

**Title:** Don't take the goat track up the mountain: Developing undergraduates' historical thinking

**Abstract:** This paper utilises an action research approach to investigate the impact of an introductory module on first year undergraduates' skills in historical enquiry. An online learning platform (Blackboard) was created to stimulate the historical thinking process, to encourage students to become more critical in their approach to historical data, and to facilitate a smoother transition into higher education. The platform was designed to run concurrently with the regular modules of the first year of a history degree and involved two higher education institutions. The module was used to develop analytical skills and to challenge misconceptions of the past. For the research, the module ran for two iterations (one per year). The platform required students to upload entries to a diary, to engage with the online material – videos, articles, links to external sites and so on – and to post on several discussion boards. Both lecturers and postgraduate students responded to the posts to encourage a deeper engagement in historical thinking, with postgraduate students acting as intermediate agents between the lecturers and the undergraduates. Data are thus drawn from a variety of sources, including focus groups with the undergraduates, interviews with the postgraduates and lecturers, and engagement data from Blackboard, such as the discussion boards, the diary entries and usage statistics.

Lecturers' and postgraduates' perceptions suggest that those students who engaged with the platform illustrated improved historical thinking skills and thus they surmised that the module had greatly impacted on the students' understanding. However, it was found that running such a platform on a non-compulsory basis led to poor engagement. Thus, drawing on pedagogical research, the second iteration was integrated more heavily into the compulsory modules and students were signposted to the introductory module as a way of improving their historical thinking skills and to help them become more effective historians.

**Dr David Allan**  
**Research Fellow**  
**Edge Hill University**