

Why we should frame questions that explicitly suggest answers will be uncertain

One central misconception that students have about History is that it's a subject that's essentially about facts and certainties. Obviously facts play an important part and historians are constantly striving to develop more accurate narratives of events but, at the heart of their work in History, students of all ages need to understand that there is a great deal that we are uncertain about and that our arguments and their answers to questions need to reflect those uncertainties, that in history we are usually dealing with the extent to which we are certain or uncertain.

This is why one of the potential reasons for teaching history is to help students become more comfortable with uncertainty in their lives and in the world around them and that they don't always expect neat, simple solutions to local, national and international problems.

All of which brings me to the questions that students are asked – maybe large enquiry questions covering work that lasts several lessons or weeks or more short-term questions. I wonder if too many questions are framed in ways that actually reinforce that misconception that History is about certainty and don't explicitly challenge that idea? The kinds of question I have in mind are the kinds I've always naturally asked, for example:

Why did William invade England in 1066?

Why did the Normans win the Battle of Hastings?

Was X the most important consequence of ...?

Those aren't exciting questions but I've deliberately kept them direct to make the point that students who are asked questions that imply certainty, as these do, will have their misconception that History is about certainties reinforced, not challenged. While teachers will discuss in class the need for hypothetical answers that avoid complete certainties, that oral discussion may bounce off the certainties implied by the questions and students' preconceptions about the subject.

What we want is for students to become comfortable with a type of answer that I used to describe as 'definitely indefinite' – ones that say that we can't reach a decisive and certain answer but that X or y seem to be the most likely explanation given the evidence. That's very different from total uncertainty – that it's all a waste of time because we can't be certain!

Therefore, if students are to become more comfortable with degrees of certainty and uncertainty and in presenting tentative judgments through hypothetical language, they will be helped by tackling questions framed around explicit use of words such as 'uncertain' and 'complex'. Such enquiry questions could begin:

How certain can we be that ...?

To what extent can we be certain about ...?

Why is it hard to be certain about ...?

Are we more certain about ... than ...?

Why does sources X, Y and X make it hard to be certain about?

Such questions make uncertainty explicit, not implicit, encouraging students to work out where their answer falls along a continuum of certainty and uncertainty and therefore sends the message to students that a degree of uncertainty is to be expected and that answers that explain why uncertainty exists are good ones, not a sign of failure.

Maybe questions framed around uncertainty should dominate across History courses, rather than being rarities, as a truer reflection of the nature of the discipline?