The most important questions to ask history students of all ages:

Identifying students' metanarratives and pre-conceptions

Metanarrative – an over-arching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern or structure for people's beliefs and gives meaning to their experiences.
Dictionary definition

'... a metanarrative ... isn't history in the literal sense – you don't read about it in journals ... it is history that simply exists, that doesn't need to be explicitly told. It is a narrative, a story, which plays out below the surface of history itself. It makes us feel safe and gives meaning to things.
Professor Annette Kehnel, The Green Ages: Medieval Innovations in Sustainability

This article stems from a coincidence. Reading Annette Kehnel's book (quoted above) first put the idea of metanarratives into my head because her chapter '*Was Everyone Poor Until We Invented Capitalism*?' discusses the impact of post-Enlightenment metanarratives on how we think about earlier periods of history. Then, clearing out old files, I found an activity, written for a Y7 textbook in 1991, which compares the approaches to enquiry used by historians and scientists. This opened up a second kind of metanarrative, this one about how we study History. Somehow these two strands fused in my mind and prompted this article – which isn't as philosophical or lengthy as this introduction may have suggested! I've never 'done philosophical' and too much detail would get in the way of my core points. What I hope this article can do is to stimulate discussion amongst teachers at the outset of their careers and, maybe, in departments about the metanarratives, (the 'big stories') and preconceptions that students bring to courses, whether they're 5, 11, 16, 18 or 75, metanarratives that have a very practical importance for the quality of students' learning in History.

The idea that students, even in primary schools, have metanarratives in their minds may sound unlikely but the chances are they do have these ideas, unspoken and implicit though they will be. And it's that implicit, unvoiced nature that makes such metanarratives potentially dangerous because what we try to teach them may simply bounce off these ingrained ideas and prevent students making sense of what we want them to learn. Their preconceived ideas and metanarratives ideas therefore need to be identified, challenged and rethought so that they don't sabotage teaching

without you being aware of what's happening – and this process of identify-challenge-rethink is what the questions below are about and why they are an essential step towards improving learning.

The problem, of course, is that discussing these questions uses up lesson time and so is in competition with coverage of overly-full exam specifications and our desire to tell students about all the fascinating topics we want them to be excited about. Despite this competition for time, I still think it's essential to discuss these questions, returning to them regularly as students get older to help students' ideas mature and grow more complex.

My final introductory point – I've split the questions into three categories but haven't agonised over their precise wording. We all word questions differently to suit our classes and emphases.

A. Questions about the nature of History

Students' Likely Metanarrative: History is about facts and certainties

Q1. What do you expect to learn (take away) from your History lessons?

Q2. What do you expect to do, to think about and discuss in History lessons?

Both these questions are about students' preconceptions of History as a discipline. They are vital questions because many people believe that History is a subject where you learn facts and where answers are certain. Far fewer people initially see History as an argument, hypothesis-based subject where the answers are almost always found along an uncertainty/certainty continuum. In History teaching, nearly all of us want students to develop the second of those understandings of the discipline but, if students already implicitly assume that History is about facts and certainties, they will struggle to make sense of what they're doing in lessons. Their preconceptions of the nature of History therefore need to be made explicit, then questioned, challenged and re-assembled mentally – hence the importance of asking and continuing to ask these questions. Implicitly embedded ideas won't be shifted in one lesson – it takes a lot longer for new ideas to put down deep roots.

Q3. How is History similar to and different from other subjects in school?

My third question also helps define the nature of History, but does so by comparing History with other subjects students study. It also gives me an excuse to include a quotation I've long wanted to include in an article – so here goes!

In his book *Beyond a Boundary* CLR James asks *'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?'* James (1901-1989) was a Trinidadian historian (e.g. of Toussaint Louverture), Marxist, author, playwright, cricketer and much else. *Beyond a Boundary* is often named as one of the greatest of sports books, placing cricket (in the West Indies in particular) in the context of politics, colonialism, class, social attitudes and racism.

I'd therefore like to echo James by asking *'What do they know of the discipline of studying History who only History know?'*

An example of an activity which could help comparisons between school subjects is included at the end of this article – the worksheet I mentioned earlier comparing History and Science as disciplines, suggesting that they have similar methodologies but use different kinds of evidence. Obviously this

is not a detailed analysis but sufficient to start KS3 students at least thinking about what is happening in these subjects behind the façade of the content. Students then need to go on to compare and contrast a range of disciplines to better understand the nature of each discipline and the similarities and differences between them. Do History and Geography really have anything in common in terms of method? Maths and Science may seem at first glance to be about certainty but is this as false as it is for History? What are the similarities and differences between History and English Lit and other subjects – and so on, with whatever questions illuminate the similarities and differences between subjects.

These comparisons, which will be strengthened by discussions amongst staff from the different departments, could then also prompt collaboration to help students better understand topics that overlap the boundaries between subjects.

B. Questions about how students see the relations between past and present

Students' Likely Metanarrative: People today are more intelligent, care more about standards of living and are better at solving problems than people in the past

Another quotation just for the fun of it – this one from Elly Griffiths, *The Woman in Blue, (A Dr Ruth Galloway Mystery),* 2016

> *Yes, it's one of those crazy religious things. You know, as if Christ's cross managed to find its way to medieval Norfolk. But they believed anything in those days.*
>
> *Phil always sounds as if bygone generations were a completely different species. In Ruth's opinion, humans haven't really changed that much. We're just as credulous now, she thinks, except about different things.*

Q4. Do you think people today are more intelligent and civilised than people in the past?

Some years ago, I was involved in a survey which revealed that over 90% of 700 students assumed that people in the Middle Ages were less intelligent than people today. This may well be an assumption that's fairly easily challenged, but if students don't re-think that assumption it causes all kinds of problems. Continuing to believe that people in the past were not as intelligent as ourselves means that students will not, for example, understand that people in past societies had complex

motives, sophisticated administrative systems and made technological breakthroughs, could think carefully through complex decisions when faced with multiple options or had ideals and a strong sense of morality. Underestimating the intelligence of past peoples therefore leads to over-simplified 'bad history'. And if students don't see people in the past as being as intelligent as ourselves, how can they develop a sense of common humanity with people in the past?

Q5. Do you think the quality of life has kept progressing over time?

A variation on this theme is the metanarrative discussed by Professor Kehnel in her book *The Green Ages* – the belief that history is the story of human progress, an arrogant idea we owe to the Enlightenment, the period when 'modern' came to equal 'superior'. One good example of the consequences of this view lies in the writings of Victorian historians who poured scorn on the public health failings of the Middle Ages while tens of thousands died of cholera and typhoid in their cities, one of whom was my great, great grandmother who died of cholera in Liverpool in 1849.

A more modern example is Steven Pinker's book *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*, a book delightfully described by Professor Kehnel as 'a light, colourful summer salad of pseudo-knowledge across the centuries, a well-nigh comprehensive summary of all the supposed truisms about the 'olden days' to be found in our collective subconscious.' Medievalists are not impressed by Mr Pinker's handling of evidence!

The problems of students holding such a view of progress through time are that it leads them to misunderstand people and periods in the past and so:

- underestimate the humanity, qualities, ideals and intelligence of people in the past
- underestimate the problem-solving skills and creativity of people in the past
- believe in a reassuring pattern of progress in democracy, human and equal rights, science, respect for others etc and that progress can't give way to regress.

And, in addition, they may well

- underestimate problems today such as our vulnerability to climate change, food shortages, war etc.

C. Questions about why it's worth studying History

Students' Likely Metanarrative: Studying History can be interesting but has no strong or helpful links to their lives outside the classroom

Q6. How can studying History help you outside the classroom?

This question was at the heart of the original Schools Council History Project in the 1970s but SCHP did more than just ask this question – it structured its course units and content so that students could appreciate that studying History, particularly its methodology, could be valuable to them outside school. It was this that made me and many others such enthusiastic converts to SCHP at that time. The early writings of the project team make clear that their prime aim was to challenge the metanarrative of History as 'interesting but useless'.

This approach puts a premium on departments communicating the potential value of studying History as explicitly as possible – it can't be left implicit. Students need to be asked regularly to explain why they think History can be useful beyond the classroom and to support their answers with examples.

This question relates to both how the discipline of studying history can be valuable to students beyond the classroom but also to the historical content and questions they study, which brings me to my last question …

Q7. What kinds of historical questions and issues interest you and are important to study at school?

The school History curriculum is itself a metanarrative which, in the past consisted of 'our island story' with a clear, nationalistic purpose, a purpose clearly still expected by some (many?) today. However, as Jason Todd has asked in his article *Thinking beyond boundar*ies (*Teaching History* 176 2019), is that metanarrative appropriate for students today, given the global challenges surrounding them in the 21st century?

It seems far more appropriate to develop a curriculum in considered awareness of students' answers to the question above so that students can see themselves, their needs, concerns and interests reflected in the curriculum. It's also important that students come to understand how topics that they don't immediately think of as being related to their own lives can, in fact, contribute to their understanding of their world. Students will therefore benefit from discussions with teachers about

why they study the topics and issues in their curriculum and why others are omitted from the curriculum.

(This has a parallel in students benefitting from understanding why they are taught using particular teaching methods, whether they are the ‘talk and question’ methods we all use at some stage or more adventurous methods such as the decisions-making activities and structured role-plays that can be found on ThinkingHistory. In my experience explaining why I used the teaching methods I did was a valuable motivator with some students).

Conclusions: an ‘Understanding-Rich’ Curriculum?

The core message of this article is that we need to identify students’ unspoken, implicit metanarratives and preconceptions because they may contain misconceptions which will sabotage teaching. Such unspoken ideas need to be made explicit because students can’t change an idea they don’t know they’ve got! This ‘identify, make explicit, challenge’ process is even more important because those engrained thoughts may, as Professor Kehnel says, often feel safe to students. Having your ‘safe’ ideas challenged is uncomfortable but it needs doing if students are to develop an understanding of the nature of History – how we study it and why it’s valuable – and also of the topics they study so that they perform better and get much more out of their studies.

Therefore, we should never assume that students’ minds are empty when starting new courses or topics. They will have ideas – whether about the people, period or topic, about how we approach evidence, causation, significance etc or about whether it’s worth doing at all. You may never begin a lesson by saying “Today, Year 7, we’re going to analyse your metanarratives” but it is essential to identify and challenge their existing ideas and return regularly to such issues across the years of their education.

The key word that has emerged from this discussion is, I think, ‘understanding’. This article has therefore also been about boosting students’ understanding of:

- the nature of History as a discipline
- how our interpretations of the past can be determined by our views of the present
- how History, both methodology and knowledge and understanding of the past, can help students in their lives beyond the classroom.

This leads me to wonder whether it's helpful to think of the History curriculum as being 'Understanding-Rich'? The better-known term in recent years has been 'Knowledge-Rich' (though I must admit that for someone of my generation this is an irritating phrase as I was taught and then began teaching in not so much a 'Knowledge-Rich' curriculum as a 'Knowledge-Saturated' curriculum that had no room for anything about how we study History). Does 'Knowledge-Rich' encompass deep understanding? I'm sure it does in more sophisticated applications but there may be a danger that knowledge of information may be seen as an end in itself rather than as, as I think it should be, the means to deeper understanding. That's why I find 'Understanding-Rich' a more appealing term – it clarifies that knowledge is a stepping stone to understanding and places students' need to understand the issues above at the heart of curriculum construction.

For all these reasons I hope that setting out the seven questions above proves useful to those setting out on their History teaching careers. If this was a workshop I think I'd finish with Elmer Bernstein's music from *The Magnificent Seven* but as this is just an article about seven questions I'll settle for a Postscript!

Postscript

I mentioned Jason Todd's article *Thinking beyond boundar*ies (*Teaching History* 176 2019) above and want to finish by recommending this to every History teacher because of the challenges it sets while also acknowledging the practical issues everyone in a classroom faces. Those challenges are for teachers to think about and question what are often the 'givens' of the History curriculum and teaching and, in this, Jason's article reminds me very much of the challenges David Sylvester posed for teachers when he set up SCHP in the early 1970s, pushing us to think deeply about why we were teaching History and particularly about what we wanted students to gain from studying History.

Such questions, as I learned in the 70s, can be very uncomfortable for some teachers and therefore can provoke hostility but it's essential that such challenges continue to be made and taken up, even if it takes a significant length of time for change to happen. In my own experience, I put a great deal of time into rethinking how the Middle Ages can be taught at KS3, moving a long way from the standard series of great events to a model focussed chiefly on understanding the similarities and differences in behaviour and attitudes of the people of the time and today – an approach built on a belief that students today can learn about themselves by studying, for example, the emotions, morality and what mattered to people in the Middle Ages. I didn't neglect 'events' but found a way

of teaching the overall story in one unit to give a genuine sense of overview and create space for what I thought to be most important for understanding the people of the Middle Ages. I'm not sure many people have followed this up but it was a challenge that was important to me to take up in the interests of students and the ideas and some resources are available on this website.

Linked articles on Thinkinghistory

(They link to issues discussed above).

Why I think it's important to teach and learn history: a personal view

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/SmileAswan.pdf

What do history students learn about people and the experience of living

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/LearningAboutPeople.html

The crucial importance of identifying students' misconceptions

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Assumptions.html

The centrality of uncertainty in studying History

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/Uncertainty.html

Urban Bodies: Teaching about medieval public health

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ResourceBase/MedievalPublicHealth.html

Enquiry and Independent learning

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/index.htm

History and science – two ways of working?

The first diagram below shows how you have been working in history. The second shows you how scientists work. Look at the two diagrams closely. Are history and science very different or are they really quite similar?

1 Describe how you have investigated a topic in history. Use an example, perhaps about the Roman Empire or Britain in the Middle Ages, to show what happened at each stage.

2 Now compare your work in history with the science diagram. What stages are the same in both?

3 In science you do experiments to check an answer or hypothesis. Historians do not do experiments. What do they do instead?

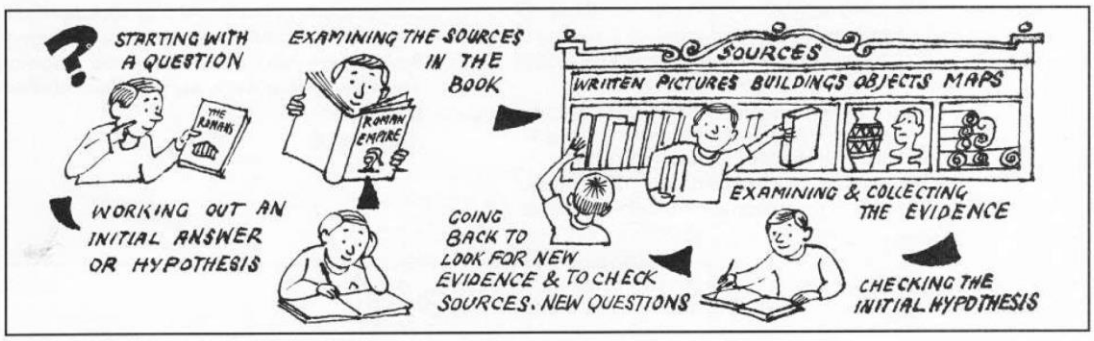
4 If two scientists in different countries do the same experiment they will almost certainly have the same result or answer. If two historians investigate the same question they may well have different answers.

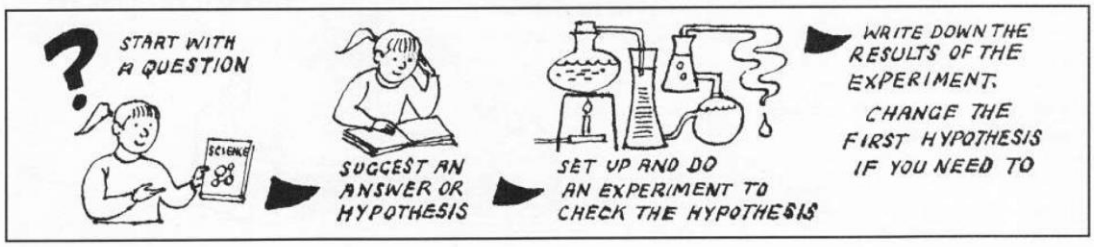
   a Why might historians have different answers?
   b Why would scientists have the same answers?

5 i Scientists usually find definite answers to questions.
   ii Historians cannot be completely certain about the answers to many questions about the past.

   Do you agree with these two statements? Explain your reasons.

6 Do science and history have very different ways of working or similar ways of working. Explain your answer.





Teacher's Resource Book, Ian Dawson, Ian Coulson and Paul Watson,

Oxford University Press, 1992