Was it really the straw that broke the camel's back?

Developing historical thinking using analogy and fictional story

Dr Arthur Chapman, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London

1. Getting better at history

How can we help our students get better in history? Whatever else the answer involves, it is likely to involve helping them develop:

- their substantive knowledge about the past (their knowledge of the 'facts', for example);
- their procedural knowledge of how history works as a way of making sense of the world (their understanding of how historical explanation works, for example); and
- their ability to argue and organise their ideas in response to historical questions (their ability to structure convincing answers to 'Why?' questions, for example).[1]

What role if any, in developing these things, might using analogies, and working with a fictional story play? Twenty years ago, I published an article that explored that question.[2]


2. The revenant camel

The article reported a teaching strategy developed in response to a student's reaction to my teaching. I had developed what seemed to me to be a robust analytical scheme of explanatory concepts – something that would develop my students' procedural knowledge of how history works and their argumentative skill (see Figure 1). My explanation of the concepts to my students fell flat, however – the concepts were too abstract, and my students lacked a way to get a clear sense of what they meant in practice. They only managed to make sense with these concepts when a member of my class proposed an analogy –

---

[1] Arthur Chapman, "Introduction: Historical Knowledge and the 'Knowledge Turn,'" in *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful Knowledge and the Powers of Knowledge*, ed. Arthur Chapman (London: UCL Press, 2021), 1–31, https://www.uclpress.co.uk/collections/education/products/130698.

[2] Arthur Chapman, "Camels, Diamonds and Counterfactuals: A Model for Teaching Causal Reasoning," *Teaching History*, no. 112 (2003): 46–53.

with the children's game *Buckaroo* in which a toy mule 'bucks' in response to various items being loaded onto an uneven saddle on the mule's back. The student linked the concepts I had been explaining – e.g., trigger causes – to elements of *Buckaroo*.

Figure 1. Cause categories[3]
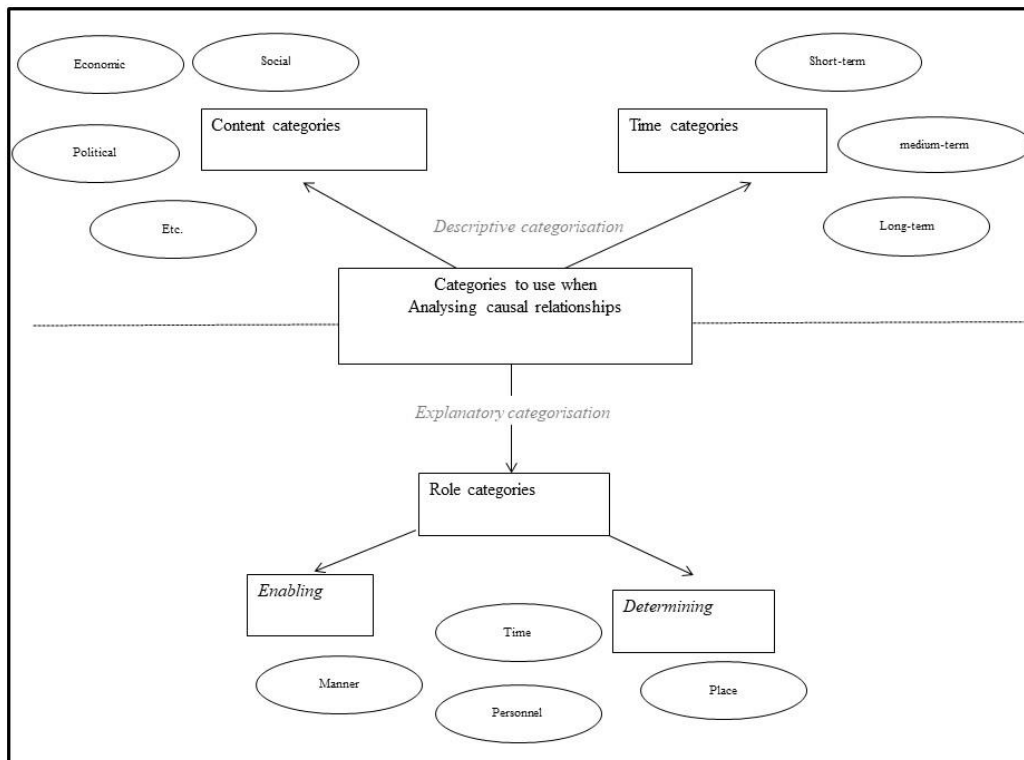
After the class, I developed my own analogy – a story based on the proverbial phrase 'the straw that broke the camel's back' to help develop my students thinking further. The idea was for my students to explore a number of questions using the concepts I had explained, including: 'Why did the camel's back break?', 'What role did the straw play in causing this outcome?', and 'What other factors were involved and what was their relative importance?' Once they had done that, I reasoned, we could transfer the learning to arguments about historical – rather than fictional – problems.
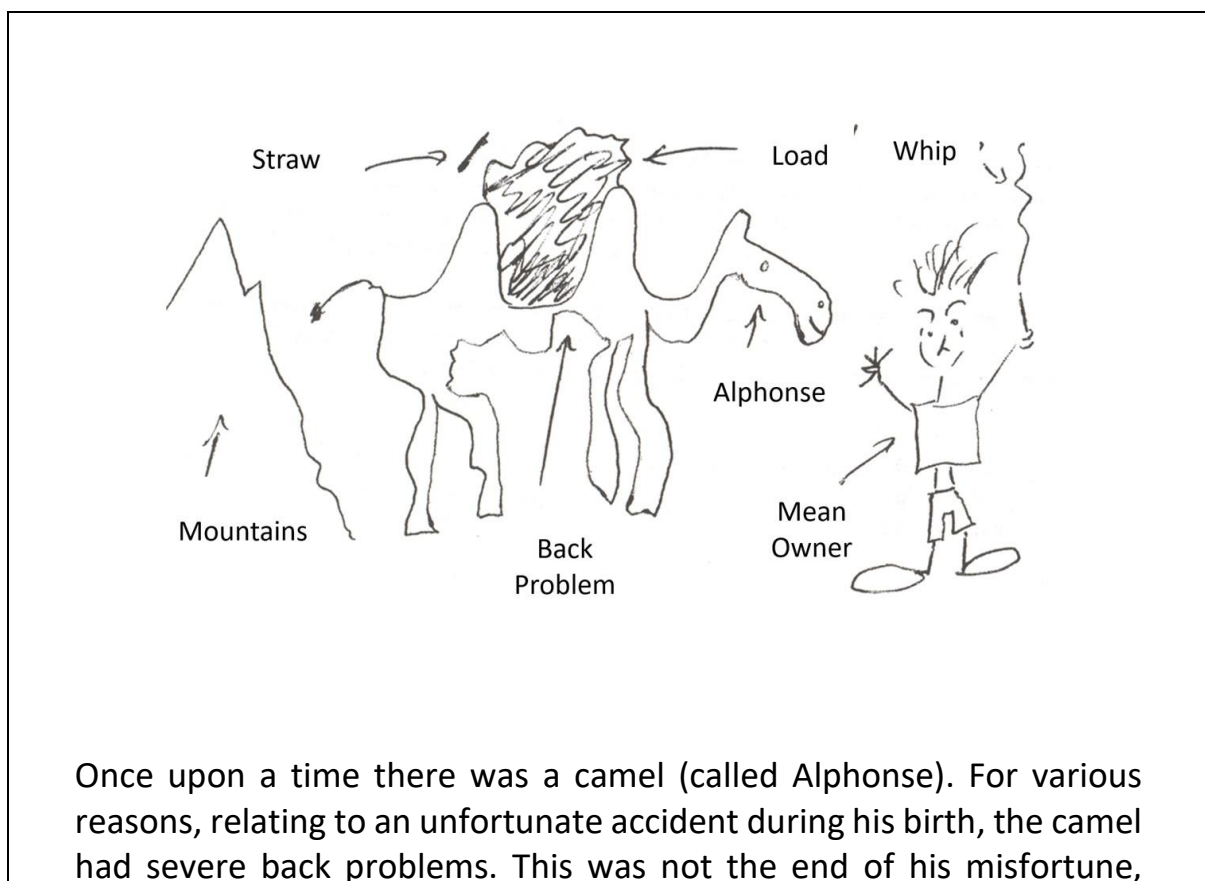
---

[3] Reproduced from Arthur Chapman 'Causal Explanation'. In Ian Davies (ed) *Debates in History Teaching.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp.100-102.

The story seemed to help my students and I decided to write up the strategy for *Teaching History* – the UK Historical Association's journal for teachers. I'm delighted to say that the strategy proved useful to other teachers also and that they began to adapt and improve it in their own classrooms, publishing these improvements in many cases. There are now other English and American versions of the story, and the story has been translated and republished in a number of contexts, including Taiwan and Brazil.[4] What is this strategy and what explains its take-up in so many contexts?

3. The terrible tale of Alphonse the camel and Frank the camel killer

The original story – which has been improved and developed – is reproduced below (see Figure 2). It is also now available as an animation on YouTube.[5]

Figure 2. The terrible tale of Alphonse the camel and Frank the camel killer[6]

Once upon a time there was a camel (called Alphonse). For various reasons, relating to an unfortunate accident during his birth, the camel had severe back problems. This was not the end of his misfortune,

---

[4] I review many of these new versions of the story and link to them on this blog page:
https://thecamelsback.org/publications/
[5] https://youtu.be/J3wHpw7V2gw
[6] Adapted from Arthur Chapman, "Camels, Diamonds and Counterfactuals: A Model for Teaching Causal Reasoning," *Teaching History*, no. 112 (2003): 46–53.

however, because he had an evil exploitative owner, called Frank the Camel Killer, who regularly overloaded his camels prior to taking them on gruelling and totally unnecessary round trips up and down mountains on his way to deliver goods to his customers. These customers, shockingly, were completely indifferent to these frequent and gross violations of the rights of camels and found Frank and his antics at least vaguely endearing.

Well, one Friday Frank had just finished loading-up Alphonse and his poor exploited fellow creatures for yet another gruelling and totally unnecessary round trip up and down the mountains. He had piled and piled and piled up the goods onto Alphonse's back and was taking a break and reflecting smugly on his handiwork, chewing a straw. On a whim he decided to add the bedraggled straw he had been chewing to Alphonse's load. Alphonse groaned obligingly. He eyed his owner with disgust. He keeled over and died of radical and irreversible back collapse.

4. What makes a good causal analysis

I developed the concepts I wanted students to use to analyze causes with the stimulus of popular works by prominent historians and guidance from my exam provider on what they were expecting.[7] This process of reflection has continued since and resulted in the categories in Figure 1.

For years, I had asked students to label causes descriptively, as first, social/economic/cultural/political in nature, and second, in terms of the timescale that they worked over, as operating over the long-/medium- or short-term causes. I realized, as a result of reading and reflection, that this was not adequate. Descriptive labelling could help a student characterize the reasons why something happened, but alone, it couldn't help them prioritize those various reasons, or show how they fitted together to bring about an outcome. To do that, I reasoned, students needed to be able to identify the

---

[7] Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997); Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Penguin, 2011).

**role** played by each reason in bringing about a particular outcome. Some causes may have helped **enable** the outcome, helping to generate a difficult situation, acting, for example, as 'underlying' causes of the outcome or as its 'preconditions.' Other factors may have helped **determine** various aspects of the situation – determining when the outcome we are trying to explain happened, determining how it happened (e.g., its speed), determining who was involved, or determining the character of the outcome (e.g., helping to explain why events were so violent, for example).

James Woodcock, who developed my strategy further in a 2005 _Teaching History_ article added a linguistic dimension to the analysis of roles – by teaching students phrases that they could use to help them think about the roles causes played.[8] Examples might include phrases such as 'exacerbated the problem,' 'deepened the crisis,' 'triggered the outcome' and so on.

Vocabularies to analyse causal role with[9]

Some useful verbs and phrases to help identify what causes 'do'		
Trigger	Speed up	Slow down
Deepen	Make worse	Prevent
Spark	Increase	Diminish

5. Developing explanation and argument by analyzing the Alphonse story

I developed a number of tasks using the story. One was competitive close reading to identify and list the causes of Alphonse's death. This involved reading the story literally (what it says) and between the lines (what is implied about the events and their context in the narrative). This is competitive in the sense that students vie with each other to produce more exhaustive lists of 'factors.' Some things are obvious and can simply be 'cut and paste' from the story (e.g., a straw was added to his load at a particular moment). Some

---

[8] J. Woodcock, "Does the Linguistic Release the Conceptual? Helping Year 10 to Improve Their Causal Reasoning," _Teaching History_ 119 (2005): 5–14.
[9] Inspired by James Woodcock's 2005 article.

possible causes can be inferred but are not stated (e.g., it seems that Frank had killed before – hence his name – and there was a culture in this context that tolerated and perhaps even encouraged camel-abuse).

Once students had their lists of causes, they were asked to draw up tables in which they identified an effect for every cause – this required them to reflect in depth on the story again (just as the close reading had) and to build a model in their minds of the context and of how all the story elements fitted together. They had to ask, 'How does this element of the story connect to the others to bring about the outcome?'

Once they had their list we used counter-factual reasoning and visual models to help students think about the relative importance of causes. Finally, students were tasked to write-up an analysis of the story – a mini-essay. Counter-factual analysis involved the students asking, 'What if?' questions. Having linked consequences to causes in their grids they were now asked to consider 'What would have happened if' one of other of the causes that they had identified was imagined away. What if, for example, there had been no mountains? Asking questions like these helped reduce the list of causes to a manageable number and also helped students continue to think about how various aspects of the narrative fitted together to bring about the result (Alphonse's death one Friday). Thinking counter-factually is thinking conditionally – in terms of 'if… then…' sentences. This is the kind of language, of course, that helps students think about causes ('because of X, Y happened…' / 'without Y, X would not have been possible').

I used a diamond nine (see Figure 3) to help students model relative importance. The idea is to write causes on each of the smaller diamonds (cut out so that they can be moved around) and to develop arguments in groups about how they all fitted together, identifying the causes to place at the top of the diamond (the most important factors) and those to place at the bottom (least important) or in the middle.

Figure 3. A blank Diamond 9
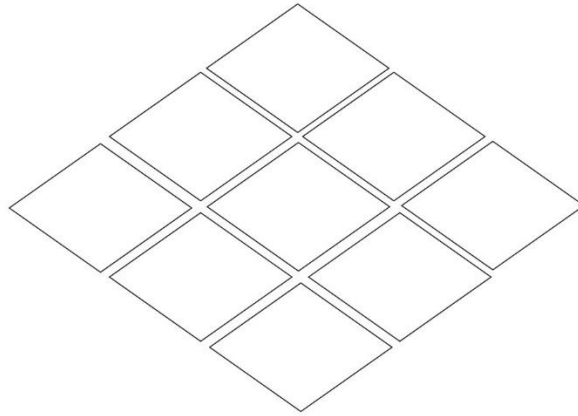
Once the lesson working with the Alphonse story was complete, further lessons followed on similar but real causal problems – for example, to borrow from Woodcock, the question about the World War I 'Did two bullets really cause twenty million deaths?' The thinking being that students could transfer what they had learned about close reading, conceptualization, language (and so on) from the fictional context to a real historical one.

6. Coda

As I have said, this story has been adopted and adapted by large numbers of teachers in the UK, the US and elsewhere and it has been improved and developed in the process. It has also been used in research projects aiming to identify the effectiveness of the strategies that I have explained.[10] I am currently evaluating a control and intervention group study in an English school that aims to look systematically at the uses and limitations of using this non-historical analogy.

I have a number of hunches about why the strategy has proved enduringly popular over the last 20 years. One is this: it allows students to learn analytical strategies and to develop their understanding of how historical explanations work, whilst exploring content where everyone knows everything (the story is the story – there is no further information needed). The exercise is also intended to be humorous and the intention there is to help students relax and to encourage them not to worry about 'getting things right.' There are also

---

[10] Gerhard L. Stoel, Jannet P. van Drie, and Carla A. M. van Boxtel, "Teaching towards Historical Expertise: Developing a Pedagogy for Fostering Causal Reasoning in History," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 47, no. 1 (2015): 49–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.968212.

good reasons why we might expect the strategy to appeal – it helps build strategy knowledge and meta-cognition, for example.

The most important insight I have gained through the experience of developing it is into the power of teacher collaboration. It was truly inspiring to see other teachers in different contexts take up Alphonse and improve upon him. Education is best advanced, it seems to me, by teachers collaborating in communities of practice to improve their practice and their students' learning experiences and thinking.

Further information about the strategy – including links to articles and to two *Teachers TV* programmes showcasing a use of the Alphonse story - can be found at http://thecamelsback.org.

Dr Arthur Chapman is Associate Professor in History Education at University College, London. He was a history teacher for 12 years before moving to university teaching in 2005.