

Developing Enquiry Skills

This section, from the Thinking History website, discusses how we can build understanding of the process of historical enquiry into courses and also provides examples of activities and resources which may be useful in the classroom. The discussion is structured as follows:

Why is Historical Enquiry important?

How does the Enquiry process fit into KS3?

How can Enquiry be used constructively at GCSE and A level?

How does the Enquiry process contribute to work at historical sites and museums?

Why is Historical Enquiry important?

One major reason is that it provides continuity across History courses, from primary to university level. Students often find History difficult because they constantly feel they're starting again. They see the surface details and think each new topic is different because it features new or mostly new names, dates, places etc. This camouflage prevents students realising that they can use what they've learned before to help them with a new topic. Therefore we need to help students realise that what they learned in Y7 is useful in Y8 and even in Y10 and Y12.

Several elements contribute to how we do this:

- a) developing conceptual understandings so that, for example, students use sources more effectively as evidence as they mature.
- b) building knowledge and understanding of the map of the past so that, for example, students are better able to compare and contrast events, periods and individuals, making those elusive links across time and developing a sense of period.
- c) and perhaps even more fundamentally, understanding how we go about the process of enquiry, being able to move from knowing nothing or next to nothing

about a topic to having a satisfying grasp of the issues and being able to answer questions about it with confidence – be they informal oral questions or demanding written exam questions. Students can then use this explicit process as a template when faced with other enquiries on other topics.

So what is the process of enquiry? This has doubtless been the subject of much learned debate but I'm afraid that has passed me by. My pragmatic definition is along the lines of:

‘question – hypothesis – use of evidence to test the hypothesis – reformulation of hypothesis’

and so on, repeating the last two stages for as long as time and patience allow.

This short description could be debated and occasionally teachers at courses have debated it, asserting that this pattern is ‘wrong’ in some way or begins with the ‘wrong’ item. However over-prescriptive precision can get in the way of a broadly useful idea. I agree that sometimes we begin with a question, at others with evidence or contextual information that inspires a question – these are variations on the theme. What's far more important is that there's a readily comprehensible sequence of activity that students can explicitly describe, apply and continue to apply as their History studies continue– and which helps them tackle their History more effectively and more confidently.

Apart from its centrality to the study of History, Enquiry is also important because it's at the heart of arguments about the value of studying History. Explicit focus on enquiry helps students, parents and school management see one of the important benefits of studying history – thinking and planning a way through a problem, asking questions, undertaking research, independent thinking, making judgments, effective communication. This is all the more important given the findings in the research of Richard Harris and Terry Haydn which concludes that ‘large numbers of [pupils] have a limited grasp of the intended purposes of a historical education ...’

For more information see articles summarising this research in *Teaching History* editions 132 and 134.

Also *Factors influencing pupil take-up of History post Key Stage 3*, Final Report September 2007 at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/ks4takeup.pdf>

If we are to make significant in-roads on students' ideas about the purposes of studying History then it seems essential to make clear the process of enquiry and its transferability to the world outside the classroom. Enquiry encompasses how to go about problem-solving, independent and team-driven research, identifying relevant evidence and evaluating its reliability, moving from tentative to firmer conclusions on the basis of that evidence and finally reaching a judgement and knowing how certain that judgement is, balancing the arguments for and against. These are widely-transferable skills, both in the contexts of individuals and teamwork – and developed in History in the most important context of all, the actions and motives of real, individual people.

How does the Enquiry Process fit into KS3?

Enquiry is a central part of KS3 History, for the reasons discussed above and because it sits at the head of the list of Key Processes and at heart of the Attainment Target. Ideas about Enquiry also run throughout the Importance of History statement. The Key Processes section of the Programme of Study says

Pupils should be able to:

- identify and investigate, individually and as part of a team, specific historical questions or issues, making and testing hypotheses
- reflect critically on historical questions or issues.

Levels 3-8 of the AT include the following extracts:

Level 3 [Subject to change revision in Primary Review] – They use sources to find answers to questions about the past.

Level 4 – When finding answers to historical questions, they begin to use information as evidence to test hypotheses.

Level 5 – They investigate historical problems and issues and begin to ask their own questions. They begin to evaluate sources to establish evidence for particular enquiries.

Level 6 – They investigate historical problems and issues, asking and beginning to refine their own questions. They evaluate sources to establish relevant evidence for particular enquiries.

Level 7 – They investigate historical problems and issues, asking and refining their own questions and beginning to reflect on the process undertaken. When establishing the evidence for a particular enquiry, pupils consider critically issues surrounding the origin, nature and purpose of sources.

Level 8 – They suggest lines of enquiry into historical problems and issues, refining their methods of investigation. They evaluate critically a range of sources and reach substantiated conclusions independently.

At least one oddity is the absence of students being expected to ask questions before level 5 – the stage at which students are most likely to stop asking questions as grumpy adolescence takes over from enthusiastic childhood. ‘Asking questions’ should be there from the start – one of the distinguishing features of ‘being good at History’ is the ability to ask searching and original questions. Hopefully the Primary Review will remedy the current sketchiness of enquiry at levels 1-3.

So Enquiry is in the AT but how does it relate to the other concepts and processes? This is difficult to gauge from the AT itself because it reads within levels like a sequence of separate statements sitting alongside each other, each in its own bubble like a group of distantly-related people at a wedding. There’s little sense of the links between the processes and concepts, of them flowing from one starting point in an inter-connected way. However ‘enquiry’ can be seen as the heart of KS3 History (and the AT), as shown in the chart overleaf which attempts to bring together the various components of KS3 History into one coherent whole. [This chart was published in *Teaching History* 135, June 2009]



A model showing how the components of Key Stage 3 History are linked

ENQUIRY

Into the actions, thoughts, experiences of people in the past

Depth studies test the hypotheses/interpretations in the thematic stories

DEPTH STUDY

DEPTH STUDY

DEPTH STUDY

DEPTH STUDY

ENQUIRY

ENQUIRY

THEMATIC STORIES e.g.	How do they explain events and attitudes today?
Conflict and co-operation	
Everyday Life	
Empires	
Movement and Settlement	
Monarchy, Votes and Human Rights	
British Unity and Disunity	

PROCESS and CONCEPTS TOOLBOX
 Evidence; cause and consequence; diversity; change and continuity; interpretations; significance; similarity and difference; chronological understanding; sense of period

- OUTCOMES CORNER**
- How historical accounts are created
 - An ability to tell these thematic stories, making links across time
 - How the past helps us to understand today
 - Why the historical process is useful beyond the classroom
 - A sense of achievement and enjoyment

ENQUIRY

Enquiry runs through the model of KS3 shown in the chart because Enquiry is the glue that holds everything together. Every unit of work, be it a Thematic Story or Depth Study is an enquiry in which students seek answers to questions, testing hypotheses or interpretations and producing a revised version or account. To carry out these enquiries students use the contents of the Process and Concepts Toolbox, sometimes focussing predominantly on one item, sometimes using a mixture.

From this follow three critical points about the nature and construction of KS3 courses and about the place of Enquiry within them:

a) Who poses the enquiry questions?

Having a scheme of work full of enthusing enquiry questions is not enough to develop student's understanding of Enquiry if all the posing of questions and structuring of enquiry is done by the teacher. An effective scheme must help students build the ability to ask their own questions and plan their own way through enquiries, simultaneously using and developing their understanding of historical enquiry. This, sadly, is far from easy, especially when much teaching is done by non-specialists and the preparation and thinking time of specialist teachers is dominated by the needs of GCSE and A level. So this is an aspiration that I suspect is largely unfulfilled at the moment but it won't be fulfilled unless it's a clear target to move towards over a number of years.

b) What is the value of 'detective puzzle' mystery enquiries?

At least some, possibly a great deal of, Enquiry work is done through mysteries of the 'What happened to the Princes in the Tower?' type. The major danger is that these are individual activities divorced from the rest of the course, both in subject-matter and in time, being used as one-off What is History? activities or enjoyable activities at the end of a term or year. If used in these ways, 'Mystery' enquiries have very little value because whatever is learned about the process of undertaking an enquiry isn't then being re-used and consolidated in the bulk of the course.

The best way to use 'detective puzzle' mysteries is for the purposes of identifying, clarifying and, perhaps, consolidating the process of enquiry. These are the aims of

[The Riccall Mystery – how do we carry out historical enquiries?](#)

While this activity has a context – the events of 1066 – its purpose is clearly to help students identify and use the enquiry process and place them in a position to re-use it. Integral to this re-use is having the means to remind students quickly of the Enquiry process. One way of doing this is to create a short PowerPoint or MovieMaker sequence which recaps the process in the context of a previous enquiry.

To exemplify this we've linked in an example based on the Riccall activity,

[Do you remember when ... we did an enquiry?](#)

The real power of this would come from using pictures of your own class and in asking students to do the voice-over to consolidate the process in their own minds.

c) How do you integrate Enquiry into the heart of KS3 History?

Before moving into the really exciting bit of this discussion, a note which may help remove some misunderstandings about what your students do during Enquiries. Because 'Enquiries' are often seen as one-off mystery items it could be thought that the appropriate resources for Enquiries are the short, often ludicrously short sources and clues and that the Enquiry only lasts one lesson, maybe two at the most (and the Riccall mystery, aimed at identifying the process, may reinforce this). However this would be a complete misconception. An Enquiry could last half a term, a term or even more and, as discussed below, can be an enquiry such as 'Why have people been prepared to risk their lives in war?' which covers the whole period from 1066 to the present. At the same time, Enquiries aren't just about using short sources. Enquiries involve the normal range of teaching resources and activities – textbooks, role-plays, extended sources, reading, story etc – all of which are used to provide evidence for building, testing and revising hypotheses. Enquiry is simply a process within which you use your normal activities – it implies nothing particular about the material or activities you use.

Now to the core point – to be developed really effectively, Enquiry needs to be embedded into the warp and weft of Key Stage 3, the relationship between the two core 'content' components – the Thematic Stories and the Depth Enquiries. By relationship I mean treating the thematic stories as hypotheses which are investigated and reformulated through depth study enquiries. This places enquiry at the heart of all work in history.

The idea of ‘thematic stories’ is still very much in its infancy. My guess is that students will make far more sense of these stories across time if they meet them in complete, simplified form from the beginning of their course. Each story needs to be visible and tell-able in one lesson and treated as a hypothesis, to be investigated and reformulated through the depth enquiries. This means thinking much more about the links across a course than has perhaps been the norm in the past. While I have written a fair amount about this in the KS3 2008 section of this site, these developing ideas will mean a certain amount of revisiting of those discussions and activities. [For example I hope shortly to rewrite two of the Norman Conquest activities so that they fit into the wider themes of Conflict more effectively.] However, one example will suffice for the moment or this section will go on forever!

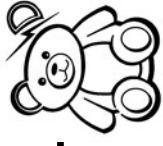
The chart overleaf shows how depth studies on the Norman Conquest and the World wars of the 20th century (or more widely on wars since 1914 as a whole) can inter-act with a thematic story answering the question ‘Why have people risked their lives in warfare?’

This means these depth studies doing 3 things at once! To take the Norman Conquest as an example, this involves

- a) helping students learn about the Norman Conquest but ...
- b) doing so in such ways that illuminate the questions relevant to the thematic story i.e. focussing on why people fought in 1066 (and not just on the leaders but on the foot-soldiers) and in rebellions afterwards and also doing this by ...
- c) following a clear and explicit enquiry process that re-uses the approach modelled in The Riccall Mystery, thus building students’ confidence in their ability to pursue enquiries.

[For a little more on how this might differ from common approaches to 1066 see the Teaching History article linked above]

In this way ‘Enquiry’ can be embedded as a core activity, one that students use and re-use throughout their KS3 course rather than being an occasional inclusion with no apparent link to the rest of the course.



STAGE 1 Creation of thematic story about reasons for being involved in war

Students place cards on a timeline - which attitudes do they expect to have been held in each period? The cards only offer some of the answers. The resulting pattern offers an initial answer to the question:
'Why have people risked their lives in warfare?'

STAGE 2 Depth Enquiry

Why did so many people risk their lives 1066-1071?
Then revisit Stage 1 hypothesis for 1066-1071

STAGE 3 Outline

Review Stage 1 hypothesis for 1100-1900 using kinaesthetic activities - world map and Top Trumps cards

STAGE 4 Depth Enquiry

Why have so many of our families risked their lives in wars since 1900s? Then revisit Stage 1 hypothesis for post 1900

STAGE 5 How have attitudes to war and justifications for war changed over time?

Review thematic story:

- What similarities and differences can you see in reasons for people risking their lives?
- What does this tell you about the dominating ideas of periods x, y, z?
- How does this investigation help you understand events, actions and choices today?

Enquiries about conflict - Outline and Depth

How can Enquiry be used constructively at GCSE and A level?

This is not a full discussion of enquiry post-14 – that would require a book or two. Nor does this section deal with the most obvious course units with ‘Enquiry’ in the title such as Edexcel’s GCSE Source Enquiries. This short section is about

- building enquiry into day to day teaching post-14, so that students retain and develop a sense of enquiry being at the heart of History
- using enquiry to help students learn more effectively by working their way from initial answers to detailed understanding.

GCSE

The following notes take teaching SHP’s *Medicine through Time* as an exemplar but the principles are transferable to all courses at this level. The ideas were worked out as part of the process of rewriting SHP’s resources for ‘Medicine’ for the new 2009 specifications.

1. Treat *Medicine through Time* as an enquiry as well as a Development Study across a long period of time. Whichever specification you follow you can build teaching the whole of ‘Medicine’ around a core enquiry such as

‘Why do people today have better health and live longer than people in the past?’

What are the benefits of pursuing such an over-arching enquiry?

- a) It continues to emphasise the centrality of enquiry in History, established at KS3.
- b) It unites the whole course and helps students to organize their knowledge. It is easier for students to develop an overview narrative of medical history in relation to a specific question than in a vacuum where information is acquired for its own sake rather than for a purpose – to undertake an enquiry and answer a core question.

c) It gives a rationale for individual period activities and helps students see why these particular 'period' enquiries have been set up – they contribute to an overall enquiry.

d) This particular question has the great advantage of helping students relate their Development Study on 'Medicine' to the present day, showing how history provides a perspective on life today.

e) It helps create a sense of achievement in developing a deeper answer to the enquiry through the course than students can offer at the beginning.

2. Using the enquiry process to help students learn more effectively.

Two of the problems that students have in learning effectively in the Development Study are

a) seeing the course as a whole, getting the chronology right and being able to make links and contrasts across time

b) seeing the wood for the trees – establishing the outline of developments in a single period without getting bogged down in so much detail that it drowns out the outline.

The enquiry process described above in the KS3 notes can help with both these issues:

a) tackling the overview - when starting the course, begin with the core question 'Why do people today have better health and live longer than people in the past?'. Use a limited amount of material to help students build up a quick overview – but an overview with a purpose, creating a hypothesis that's a first answer to this question. This hypothesis could include reference to the key elements (changes in understanding of disease, public health etc) and also the pattern of improvement (slow development or sudden improvement) and when this might have been. Spending a lesson or two juggling a range of clues from different periods enables students to build up a sense of the key periods and their sequence while creating their hypothesis. This has then created a framework of understanding that gives them a context for moving onto individual periods.

b) stopping students drowning in detail - a common problem for students at all levels is that they don't think they can answer a question until the very end of a unit of work. Therefore they feel they have to build up a lot of knowledge before they can begin to use it – and this is a recipe for acquiring lots of information without any pattern or purpose – or, simply, doing lots of stuff without taking in anything significant. Whether getting stuck into medicine in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or whenever, a much more effective model is to begin with a question and develop an outline answer based on a limited amount of information and then, if necessary and students can handle it, plunge into more detail to test and develop that outline answer. Thus in SHPs new 'Medicine' books we have begun each period with a 'Medical Moments in time' page, providing key points through the medium of people talking in a scene from 200AD, 1347, 1665 etc. This gives students enough information on one page to see what is happening in public health, understanding of disease, treatments, surgery etc and then to answer each period's key question such as 'Why didn't medicine improve in the Middle Ages?' or 'Why was the medical Renaissance important when it didn't make anyone healthier?'. Having established their hypothesis students can then move onto look at the period in more detail – in the context of that outline. This helps confidence – they already have an answer to build on. They don't have to learn all that stuff about Harvey, Vesalius etc before they can begin to see the pattern of the period. You could even save a lot of time by dividing detailed topics amongst the class, secure that everyone has knowledge of the key features of the period.

A level

Again a common problem at A level (and at degree level) is that students think they have to learn lots before they can begin to make sense of a topic or start to put answers together. But without hooks (the question and hypothesis of the early stages of the enquiry process) there's nothing to hang this learning on and that creates the ever-present danger of lots of reading and note-taking without any clear sense of direction. That in turn leads to frustration and reduced motivation – 'I've done loads of reading but haven't retained much/can't make sense of it.' In practice, having a question and hypothesis to work on from the beginning make a huge difference, guiding reading constructively and making for much more effective learning. This process also combats

the sense of ‘not knowing’, making explicit that it’s OK to know little or nothing at the outset but that uncertainty is a natural and accepted part of getting to grips with a topic.

This is most easily demonstrated using an example. Imagine you’re about to set your Y12 to work on the events of 1471, focussing on why Edward IV was able to regain his throne after being deposed only months earlier. Never mind if you don’t teach this (or know anything much about Edward IV) – it’s the process that’s critical, being transferable to any other context. The key to students tackling this effectively is to move straight into the question and to construct a possible answer in the first lesson.

So, begin by presenting students with the question – Why did Edward regain his throne in 1471? Then ask them for ideas – after all, they’ll have looked at why he lost the throne – but you can’t rely on this, some students won’t have the confidence to make the mental leaps across topics. So, give them the answer! Not a complete answer but a list of possible factors on cards and ask them to organize them into groups

- a) reasons which seem to link to Edward’s own strengths and qualities
- b) reasons which seem to be his opponents’ mistakes or weaknesses
- c) other factors which don’t seem to fit into (a) or (b)

Note the use of the word ‘seem’, very hypothetical, very reassuring that you’re not meant to be certain or to know the answer at this stage. The factor cards can be organized onto a washing line running from Edward’s strengths to his opponents’ weaknesses – a washing line that has a cunning relationship to an essay plan! And the washing line has created a hypothesis – the answer is a mix of Edward’s strengths and his opponents’ weaknesses – which do students’ think is likely to have been more important?

Now at this stage students just have a list of factors, organized into a pattern – factors such as ‘Edward’s military leadership’ and ‘Clarence changes sides’ – so they don’t know much but enough to enable them to look for detail on these factors in their books – exactly how was Edward a good military leader, when exactly did his leadership play a part, was this a factor at critical moments? Thus the initial identification of a question and hypothesis helps students read much more effectively because they’ve got a target

for that reading. The pages of their books no longer comprise an obstacle course full of completely unfamiliar material. The benefits of the approach are confidence, a sense of direction, improved motivation, and improved reading. And, in the long-run, better writing because knowledge is more secure, having been built up in layers, from outline to depth.

Thus creating a hypothesis at the outset of 4 or 5 lessons-worth of work provides a structure that students can follow, realising that it's OK to know only a little at the outset but that they can build that knowledge and understanding as they go – and you're giving them the tools to become more and more independent in their learning. At some stage take away the scaffolding – the list of possible reasons – and insist they come up with their own ideas. Creating independent thinkers and learners is what A level should be about – not students who can't cope without a book covered in exam board logos and detailed guidance on how to get from level 2 to level 3.

For a more detailed description of this activity (with resource cards) see –

[1471: Why did Edward IV win his crown back?](#)

How does the Enquiry process contribute to work at historical sites and museums?

Visits to museums and historic sites help students build up knowledge and understanding of a topic or period. They can also give students practice in following the enquiry process, a further justification for taking students out of school. Visits can fit in at different stages of the enquiry process, depending on the nature of the site. This may also be an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the transferability of the enquiry process, away from the classroom.

Model 1

Use the site at the very beginning of the process to stimulate questions and create initial hypotheses. Then return to school to use other resources to test and develop those hypotheses and build fuller answers to the questions. For example, take a question such as 'How important was religion to people in the Middle Ages?' or 'Did monks and monasteries matter to people in the Middle Ages? The best way to start, to beginning developing an answer is to go to a monastery or cathedral and use the evidence there –

what does it tell you about the importance of religion? Then take those hypotheses and follow them up using a wider range of resources in school.

Model 2

Begin the process in school with students developing hypotheses in answer to a question. Then undertake the site or museum visit to see if their answers stand up against the evidence they see, whether it's a building or a range of objects in a museum or an interpretation presented by an actor at the site. For example, KS3 students may be exploring the story of everyday life and could build a graph or description in the classroom, based on the national picture, using books, pictures and sources in the classroom. But was that what it was like in their town? That's where a visit allows students to use their local museum to test the hypothesis in the national picture – was it like that here?

Using either of these approaches has two other benefits. Firstly it requires that the visit is embedded in a sequence of lessons – school – visit – school – rather than being a one-off 'trip' whose value is likely to be extremely limited because it is just a one-off. Secondly this approach means that the teachers accompanying the trip have to be fully involved because the activities link in closely to what's happened before and what will happen in succeeding lessons. A visit should never be an opportunity to hand over completely to museum or site staff – if you do, how are you going to build on the students' experiences?