

UNIT 14 Why does it Matter? Why should we care?

Historical Significance¹

What is historical significance? Why does it matter? Why should we care?

Historical significance is the process used to evaluate what was significant about selected events, people, and developments in the past. Historians use different sets of criteria to help them make judgements about significance.

Significance has been called the forgotten concept in history, no doubt because it can be challenging for both teacher and students.

“Teachers often tell students what is important instead of asking them to consider what is significant. The key to understanding significance is to understand the distinction between teaching significant history, and asking students to make judgements about significance.”

Matthew Bradshaw (Teaching History 2004)

There are a number of criteria that historians' use that can be applied to establish the significance of events.

- Relevance to people living at the time
- Resonance to people's experience, beliefs or situations at the time
- Relevance to an increased understanding of the present-day
- Remarked on by people at the time and since
- Remembered within the collective memory of a group
- Revealing of some other aspect of the past
- Results that have consequences for the future
- Durability – for how long people's lives were affected
- Quantity – how many lives were affected
- Profundity – how deeply people's lives were affected

Students could use sources on a topic better understand the 'short term' and 'long term' impact or significance of their topic. Did their topic have the same impact/significance when

¹ Excerpted from: Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). *Historical Significance. Facing the Past, Shaping the Future.* Available at: <https://facingthepastshapingthefuture.com/teacher-guidance/teaching-learning-strategies/history/historical-significance/>. Accessed 29 June 2021

it occurred as it does now? The students could apply the following criteria to help them to make their judgments:

Remarkable: The event was remarked on by people at the time or since

Remembered: The event/development was important at some stage within the collective memory of a group or groups

Resonant: People like to make analogies with it; it is possible to connect with experiences, beliefs or attitudes across time and place

Resulting in Change: It had consequences for the future

Revealing: Some other aspects of the past

Teaching Historical Significance

When teaching historical significance teachers need to;

- Understand that the significance of some past events may be contested in their school situation.
- Appreciate that what can make chosen events and individuals most significant is the impact they have on the way we live today.
- Understand that significance is attributed to events and individuals at the time and subsequently.

The Critical Thinking Consortium has an informative lesson entitled "[Learning about Historical Significance](#)" that you might find helpful.

NHD Quick Tips - "[What is historical significance?](#)" video

