



Using Creative pedagogies, such as Ethics and Trusteeship and generating and exploring ideas, to allow Lower Prior Attaining students to access complex and challenging material about whether Britain should be ashamed of The British Empire.

Ellie Sullivan, Penryn College, June 2026

Background

This research took place with a Lower Prior Attainment group of Year 8 students at Penryn College. Having already taught the group for one half-term, I wanted to see if the group could access an ethical question that needed specific factual historical knowledge to respond in a meaningful way. This Big Enquiry Question is part of the History Year 8 Scheme of Work and I wanted this group to tackle this important question: "should Britain be ashamed of its colonial past?". I was keen to gain the insight of a Teaching Assistant who works with the group and has been with them for many subjects, including several Humanities units in Year 7 and 8.

Research Question: Does Creative pedagogy enable DAP [disadvantaged pupils] and LPA [lower prior attainment] students to respond to a complex ethical question?

What I did

I took the mainstream Scheme of Work for Year 8 and produced a series of lessons which aimed for the same outcomes in terms of empowering students to be immersed, ask questions and ultimately make judgement calls as young Historians, but I used Creative ideas to make each individual lesson accessible to these students. Each lesson worked to embed clear routines, such as using a 'pom pom jar' to reward excellent participation, having tasks listed on the board for a named student to tick off, and clear routines about how we discussed ideas as a class to enable maximum engagement. The discussion routine is a format where the class are given three 'lives' on the board and they pass the conversation from person to person, saying whether they want to build on someone's point, question it or disagree. The students can 'freeze the teacher out' and take full control as the teacher must put their hand up if they want to speak. A student removes a 'life' if anyone calls out. Students are rewarded for listening and tracking as well as talking and there is no sanction for lives being lost- we are simply practising how to have a constructive conversation where all are honing ideas.

Data was collected using photos of students' work, teacher journal reflections before and after the project, a recorded class discussion, a recorded student and staff (TA) reflection on the unit, photos of the whiteboard during lessons and a series of lesson PowerPoints demonstrating my approach.

What I found out

- Students felt **empowered** by being asked for a judgement on whether Britain should be ashamed, rather than simply 'learning about' the topic or others' views. One student told me she had discussed this issue at home. Several students spoke passionately about their judgement and about injustice (**issues that matter**), both in the recorded class discussion and in the recorded student reflection.
- Students were able to **hone and develop an idea over time**. As every lesson built on the overall unit question: "Should Britain be ashamed of its colonial past?", as students learnt new factual information, their discussions added to their gradually forming conclusions.
- The creative pedagogies and routines helped to provide a foundation and framework for student engagement and effective **dialogue and collaboration**.
- By far and away the biggest factor in terms of 'hooking' student imagination engagement, though, was the use of **stories**. I discovered early on that when students could pin their understanding on a personal story, involving real people, they were gripped. For example, the true story of The Zong ship carrying enslaved people on The Middle Passage.

This is supported by my reading of Daniel Willingham **Why students don't like school (p. 52)**:

The Power of Stories

The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories--so much so that psychologists sometimes refer to stories as "psychologically privileged," meaning that they are treated differently in memory than other types of material. I'm going to suggest that organizing a lesson plan like a story is an effective way to help students comprehend and remember. It also happens to be the organizing



principle used by the four teachers I described. The way in which each of them related emotionally to their students was very different, but the way they got their students to think about the meaning of material was identical.

- As a teacher, I found it hugely rewarding to see students engaging so thoughtfully and maturely with this question. I also found their response to injustice moving. I never had to remind a single student to talk about ‘enslaved people’ (rather than ‘slaves’) as they were so concerned to get this right and be respectful.
- The TA I interviewed said about the Creative classroom routines such as the pom pom jar: “The students love it”. She also noted that this group are really enjoying Humanities and there is one student who was school refusing last year in part due to Humanities, who now says it’s her favourite subject.

What next?

- Plan units of work with an overall ‘Big Enquiry Question’, so students can **hone and develop** their ideas over time.
- For other units of work with a similar group, experiment with more play (especially when remembering stories). There were limitations to being able to do this for this unit as play and acting about the slave trade would be completely inappropriate.
- Continue to use creative pedagogies and clear, repeated routines (especially for oracy), that students find fun and rewarding. Celebrate engagement and **exploration of ideas**, as well as behaviour.
- Wherever possible and relevant (not arbitrarily), use **personal stories** in History and RE as hooks for students to build their knowledge on, as well as engaging their empathy and compassion.
- Think about whether lessons can be **structured** with elements of a narrative (i.e. equilibrium, disruption, repair and new equilibrium), as the brain naturally responds to narratives.

Links

Daniel T Willingham **Why students don’t like school** [why-dont-students-like-school](https://www.danielwillingham.com/why-dont-students-like-school/)