



## The problem page for history mentors

This feature of *Teaching History* is designed to build critical, informed debate about the character of teacher training, teacher education and professional development. It is also designed to offer practical help to all involved in training new history teachers. Each issue presents a situation in initial teacher education/training with an emphasis upon a particular, history-specific issue.

Mentors or others involved in the training of student history teachers are invited to be the agony aunts.

### This issue's problem:

Eleanor Franks doesn't really understand her students' frames of reference and the difficulties that many of them have in making sense of the particular historical phenomena she is teaching them about

Eleanor Franks, a well-qualified graduate with a first class degree in history, has struggled to pitch lessons effectively for the different classes that she has been working with. Her own historical knowledge is very strong and her lessons generally appear to be well planned with appropriate objectives and activities that are well matched to them. However, the coherence of her planning often seems to be let down by her failure to recognise what her students currently know or to appreciate how they might be thinking, especially when they begin to engage with a new topic. She has consistently struggled to identify where particular classes are likely to need help, for example, in drawing inferences or in developing a line of argument that appears obvious to her.

Initially her mentor, Louis, assumed that the problem was associated with Eleanor's own experience of selective education and that she just needed to gain more experience of a more diverse student cohort. Louis invested quite a lot of time in helping her to identify vocabulary in sources and other materials with which the students might struggle – a process that certainly helped to ensure that activities were more accessible. But as Eleanor has made progress and sought to develop a more independent approach to planning, related problems have arisen. Often the issue is not really one of specific vocabulary but a failure to think through the range of prior knowledge on which the new learning for a particular lesson depends. More serious perhaps, is a tendency for Eleanor to ignore signs that the students are struggling. She doesn't seem to pick up on the confusion implied by their attempts to answer some of her questions (or indeed by their unwillingness to attempt to do so). While she is aware that things are not really going to plan, she struggles in the heat of the moment and subsequently to identify the root of the problem. Once the difficulty is pointed out to her, she recognises the issue, but Louis is unsure how he can help her both to identify potential problems *before* the lesson and to use what students actually say and do *within* the lesson to diagnose particular stumbling blocks and guide the students around them.

## An extract from the mentor's observation notes on a recent Year 8 lesson about the Reformation

### Target(s) for development arising from the lesson

#### TS2 Promote good progress and outcomes by pupils

The main issue that I think you have to keep focusing on is the need to 'plan teaching to build on pupils' capabilities and prior knowledge' – which is strongly linked to your own 'knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn'.

As we discussed, there seemed to be two main difficulties in the lesson, but they are both connected to the same issue. In one respect – the framing of your question about why people might be prepared to die for their religious beliefs – you tended to *under-estimate* the students' prior learning and to neglect relevant experience on which they might draw. You assumed both that they had no knowledge of the importance of religion in the Middle Ages and that they all shared your own secular world view. In another – your assumptions that they could *easily* link features of church decoration to a Catholic or Protestant perspective – you didn't take into account the specific knowledge that they would actually need about some of the underlying differences in belief (i.e. doctrine) about how people could be 'saved'.

It's obviously difficult picking up on a topic like the Reformation when you don't have a detailed knowledge of what the students have learned about religious belief and the Church in the Middle Ages – and I'm very sorry that John doesn't seem to have encouraged you to look at the Year 7 scheme of work – but you ought to approach *any* new topic with a question about where students will have encountered relevant ideas before so that you can help to tune them back in to what's going on (and particularly to prevailing attitudes, beliefs and assumptions) and to make connections. It's also important to think about students' *own* beliefs and assumptions and the kinds of ideas that they will be familiar with from their experiences in the present. How might these ideas be helpful to them – again giving you a point of connection – and how might they create barriers for them if the students simply transfer values and beliefs from the present back into the past?

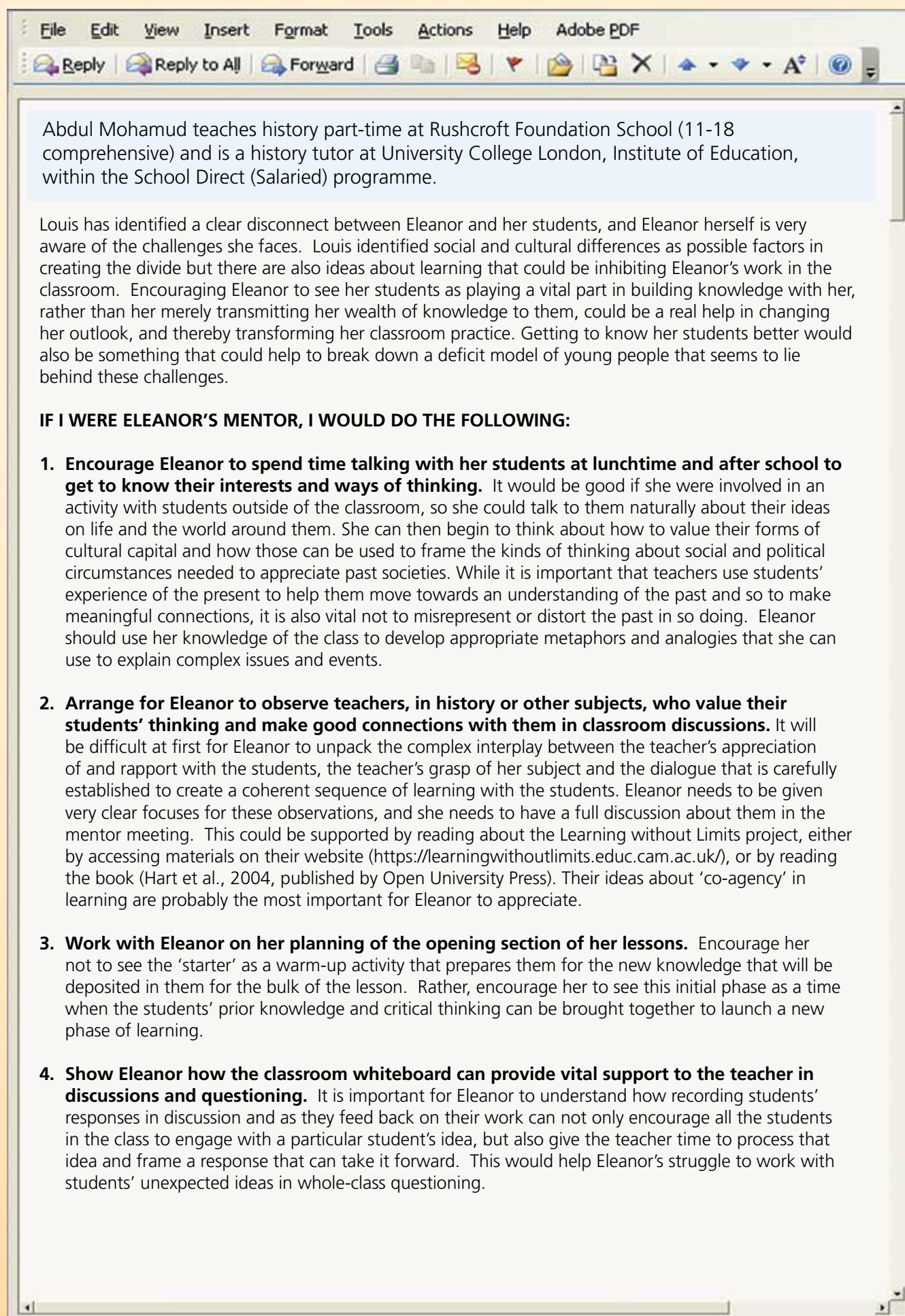
## An email from the regular Year 9 class teacher

Hi Eleanor,

Sorry that I got caught up at lunchtime and couldn't talk about the lesson then, but have you got a few minutes at the end of school today – especially to think about the next few lessons with Year 9 going forward? I know you've got a good sense of the sequence that you want to follow in explaining how Hitler achieved power within Germany, but I'm a bit worried after last lesson about how well the students have actually grasped the economic circumstances of the Wall Street Crash and its aftermath. After listening in to the students' discussions as they did the card sort and trying to encourage them to explain their choices, I've got some concerns about what they've really grasped either about the idea of a stock market 'crash' or about an economic 'depression'. Samir and Jason, for example, seemed to have seized on the reference to suicides in America as a way of making sense of the idea of the 'depression'. While that allowed them to talk about people being in despair and looking for someone who gave them hope, I'm not sure they have any real grasp of the economic chain of events. I'm also a bit alarmed that the discussion about people being attracted to extremist parties (of the right and left) has got mixed up in some students' thinking with current concerns about religious extremists. These are complex ideas, I know, but I think we need to take stock and work out how we might help to clarify some of the issues and help all of the students make more sense of the historical context.

## An extract from Eleanor's weekly reflection

My main target going forward has to be about checking on students' understanding and trying to make better links to their existing knowledge when introducing new ideas (TS2). The need to do this seems really obvious – but I know I easily lose sight of it when I'm planning. I've been trying to focus so hard on getting the question and objectives clear and making sure that there is a logical flow. I'm also really struggling with how to get feedback from students in ways that I can actually handle. I plan the questions that I'm going to ask, but then when I get an answer that doesn't make sense or that I don't really understand, I get into a panic about how to respond. There's so much going on, with 28 or 30 students and I'm always worried that if I begin following up on their suggestions (a) I'll get confused and (b) behaviour problems will develop.



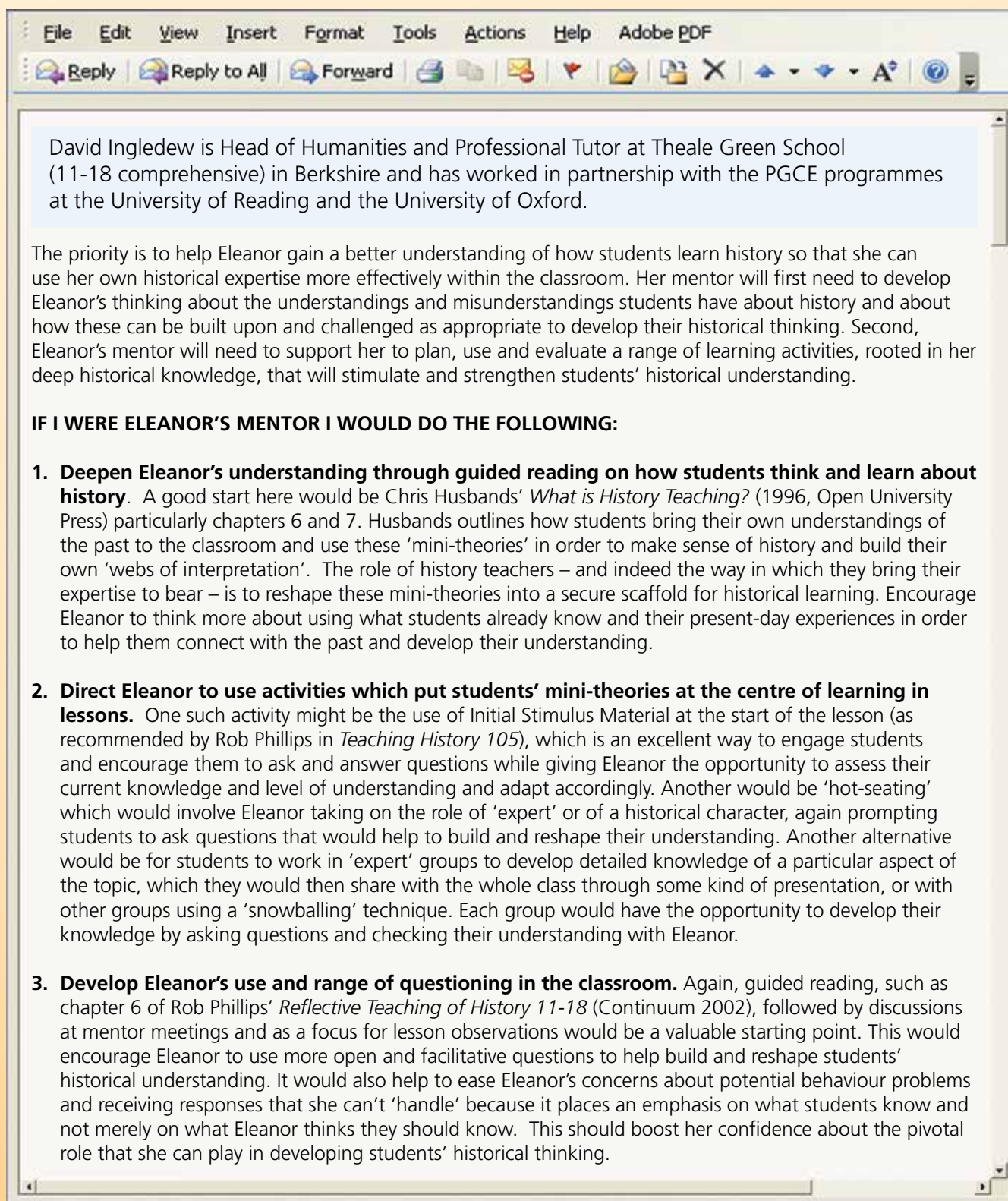
The screenshot shows an email client window with a menu bar (File, Edit, View, Insert, Format, Tools, Actions, Help, Adobe PDF) and a toolbar with icons for Reply, Reply to All, Forward, and other functions. The email content is as follows:

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Louis has identified a clear disconnect between Eleanor and her students, and Eleanor herself is very aware of the challenges she faces. Louis identified social and cultural differences as possible factors in creating the divide but there are also ideas about learning that could be inhibiting Eleanor's work in the classroom. Encouraging Eleanor to see her students as playing a vital part in building knowledge with her, rather than her merely transmitting her wealth of knowledge to them, could be a real help in changing her outlook, and thereby transforming her classroom practice. Getting to know her students better would also be something that could help to break down a deficit model of young people that seems to lie behind these challenges.

**IF I WERE ELEANOR'S MENTOR, I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:**

- 1. Encourage Eleanor to spend time talking with her students at lunchtime and after school to get to know their interests and ways of thinking.** It would be good if she were involved in an activity with students outside of the classroom, so she could talk to them naturally about their ideas on life and the world around them. She can then begin to think about how to value their forms of cultural capital and how those can be used to frame the kinds of thinking about social and political circumstances needed to appreciate past societies. While it is important that teachers use students' experience of the present to help them move towards an understanding of the past and so to make meaningful connections, it is also vital not to misrepresent or distort the past in so doing. Eleanor should use her knowledge of the class to develop appropriate metaphors and analogies that she can use to explain complex issues and events.
- 2. Arrange for Eleanor to observe teachers, in history or other subjects, who value their students' thinking and make good connections with them in classroom discussions.** It will be difficult at first for Eleanor to unpack the complex interplay between the teacher's appreciation of and rapport with the students, the teacher's grasp of her subject and the dialogue that is carefully established to create a coherent sequence of learning with the students. Eleanor needs to be given very clear focuses for these observations, and she needs to have a full discussion about them in the mentor meeting. This could be supported by reading about the Learning without Limits project, either by accessing materials on their website (<https://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/>), or by reading the book (Hart et al., 2004, published by Open University Press). Their ideas about 'co-agency' in learning are probably the most important for Eleanor to appreciate.
- 3. Work with Eleanor on her planning of the opening section of her lessons.** Encourage her not to see the 'starter' as a warm-up activity that prepares them for the new knowledge that will be deposited in them for the bulk of the lesson. Rather, encourage her to see this initial phase as a time when the students' prior knowledge and critical thinking can be brought together to launch a new phase of learning.
- 4. Show Eleanor how the classroom whiteboard can provide vital support to the teacher in discussions and questioning.** It is important for Eleanor to understand how recording students' responses in discussion and as they feed back on their work can not only encourage all the students in the class to engage with a particular student's idea, but also give the teacher time to process that idea and frame a response that can take it forward. This would help Eleanor's struggle to work with students' unexpected ideas in whole-class questioning.



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The priority is to help Eleanor gain a better understanding of how students learn history so that she can use her own historical expertise more effectively within the classroom. Her mentor will first need to develop Eleanor's thinking about the understandings and misunderstandings students have about history and about how these can be built upon and challenged as appropriate to develop their historical thinking. Second, Eleanor's mentor will need to support her to plan, use and evaluate a range of learning activities, rooted in her deep historical knowledge, that will stimulate and strengthen students' historical understanding.

#### IF I WERE ELEANOR'S MENTOR I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:

- 1. Deepen Eleanor's understanding through guided reading on how students think and learn about history.** A good start here would be Chris Husbands' *What is History Teaching?* (1996, Open University Press) particularly chapters 6 and 7. Husbands outlines how students bring their own understandings of the past to the classroom and use these 'mini-theories' in order to make sense of history and build their own 'webs of interpretation'. The role of history teachers – and indeed the way in which they bring their expertise to bear – is to reshape these mini-theories into a secure scaffold for historical learning. Encourage Eleanor to think more about using what students already know and their present-day experiences in order to help them connect with the past and develop their understanding.
- 2. Direct Eleanor to use activities which put students' mini-theories at the centre of learning in lessons.** One such activity might be the use of Initial Stimulus Material at the start of the lesson (as recommended by Rob Phillips in *Teaching History 105*), which is an excellent way to engage students and encourage them to ask and answer questions while giving Eleanor the opportunity to assess their current knowledge and level of understanding and adapt accordingly. Another would be 'hot-seating' which would involve Eleanor taking on the role of 'expert' or of a historical character, again prompting students to ask questions that would help to build and reshape their understanding. Another alternative would be for students to work in 'expert' groups to develop detailed knowledge of a particular aspect of the topic, which they would then share with the whole class through some kind of presentation, or with other groups using a 'snowballing' technique. Each group would have the opportunity to develop their knowledge by asking questions and checking their understanding with Eleanor.
- 3. Develop Eleanor's use and range of questioning in the classroom.** Again, guided reading, such as chapter 6 of Rob Phillips' *Reflective Teaching of History 11-18* (Continuum 2002), followed by discussions at mentor meetings and as a focus for lesson observations would be a valuable starting point. This would encourage Eleanor to use more open and facilitative questions to help build and reshape students' historical understanding. It would also help to ease Eleanor's concerns about potential behaviour problems and receiving responses that she can't 'handle' because it places an emphasis on what students know and not merely on what Eleanor thinks they should know. This should boost her confidence about the pivotal role that she can play in developing students' historical thinking.

## Next issue's problem:

Robert Nivelle is worried that he is not gaining enough experience of planning and teaching exam classes. For details of his mentor's problem, email: [martin.hoare@history.org.uk](mailto:martin.hoare@history.org.uk)

Responses are invited from mentors and trainers of trainee history teachers.

Responses for the September edition must be received by 21 July 2017

Eleanor and Robert are both fictional characters. Thanks to Katharine Burn, Department of Education, University of Oxford, for devising the Move Me On problem.