task questions.

The feedback sheets were in part a synthesis of ideas that were present in the feedback that students received from the participating academics and also based on ideas that had emerged in discussions between the teachers and academics involved in the project. The feedback sheets also drew on an approach to historical argument apparent in historiographic (Megill, 2007), history education and history education research literature (Coffin, 2006; Martin, Coffin and North, 2007 and Chapman, 2006(b)).

Both feedback sheets were prefaced with the following paragraph:

Please use the questions and suggestions below to help you give constructive feedback to the other student you are paired with on how they might improve their answers... The questions and suggestions below are based on points made in your posts and points made in a discussion between teachers and academics. This sheet is here to provide inspiration for you – you are *not* expected to ask all these questions! To repeat, this sheet is intended as 'help': you do not have to use it and you may of course have better ideas!

FEEDBACK IDEAS FOR QUESTION 1

Ideas for thinking about question 1

(Explaining *why* the interpretations might differ so much)

Historians aim to make *warranted* claims about the past and to do this through arguments *grounded* in *reasoning* and the critical consideration of *evidence*. It is important to read our two interpretations very closely and to reflect on *both* evidence *and* argument. Here are some questions you might ask to help you do this.

- Are the historians asking the same questions or are they in fact answering different questions about the past? (It is possible to set out with different aims - to set out to describe something in the past, to explain it, to evaluate it and so on.)
- Do the historians examine the same source materials as they pursue their questions about the past?
- Do the historians ask the same questions of their source materials?
- Is there common ground between two historians – do they agree on basic facts for example?
- Where exactly does disagreement arise – it might be about some basic facts or it might be that disagreement arises when conclusions are drawn from agreed facts.
- Where different conclusions are drawn from similar facts or sources it may be because the historians disagree about what these things *mean*. There are many reasons why they might. Consider these possibilities (and others that you can think of!) –
 - Do they have differing understandings of the *context* (the period, the background situation and so on)?
 - Are they defining *concepts* in different ways (if we disagree about whether a ‘revolution’ has occurred, for example, it may be because we are using different criteria to define the concept ‘revolution’)?

FEEDBACK IDEAS FOR QUESTION 2

Ideas for thinking about question 2

(How might we choose between these accounts?)

Historical claims must be *warranted* – appropriately supported with evidence and argument. They must also provide the ‘best explanation’ or account of what appear to be the facts of the situation.

It is important to treat historical interpretations as arguments rather than simply as expressions of opinion. Do not hesitate to *challenge* historians’ arguments and to *test* their strength! The key thing is to think *critically* about what is said and about the support that is offered for what is claimed.

You can piece together a good deal of factual information about the time period and context and also about ‘Ranters’ from these two texts. It is very important to use factual information like this when evaluating these texts and to ask the following question –

- Which interpretation gives the most convincing explanation of the commonly agreed facts of the situation?

To answer that you need to think about the facts and about the quality of the explanations and arguments offered. Here are some possible questions to use when trying to compare and evaluate explanations.

- Which interpretation is most **comprehensive** – which covers the broadest range of *relevant* issues? Does either author fail to raise questions or issues that you consider relevant?
- **Substantiation** – is there variation in the support offered for the historians’ arguments or are they equally well supported with evidence? This is not just a matter of counting evidence. You need to consider the quality of evidence also.
- **Argument** – do both interpretations support the claims that they make about the past with equally effective arguments? Historians are just as capable as the rest of us of making errors of logic and producing flawed reasoning.
- **Assumptions** – are there things that are taken for granted, rather than established, and that need to be explained, examined or proved more fully in either interpretation?

Appendix 4. HVA Evaluation Data 2007-8

Thu, May 15, 2008 -- *Evaluating the Virtual Academy*

We would greatly appreciate your feedback on this virtual academy. We hope that you have enjoyed the experience of taking part in it, that it has helped develop your thinking about historical interpretations and that you have found it valuable to have feedback on your thinking from historians.

Please could you add a final post to the site on your group page entitled 'Evaluation' and let us know your thoughts? I would really appreciate any feedback you can give and it will certainly inform the planning of activity like this in the future.

Many thanks!

Date: Fri May 16 2008 13:06

Author: Student 14

Subject: Evaluation

I found this exercise very stimulating and fulfilling. It has enabled me to consider things from different points of view historically. However, I personally feel that this time of year is too busy to carry out such a task. Also I feel that the feedback has been patchy, by this I mean the initial set of feedback was for one answer meant for both members of the group and for the other question it was only for the other person i.e. not personally beneficial. I also think based on the comments to the final answers, whilst I do appreciate them, I feel that more was expected from me than I am currently capable of giving.

Date: Wed May 21 2008 13:01

Author: Student 4

Subject: Evaluation

I found this a very useful and beneficial activity, it helped me to explore more deeper historical perspectives and sources. Hearing responses from historians helped stimulate me to think more broadly on the issue than the straightforward approach I previously would have taken. Whilst the time of year to do such an activity wasn't perhaps ideal, I didn't find it too much of a time constraint so wasn't too much of a problem for me.

Thank you very much

Date: Wed May 21 2008 18:49

Author: Student 9

Subject: Evaluation

Thank you very much for a very enjoyable experience and all your useful comments. I particularly enjoyed the fact that the choice of 'the Ranters' as the subject gave us an opportunity to explore a new time period of history and a new aspect of historical debate (on the a level course there is basically only ever a focus on the monarchy, never on the common folk).

What might be useful next time is if we have a bit more guidance on how to go about using the resource- I noticed that other people were, as it were, having debates, and responding to each others comments, and have to admit that (somewhat stupidly) this hadn't occurred to me as an idea- perhaps it would be an idea to suggest this implicitly for dopey people like me!

what also might be good is if the project went on over a larger period of time and covered a greater range of topics- it would be really interesting to complete a similar exercise concerning a completely alien aspect of history- e.g. Chinese history- as generally a level leaves you with very narrow historical horizons.

Thanks again

Appendix 5. The HVA Discussion Board Set-up 2008-9

In both 2007-8 and 2008-9 the History Virtual Academy (HVA) was run as a Blackboard 'course'.

The 2007-8 arrangements were relatively simple: students could only access the paired discussion group that they were part of.

In 2008-9 it was decided to allow all students access to all groups (as 'readers') but only to the group that they were members of as 'participants': 'readers' could read posts but only 'participants' could make posts. This fact and the fact that the academy had three stages and two questions to answer at two of the three stages had unforeseen consequences for users and the layout of the site was not conducive to easy navigation.

The figure below is a screen capture of the discussion board main page. There were 10 different boards on this page (five for each group).

The screenshot shows the Blackboard Academic Suite interface in Microsoft Internet Explorer. The browser address bar shows the URL: https://www.ble.ac.uk/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab=community&url=%2Fbin%2Fcommon%2Fcourse.pl%3Fcourse_id%3D_27316_1. The page title is "HISTORY VIRTUAL ACADEMY (IOE HVA) > COMMUNICATIONS > DISCUSSION BOARD".

The main content area displays a "Discussion Board" section with a "Forum" tab. Below the tab is a table of discussion boards:

Display Order	Forum	Total Posts	Unread Posts	Total Participants	
1	Group 1 Weeks 4-5 Question 1 This is the first of two boards for this element of the VA. Have a look at the two historians' arguments in the Historical Debate folder hyperlinked on the left of the page and answer the following question. Don't forget to use the feedback from Week 1 to help you. Please (a) make a post and (b) reply to another group's post How might you explain the fact that these historians say such differing things about the Ranters? Please use <u>use only the information you have been given on this site</u> when answering the question and focus on what Historian A and B actually say.	24	0	11	Modify Manage Remove Copy
2	Group 2 Weeks 4-5 Question 1 This is the first of two boards for this element of the VA. Have a look at the two historians' arguments in the Historical Debate folder hyperlinked on the left of the page and answer the following question. Don't forget to use the feedback from Week 1 to help you. Please (a) make a post and (b) reply to another group's post How might you explain the fact that these historians	17	0	9	Modify Manage Remove Copy

The left sidebar contains navigation links: "About the HVA", "Who's Who in the HVA", "Discussion Rules", "Group 1", "Group 2", "The Historical Debate", "Announcements", "Ranter", "Documents", "HVA Evaluation Questionnaire", "Communication", "Organization Tools", "Control Panel", "Refresh", and "Detail View".

Appendix 6. Task Documents 2008-9: Context

The Context: England in 1649-51.

The early seventeenth century was a time of extensive conflict in Europe. Germany and central Europe, for example, suffered 30 years of war between 1618 and 1648. Much of the conflict was religious in nature and originated in the Reformation of the sixteenth century in which the power of the Catholic Church had been challenged by Protestants. There were conflicts also about politics and about the limits (if any) that should be placed on the power of monarchs. A protestant religious settlement, the Church of England, had been established in England and similar settlements had been established elsewhere.

In England, during the reign of Charles I, conflict arose between the King and Parliament over a number of issues including religion and taxation. Charles was perceived by many to be aiming to establish an absolute monarchy, ruling without Parliament. He was also suspected of Catholic sympathies. A civil war between the supporters of the King and of the Parliament broke out (1642-46). Charles was defeated and eventually tried and executed. Parliament established a 'Commonwealth' (a republic) after the execution of the King in 1649.

During the Civil War and in the period after the execution of the King many radical groups who called for religious, political and economic reforms arose including a group called the Levellers (who demanded broader political rights for ordinary soldiers in Parliament's New Model Army) and the Diggers (who argued for a form of religious communism). The Parliamentary leadership, and the most powerful parliamentary politician and general Oliver Cromwell, faced the problem that many revolutionary leaders often face of containing radicals and demands for change. It was in this context that we start to see references to 'Ranters' appearing in the archival records of the period.

There have been extensive historical controversies about these radical groups and their importance. The 'Ranters' have been particularly debated and historians have disagreed dramatically about the conclusions that historians should draw about the 'Ranters' from the documents that make reference to them or that are attributed to 'Ranters'.

Appendix 7. Task Documents 2008-9: Documents relating to 'The Ranters' (Examples)

Document 1⁶³

Extracts from Chapter 1 of Abiezer Coppe's *A Fiery Flying Roll: A Word from the Lord to all the Great Ones of the Earth* published in 1649.

Coppe was a self-proclaimed Ranter.

Thus says the Lord, *I inform you, that I overturn, overturn, overturn.* And as the Bishops, Charles, and the Lords, have had their turn¹... so your turn shall be next (ye surviving great ones) by what Name or Title soever dignified or distinguished, who ever you are, that oppose me, the Eternal God, who am UNIVERSAL Love, and whose service is perfect freedom, and pure Libertinism² ...

Behold, behold, behold, I the eternal God... who am that mighty Leveller³, am coming... to Level in good earnest, to Level to some purpose... to Level the Hills with the Valleys, and to lay the Mountains low... High Mountains! lofty Cedars it is high time for you... to hide you in the dust, for fear of the Lord... For the lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord ALONE shall be exalted...

But this is not all. *For... I come (says the Lord) with a vengeance, to level also your Honour, Riches, &c to stain the pride of all your glory, and to bring into contempt all the Honourable... upon the earth...*

For this Honour, Nobility, Gentility⁴... hath... been the Father of hellish horrid pride, arrogance, haughtiness, loftiness, murder, malice, of all manner of wickedness and impiety⁵; yea the cause of all the blood that ever hath been shed... the neck of horrid pride, murder, malice, and tyranny... may be chopped off at one blow. And that... the Eternal God, who am Universal Love, may fill the Earth with universal love, universal peace, and perfect freedom...

1. Bishops were abolished by Parliament in October 1646, King Charles I was tried and then executed in January 1649 and the House of Lords was abolished in February 1649.

2. 'Libertinism' has at least three meanings all of which were common in the first half of the seventeenth century: (1) free thinking in religious matters (2) sexual freedom (3) total freedom from rules in general.

3. 'Leveller' had two meanings at this time: (1) a member of a group of radicals in the New Model Army and (2) someone who believed that distinctions of hierarchy or rank between people should be removed.

4. 'Gentility' means the cultivated manners and behaviour of 'gentlemen' and persons of rank.

5. 'Impiety' means lack of respect for religion.

⁶³ This text was adapted from Cohn, 1993, pp.323-324.

Document 3⁶⁴

Extracts from *The Ranters Declaration* by M. Stubs published in London in 1650.

The pamphlet describes its author, Stubs, as an ex-Ranter.

On the 9th of this December a great Company of the new Generation of Ranters, assembled together near the White Lion in Pelican Lane... affirming, that that man who tipples deepest,¹ swears the frequentest, commits adultery... the oftenest, blasphemes the impudentest,² and perpetrates the most notorious crimes... is the dearest darling to be gloriously placed in the tribunal Throne of Heaven...

Another sort of this Diabolical Generation,³ had on the 11th of this...December a meeting near the Horn Tavern in Fleet Street, where they began to delight themselves with a Christmas Gambel...⁴

Another sort of Ranters had lately a meeting near Paddington... where they resolved to keep poor old Christmas a foot still...

Another sort of Ranters are of an opinion, that Free-will is lawful, and that they ought to sport and revel⁵ on all days whatsoever...

Another sort of these Creatures formerly called the Civil Ranter, (in number about 5000)... have also taken an Oath, to be true to the present Government, as it is now established, without King or House of Lords; and upon taking the said Oath, one of their Fellow Creatures, began to quibble, saying, *Then will I deny all Lord Mayors, all Lords, Presidents, and all Lord Chief Justices, &c.* For which he was presently expelled from amongst them.

1. To 'tipple' is to drink alcohol.

2. To 'blaspheme' is to talk or write in ways that mock or insult religion.

3. 'Diabolical' means devilish or inspired by Satan.

4. This means a Christmas dance or party. Christmas was abolished by the Parliament in 1647 on the grounds that feasting and drinking in the name of religion were immoral. The Christmas holiday was restored by Charles II after the monarchy was restored in 1660.

5. To 'sport and revel' means to eat, drink and be merry or to have a 'party'.

⁶⁴ This text was adapted from Davies, 1986, pp.174-176.

Appendix 8. The 2008-9 HVA: A Complete Discussion Thread (Example)

Discussion Group 1, Weeks 2-3, Question 1, Thread 5

Author: Group 11

Posted date: Friday, 6 March 2009 13:14:27 o'clock GMT

Having read the documents it has come apparent that the Ranters were a group of people who arose after the English Civil War, calling for further reform in religion, economics and politics. It is also apparent that it is difficult to determine exactly who they were, in that they seem to be those who were more radical in their ideas than others. This can be seen in document 3 where Stubbs is talking about the different sorts/sects of Ranters, some of whom appear less radical than the others, especially the 'Civil Ranters' who have taken an oath '*to be true to the present Government*'.

Their main beliefs seem to be based around free-will, as this is mentioned in most of the documents. Blasphemy, swearing, adultery, crime and drinking are the ways in which they seem to be asserting this idea of free-will. We disagree with what has been said in this group already, in the sense that we haven't read the evidence as that the Ranters think they will go to Heaven having behaved in this free-will way. The only evidence we have found in relation to this is in Document 3, where we believe the Ex-Ranter M. Stubbs is taking the 'mickey'/ being satirical by calling the Ranters '*dearest darlings*' before going on to say that they are going to be judged in '*the tribunal Throne of Heaven*'. From this it can be inferred that the reason he is no longer a Ranter is because he still wants to go to Heaven but doesn't believe that he will get there if he follows the Ranter's ideas of free-will.

It seems that the Ranters, following the period of Civil War, are against the hierarchical system which existed. It seems as though they blame the higher classes for the bloodshed that had occurred during the previous decades. Document 1 refers to the '*Nobility, Gentility...hath...been the Father of hellish horrid pride, arrogance, haughtiness, loftiness, murder, malice, of all manner of wickedness and impiety*'.

The Ranters appear to believe that religion in England is too 'top-down' and the unrest of the past decades have been due to the vigour of the established church- therefore linking to above paragraph. They don't seem to want organised religion but believe it should be more 'free-will'. Document 5 does show that they were anti-Catholic following a mocking scene of the Communion whereby they throw a cup of Ale into a corner and said '*there is the blood of Christ*'.

Author: Group 2

Posted date: Thursday, 12 March 2009 11:28:15 o'clock GMT

Although the points made about the Ranters here are valid and the inferences can be supported, the failure to look at the provenances has weakened your argument. For example a source that was written by an ex-Ranter is likely to have differing views from a source written by someone who belonged to the Ranters, by commenting on this you gain a better and deeper understanding of why they have made these comments or have these beliefs. Moreover acts such as blasphemy and infidelity were not so much acts of free will, but were a way of the Ranters being able to fight against the 'nobility' and government.

Author: Group 4

Posted date: Thursday, 12 March 2009 11:32:31 o'clock GMT

In response to your comment on the ex-Ranter in paragraph three it could be considered a vested interest in making the Ranters look bad rather than a change of view. the source does not say how he came to be an ex Ranter and it is possible that he was avoiding imprisonment as document 5 shows Ranters were being indicted therefore he could have been protecting himself.

Author: Group 1

Posted date: Thursday, 12 March 2009 11:36:29 o'clock GMT

Your interpretation of the third document, in that M.Stubs is exercising sarcasm in relation to the Ranters being 'dearest darlings' being judged in the 'throne of heaven' appears to overlook the fact that M.Stubs cites this quotation from a congregation of Ranters outside 'White Lion in Pelican Lane'. This may not be his own attempt at sarcasm but the genuine beliefs that the Ranters held, directly quoted.

Author: Group 11

Posted date: Friday, 13 March 2009 12:46:41 o'clock GMT

Having re-studied the document it looks as though this section can be considered ambiguous as in it can be interpreted in two different ways. We agree with you that it could be interpreted that what he is stating is a direct quote from what the Ranters were saying. But given the fact that there are no quotation marks, we feel as though he is summarising what the Ranters were saying in their congregation rather than directly quoting them. The final sentence in the paragraph can therefore be seen as Stub's overemphasis and satirical view on the matter.

Author: Group 24

Posted date: Tuesday, 17 March 2009 13:14:32 o'clock GMT

Perhaps it cannot be determined who the Ranters are because the name was simply a label for anyone or group who went against the religious and social beliefs of the time. There seems to be a fundamental lack of unity if this is indeed a particular or defined group. The fact that there are many sects/groups perhaps confirms this. Are the Ranters just a group of religious dissidents lumped together under one roof?

Appendix 9. The 2008-9 HVA: Academic Feedback, Stage 2, Question 1 (Example)

Author: Arthur Chapman

Posted date: Wednesday, 18 March 2009 00:32:12 o'clock GMT

Here is Eric Evans' feedback on Week 1, Question 1: use this to help you think how to approach Week 3, Question 1.

I thought the answers to this question really interesting. Thank you, as a collective, for the effort which went into them. I apologise for not directly citing each contribution. I'm trying to catch the overall arguments and approaches and respond to them. Be assured, if you aren't mentioned, it doesn't mean that you have been ignored!

The most commonly identified reasons you gave to explain historians' disagreements were: nature of sources studied; personal beliefs, attitudes (especially political and religious) and motivations; the educational and cultural background of the historian; different societal attitudes; changes in access to sources. There's a lot to be said about all of these and none is self-evidently wrong. Most of them are referred to, with useful indicative examples, in Group 12's post.

One interesting perspective which few threads mentioned concerned the sheer bulk of sources available for many (indeed, perhaps most?) historical topics. Group 13 noted that historians can't be expected to read all of the sources. There is just not enough time, and the budget may not stretch to the requisite travel needed to 'bottom' some topics. If that premise is accepted, then the Group 13's contention – that selection may be unduly influenced by 'personal opinions' – is worth thinking about. Historians may not often set out trying to be overly partial in their judgments, but their selection of sources may produce exactly this outcome

I liked the development of the idea about the historian's 'country of origin' which appeared in Group 1's post, because a lot of recent historiography concerning the role and development of Empires is strongly influenced by nationalist perspectives. You might want to reflect on whether historians writing about Empire from within the UK are these days excessively defensive about the role of the British Empire. Might it be over-influenced by 'context' in the light of evidence available? This is a very contentious topic.

I wondered whether the authors of the Group 2 post were being a little unkind to the 'subjectivity' of historians. You almost give the impression that historians 'choose' their sources on purely prejudicial considerations.

Take also your German example. Isn't it likely that some German historians will go against the grain of national sympathy, particularly when that 'sympathy' was refracted through a national socialist lens? Group 25's response to the original statement was interesting.

The debate about different time-periods and the impact of the 30 yr rule in Group 22's reply to Group 3 was interesting. It's certainly the case that new evidence which crops up when archives (of whichever country) are opened up can re-shape a debate.

The authors of the Group 4 post wonder whether historians who have lived through a particular period may have 'better insight'. This is possible, of course, but circumstances can alter perceptions. Some historians might have been too close to events to be objective as historians when they were strongly influenced (for example in response to a humanitarian crises) as observers. It's worth noting that there is a long tradition of history being written by key participants in events. Winston Churchill is one obvious example.

Group 5's response to Group 25's post touches on an area which perhaps is not as strongly represented in the postings as I expected. The example given is of the changing reputation of Feargus O'Connor. The now more generally favourable reputation he retrospectively enjoys could well be because historians *need* to debate in order to further their subject. Some will deliberately choose to run with an argument which is unfashionable, unpopular or even objectionable. In the case cited, however, an observation made by others – that the political sympathies of the revisionist writers may influence the judgment offered – is also pertinent. Neither Dorothy Thompson nor James Epstein is noted as sympathetic either to the current political right or to the assumed superiority of moral-force Chartism.

I was interested in the contributions made by folk who knew about the so-called Tudor Revolution in Government. This was a startling new interpretation offered by Geoffrey Elton (who, incidentally, came from an émigré Jewish family, though I haven't often heard of folk drawing on this information to explain why his interpretations ran as they did!) in the 1970s. Contributors to this debate tended to argue that the idea of a Revolution in Government in the reign of Henry VIII is now debunked, thanks to the later researches of David Starkey (a pupil of Elton's, incidentally) and many others. This caused me to wonder whether the next stage in this debate, if there is one, may witness attempts to rehabilitate Elton. He may have overplayed his hand by calling it a revolution, but the nature and extent of changes in government processes, especially perhaps in the 1530s, were cumulatively impressive, even startling. When does a lot of 'difference from what went before' amount to a 'revolution in government'. I develop this hypothetical bit of revisionism because I wanted to get across the idea

that historical debates, like many volcanoes, take a very long time to become genuinely 'extinct'. Perhaps the Tudor Revolution one is merely 'dormant'.

In taking the debate on why historians disagree further, you may find it useful to concentrate on one or two examples which you know about and try determine the *relative importance* of the factors you have identified and which I try to summarize in my second paragraph above. The factors chosen are likely to have different weight for different debates, but it's interesting to reflect on the factors which fuel a historical debate. Remember finally that historical debate and 'revisionism' (an overworked term, perhaps, but useful in context) is the very lifeblood of the subject. The phrase 'the definitive study of X' is, or should be for the lively historian, a contradiction in terms.

Thanks again for getting me to think afresh about these issues.

Appendix 10. The 2008-9 HVA: Academic Feedback, Stage 2, Question 2 (Example)

Author: Arthur Chapman

Posted date: Wednesday, 18 March 2009 00:39:19 o'clock GMT

Here is Robert Poole's feedback on Week 1, Question 2: use this to help you think how to approach Week 3, Question 2.

An interesting set of suggestions! It's easier to spot possible flaws or bias, harder to work out how to counter it. I notice three main types of answer to this one.

1. Assess the historian.
2. Assess the accounts.
3. Assess the evidence.

1. Assess the historian. Several posts emphasised identifying the beliefs and bias of the historian who wrote the piece. It certainly helps – as E H Carr once said, if you want to study history, first study the historian. But is this the most efficient way to go about things?

If you wanted to evaluate the results of two conflicting sets of medical tests, would you begin by looking at the personal background of the testers, or would you check their evidence? Surely the second? And if so, why should history be different? (Of course it may help to know that the successful drug test was run by the drug company and the unsuccessful one was independent, but this would raise your suspicions – it wouldn't settle the argument. I'm thinking here of the Guardian's 'Bad Science' column, which is an aid to clear thinking all round!)

Supposing you do find out that the historians have different backgrounds, how much would this tell you? One person in Group 9 explained that as an Indian s/he tended to support Indian nationalist views – a refreshing admission of possible bias which all historians would do well to follow! (And which tends to make me trust you...) Excuse me if I use this as an example – it's not a personal point. But are you a BJP (Hindu) nationalist, or a Congress party (pan-Indian) nationalist? Do you

therefore have opposing views on different phases of Indian nationalism, or on British rule, or how well independence was handled? And were you brought up with your views or did you form them on the basis of experience or observation? Would you be open to change your allegiance if you found out something new and important, or would you just carry on cheering for your side? Would you expect an historian to be more or less open to persuasion by evidence?

Group 27 mentioned David Irving. He is (as Group 8 put it) a historian who makes his views very clear, and thus perhaps plausible. But he was exposed in court as a systematic and deliberate falsifier of evidence related to the holocaust. This gives us an extreme case to argue from – once you know this you will certainly not trust anything he writes. But he also wrote the first detailed account of the bombing of Dresden in February 1945, and while his casualty estimates have proved to be too high his account is still not without value. His belief that Dresden was a war crime is shared by pacifists and allied advocates of just war, so background only gets you so far. And people who disagree about whether it was a war crime might vary in their estimates of casualty figures, and vice versa.

So: the background of a historian may prompt questioning but it can't be read off onto the detailed answers. There are closer, better ways of getting at the facts.

2. Assess the accounts. Comparing several accounts is an ideal. Someone with a wider knowledge is more likely to spot the holes in an argument, so this is in principle a good idea – but how many times have you read 2-3 other books to check whether the first one you read was accurate? (No – nor me). And what if there are two experts and they radically disagree on the basis of similar bodies of evidence?

A couple of people suggested that clarity of language and openness of argument are good indicators of academic honesty. I'm sure that's right – always suspect waffle! But again, we can be misled by clear and appealing writing – the socialist writer and novelist George Orwell was the master at this, but he wasn't always right.

One good indicator, I would suggest, is whether the historian really tests their ideas. A scientist who wants to find out whether (say) UV light causes cancer in mice must deliberately test their claim by seeing if infra-red light does the same, and whether UV light can be used and not cause cancer, and whether what is true of mice is true of jellyfish and lizards, and so on. Like testing a model of a bridge, you try to make it fail. If it survives, you build - or publish. Similarly, a historian who believes that people vote mainly on class lines (this could be Britain or India!) must also test the fit between voting and race, religion, gender, age and so on. If class is the best fit, we have a hypothesis.

3. Assess the evidence. This is the most direct route to knowledge, as several people pointed out. It may not solve everything, but it's a good place to start before we start looking for more distant factors. If all books came with a full appendix of evidence, this would be easy, but most don't (and can't). The historian is a writer, and writers must select, and we must trust them to select honestly. We can't easily check their selection, though we hope that other experts and reviewers will do that for us. But maybe we can notice the way a historian uses evidence.

Let me tell a classic academic story. The pro-Ranter historian here also argued that Protestantism assisted the rise of capitalism. He read and quoted prodigious numbers of protestant sermons which espoused capitalist values, and no-one could gainsay him. But then a critic came along and combed through many of the same sermons. He found that the same writers also made anti-capitalist points – the story was much less clear-cut. His explanation was this. Our historian had a card index bulging with cards labelled 'Protestantism and capitalism – links'. He didn't have a similar set of cards labelled 'Protestantism and capitalism – no links'. How would you collect null examples? And why? This was not deliberate suppression or falsification – it was just an example of how we tend to find what we are looking for. If you're looking for gold in the ground, this nugget-hunting technique works fine. But if you want to understand the distribution of gold, it's useless. History and metal-detecting are incompatible.

In conclusion, science (unlike say creationism) thrives on doubt and uncertainty – it doesn't peddle certainty. The same ought to be true of any discipline that claims to find out truths. The physicist Richard Feynman once wrote, 'if we want to solve a problem that we have never solved before, we must always leave the door to the unknown ajar'. Does your historian leave doors open?

Appendix 11. The 2008-9 HVA: Moderator Feedback, Stage 3 (Example)

Author: Arthur Chapman

Posted date: Saturday, 14 March 2009 23:46:29 o'clock GMT

Hello everyone,

Can I start by saying how impressive it is to see you deploying your historical thinking so effectively: well done for developing and sustaining arguments about a period that most of you have never studied!

There are excellent ideas in these posts and it is really good to see some arguments and debates developing through threads that unite a number of posts (for example, the debates sparked by Group 10 and Group 11). History thrives on debate and argument and debating the claims that the evidence can sustain is a really good way to hone and develop your historical skills. Could we try and develop some more debates like these?

Developing historical argument involves thinking about individual documents in the light of what we know about the period and also in the light of other documents. Many posts use the contextual material that you have been given to try to locate the sources in the past situation that they emerged from and most posts do an impressive job here, particularly given that this is a new period for most of you. Lots of really promising synthesis is happening here and many posts develop interesting interpretations of what the actions of the Ranters might have meant as a result (for example, Group 5's post). You will see that many of you anticipate themes that historians specialising in this period have developed when we come to the next stage of the HVA from this Wednesday onwards.

There is plenty of material in your posts that shows that you are using the documents as *evidence* – extracting information from the documents and using that information to develop and support conclusions about the Ranters. You are also careful to support your claims and conclusions with quotations from the documents and with references to documents. Excellent! Almost all posts are cross-referencing arguments made on the basis of one document with arguments developed from other documents and almost all posts weave individual conclusions together into overall arguments about the Ranters based on the collection of documents as a whole. This is excellent also. Group 1's post is a good example of this, as are the posts by Group 2, Group 11, Group 27, Group 30 and Group 5, for example. Well done!

Some posts are also careful to draw negative conclusions as well as positive ones. This is a very important move to make: it is important to be clear about what the documents *do not* allow us to conclude – Group 11 are very clear, for example, that it is difficult to be sure who the Ranters were. Group 27's reply to Group 10 is a good example of this kind of thinking also as is Group 27's post. I think that there is

more scope for many other posts to think negatively also. What can we say and what can we not say? Generally speaking, it is as important to consider that second question as it is to consider the first one.

Some posts do something very important also and develop conclusions of differing degrees of certainty. Often the documents that remain in the archive can support more than one conclusion. How sure can we be about the conclusions that we decide to draw? Can we entertain more than one conclusion equally or do some conclusions carry more weight than others? Sometimes we can be very sure of our ground – it is absolutely clear, for example, that we have more than one document that refers to Ranters. Often, however, we are dealing with probability rather than certainty and it is good to see that some posts are very careful to choose language that reflects this. Words like ‘perhaps’ and ‘probably’ have an important role to play in history as does the ‘however’. Group 27 and Group 30 are very careful to use language that reflects degrees of certainty and uncertainty and this is something that other posts develop also through the use of the verb ‘seem’. There is scope for more of this, however: how certain are you about the conclusions that you have drawn?

It is good to see, also, that some posts really debate what the documents might mean – a good example of this is the debate that follows Group 11’s post. This is a really good example of a productive debate – well done everyone. Well done Groups 1,2 and 4 for raising questions and well done Group 11 for considering the points that the other groups raise and also for developing your argument further in response. Well done Group 27 and Group 10 for raising questions about each other’s claims and also for responding to criticism and defending your arguments! Just what do the sources mean? Group 10 raise pertinent points about the ‘monster’ for example.

There is one clear issue that most of the posts could consider further – as well as thinking about what information we can extract from documents and about the conclusions that we can base on that information, it is very important to think about what the documents are. Group 2 raises this question, as a question about provenance, in their comments on Group 11. I think it is worth everyone thinking about this in greater detail. Some of these documents are described as works by Ranters and some of the documents are something else entirely. What kind of publication, for example, is the *Ranter’s Monster*? Is *The Ranter’s Declaration* actually a declaration on behalf of a group of Ranters? It might help to think about publications that exist now: what kind of contemporary publication might we compare the *Ranter’s Monster* to, for example? Does it look like *The Financial Times* or does it look more like *The News of The World*? How does thinking about the documents in this kind of way help us think about the conclusions that we can draw with certainty about the Ranters? I am not suggesting that you try and look up what these documents are – the idea is to work only with what you have in the collection. It is possible to draw some pretty firm conclusions about what the documents are from what they say and from the attribution and author details provided.

Apologies if I have not mentioned your group's post by name in my comments – I am conscious that my post is rather long already! To repeat the point that I started with: well done everyone, these are impressive posts!

Can we see if we can generate some more debate about these documents between now and the end of Tuesday when we move on to look at what historians have made of materials like this?

Can I also encourage those who have not posted yet to make their posts as soon as possible?

Regards

Arthur

Appendix 12. The 2008-9 HVA: Academic Feedback, Stage 7, Question 2 (Example)

HISTORY VIRTUAL ACADEMY⁶⁵

FEEDBACK ON RANTER QUESTION 2

E.J.EVANS

As with my comments on Question 1 for Weeks 4-5, I'll begin by making an observation on the focus of the question. The key word in this question is, for me, 'how'. You are asked to reach a judgment about which of two historians' accounts of the Ranters you would choose. You are being invited to make a judgment using 'only the information you have been given on this site'.

A number of you clearly felt that you hadn't been given enough information anyway! You can sense the frustration in the first posting from Group 12! I think there is more to be quarried from this exercise than is implied there and a later posting offers observations about the kinds of criteria we are looking for. These include: reference back to 'original sources' and 'independent study' of these; how the evidence, and how much evidence, has been selected; how the historian has evaluated evidence him or herself; quality of writing (a prompt which I offered in the earlier feedback).

There's also the *purpose* of different writers. As a number of you point out (see for example Group 11 & Group 4), what the two historians are trying to do is central to any judgment about preference. It does indeed 'depend on what aspect of the Ranters you're looking at' and 'the historical approach [taken by the two historians] is relevant'. It should be central to an informed judgment to appreciate that Historian B is looking for 'direct' information (and finding only hostile evidence) while Historian A is trying to infer from limited or opaque evidence. It's a shame, given the insight of Group 4, then the posting doesn't go on to reach an informed judgment based on what the two historians say.

It's not invalid also to note that subjective elements come into judgments like this. This approach is very neatly encapsulated by Group 12, which notes the huge difficulties involved in coming to a definitive judgment on a subject now 350 years old and on which relatively little evidence survives. 'Let's push the boat out and be adventurous', says this Posting. You get further imaginatively by trying the answer the questions in the mind of Historian A (largely: what kind of people were these Ranters and why did they seem to be so important for a brief period?) than by taking the negative view offered by Historian B (in effect: to begin with the assertion that 'as a group' – perhaps an important caveat which no one seems to have commented on – the Ranters 'are a fiction' and then pouring the coldest of cold water on the evidence which does survive). This approach is valid but the reasons for offering a personal view need to be made explicit alongside the acknowledgement that the two historians are trying to do different things.

⁶⁵ This feedback was posted as an attachment to an email to Group 1 from the moderator.

Group 13 offer an interesting view, which is that on the strength of argument and use of language, Historian B's work is the more persuasive. More might have been said to substantiate the view about the quality of argument. One other comment might also be made. This posting comes close to suggesting that the historians should have offered 'a broader understanding of the social perception of the Ranter faction in relation to other groups'. This might indeed have been useful. However, it is hardly valid to criticise historians for what they are NOT trying to do. Which observation leads me on to another point. Judgment on which interpretation to prefer should include information (or at least inference) about what the Historian was *trying* to do.

On my reading of the two extracts, Historian A is trying to explain Ranter beliefs, which is linked to an observation that specific religious beliefs need to be seen in the wider context of appreciation of the need for 'freedom from moral restraint'. Historian A also suggests why Ranter beliefs were so obnoxious to the authorities. Historian B's purpose is to challenge a strong historical orthodoxy. Historians believe that the Ranters did exist as a group, however briefly, and that they concerned the authorities. Historian B asserts that they didn't. In taking this line, Historian B leaves himself open to the logical difficulty of proving a negative. It's up to you to decide how successful he is in this attempt. You must, in making your decision, consider the evidence used: which largely boil down to the paucity and the partiality of the evidence. 'Now', Historian B, seems to be saying: 'Prove me wrong'. Now it's true that no 'Bumper Fun Book of Ranter Frolics' has yet come to light and it is, of course, for individuals to decide on the basis of their own readings. However, but I wonder how many of you would disagree that much of what Historian B writes is about casting doubt on the integrity of the sources. Is the 'talk' coming 'from the lips of writers condemning Ranterism' really to be dismissed as 'moral panic...collective fantasy and paranoia'? Is this much more than the slapping down of derogatory labels? Where is the evidence in support of 'paranoia'? You may well find this writing more convincing than I do. Some of you have praised Historian B for his greater 'depth of analysis' (Group 13) and for his 'persuasive use of language' (Group 11). So long as you have evidence to support your conclusions, then differences of opinion are not only fine. They are the lifeblood of a subject which depends on argument, debate – and conflicting interpretations.

I'll end by drawing your attention to Arthur Chapman's Posting (Thread 4, 26 March 09) and particularly to the last paragraph, in which Arthur urges you to re-examine the selection of evidence presented for Task 1 (Weeks 2 & 3). It's a shame that so little reference back has been attempted here. For example, you could have used Documents 1-6 there to test out the hypothesis of Historian B (Text 2) that the evidence for the existence of Ranterism comes 'almost without exception, from persons writing against 'Ranting''. You could also have cross-referred what you find in the second paragraph of Text 1 about atheism, everything coming 'from nature not from God' and about the denial of sin against what Ranters say in Documents 1 and 2. This approach would have afforded real scope for interrogating the arguments of historians against a cache of evidence which has been selected for you. There do, however, remain knotty problems concerning typicality and reliability but these Documents do enable you to get further than most postings here manage.

Appendix 13. HVA Evaluation Questionnaire 2008-9

The questionnaire used to evaluate the 2008-9 HVA was circulated by email to participating teachers and academics some weeks prior to deployment for approval and amendment and deployed, as a survey embedded in Blackboard, on the 4th of May.

HVA Evaluation Questionnaire

We are very interested in hearing your thoughts about the History Virtual Academy. This is an experimental idea and your views about (a) the value of the experience for you and (b) how it might be improved in future year will be very valuable indeed.

We will be very grateful, therefore, if you could please complete this short questionnaire.

Please answer the questions that follow as fully as possible.

Question 1

One aim of the HVA was to help students develop their thinking about historical evidence and about historical interpretations.

Has the HVA helped you develop your thinking about these two areas of history do you think?

Question 2

One of the aims of the HVA was to enable you to interact with academic historians.

Did you find this a useful and enjoyable experience?

Question 3

One of the aims of the HVA was to enable you to interact with students in other sixth forms.

Did you find this a useful and enjoyable experience?

Question 4

One of the aims of the HVA was to give you some insight into what history involves in higher education.

Did we succeed in doing this, do you think?

Question 5

Can you suggest any improvements to the HVA that might improve the experience for other students in future?