How can Key Stage 3 support teaching about the Middle Ages at GCSE and A-level?

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This article is about developing students' knowledge of the Middle Ages at Key Stage 3 so that it supports work at GCSE, rather than them having to start from scratch or, worse, having to unlearn what they think they already know about the period. This also applies to those studying the Middle Ages at A-level for, although there's a long gap between Years 7 and 12, the longer erroneous understandings last the harder it is to challenge them.

1. Identifying students' potential misconceptions about GCSE topics

We all become good at identifying the misunderstandings students have with particular topics and dealing with them in the courses where they occur. This section suggests making those misunderstandings of medieval history at GCSE integral to Key Stage 3 planning. What kinds of misconceptions may exist?

a) Ideas related to individual topics.

These may not be expressed explicitly but lurk unrecognised in students' minds. When studying the Norman Conquest, for example, the following may be assumed and, if not brought into the open and challenged, will undermine understanding. You may not be able to tackle all of them at Key Stage 3 but avoid tasks that cement them! Students may think that:

- Succession crises such as that in 1066 were unusual in England so could not be anticipated
- It was easy to identify the 'rightful' heir to the crown because he was bound to be the last king's closest male relative
- Nationalities were entirely distinct with few, if any, connections between countries
- The only motives driving the actions of rulers and leaders were power and wealth

Another example comes from ideas about the development of castles, abbeys and other sites, for example:

- These buildings or sites did not change over many centuries
- Each had only one function e.g. castles had only a military function
- They were cold and miserable to live in because that's how they look today.

b) Ideas related to the thinking, principles and aspirations of medieval people

These issues are relevant to all medieval history at GCSE and A-level but particularly to the medieval element of Thematic units at GCSE where you may only have two or three weeks to cover the required material. Similar misconceptions hinder students' understanding of all Thematic topics but here are some linked to medieval medicine and public health:

- People had no desire to improve the quality of their lives or homes. This misunderstanding makes it much harder for students to take in and use knowledge about the efforts made in late medieval towns to maintain clean streets and water supplies.
- People did not think logically. If students believe this then they attribute attempts to prevent the spread of plague by prayer or pilgrimage to 'superstition' and cannot see such actions as the logical consequence of the contemporary world-view.
- Hardly anyone could read or was interested in acquiring new knowledge. With these ideas, it becomes impossible to take in the spread of texts advising people on how to safeguard their health and avoid disease.

c) Ideas about the quality of decision-making and about motives

This overlaps with the point (a) above about motives but is worth restating, particularly in relation to topics involving war and politics, at A-level as well as GCSE.

Students who emerge from Key Stage 3 assuming that decisions about whether to go to war or challenge a king were taken quickly and eagerly with no thought for consequences for individuals or for the community of the realm will find it much harder to develop effective explanations for such decisions at GCSE and A-level.

To take the example of the Wars of the Roses, many individuals were greatly influenced by expectations of loyalty to the crown and by awareness of the common good. Even decisions most easily condemned as simple treachery and lust for power, such as Warwick's alliance with Margaret of Anjou against his former ally, Edward IV, are partly explained by developing events which meant Warwick had to select the least worst option facing him, having exhausted other options. Medieval individuals were no better than ourselves at predicting the outcomes of actions and so found themselves on paths they would not initially have chosen. This is not to deny the existence of ruthlessness, violence, lust for power etc. but such 'qualities' are found as often in other periods.

To conclude this section, the only thing worse than not identifying and combating misconceptions is reinforcing them through tasks and choices of content which focus on the 'horrible' and violent or which underestimate the complexity of medieval thinking and decision-taking.

2. Identifying the necessary contexts for GCSE topics which can be covered at Key Stage 3

This is not about covering detail at Key Stage 3 that will reappear at GCSE but about providing students with the broader contextual knowledge which prepares them for the detail of GCSE topics. For example, those studying Edward I at GCSE will have a head start if they can suggest answers to at least *some* of these contextual questions:

- Why were some kings more powerful and successful than others?
- What roles did barons, parliament and people play in government?
- How interested were English kings in events overseas and in the rest of Britain?
- How effectively did governments deal with crimes?
- How sophisticated was the government's administration?
- Why did people build castles?

It would be naïve to assume that students who tackle these questions at Key Stage 3 will always remember the answers when they begin GCSE but even recognising the questions and the ideas behind them as familiar is itself helpful, providing a base to build on, enhancing confidence and making the task of developing answers easier. The alternative is for everything to feel new which makes learning feel harder.

Taking this further, it is helpful to move on to identify the understandings you want students to take away from Key Stage 3 as context for GCSE work. The following understandings will help anyone studying the reigns of Richard and John or Edward I at GCSE or medieval topics at A-level:

- Monarchs were seen as God's representatives and remained central to government throughout this period
- Monarchs were expected to defend their people from disorder at home and enemies abroad
- Monarchs were expected to consult their barons about important decisions before taking the decisions themselves.
- Barons were deeply reluctant to rebel but felt forced to do so sometimes when kings did not consult them and endangered their lives and property
- Magna Carta and parliaments were initiated to ensure kings did consult barons and others.
- The commons expected kings and barons to provide defence, peace and prosperity. They were increasingly well-informed about political events and prepared to make their voices heard.

If studying 'castles' at GCSE then plan takeaways from Key Stage 3 such as:

- Castles had a variety of functions – as homes, fortresses, administrative centres, to display power and as major employers and the people who lived there had as much concern for comfort as people in any era.

Inherent in this discussion are many 'first-order concepts' i.e. government, administration, monarchy, parliament, the commons, kingship etc. It is important to identify those central to GCSE success and plan for them to receive a first outing at Key Stage 3.

3. How can we make material more memorable?

It is a long time from Year 7 to Year 10, both in months and years and the tumult of adolescence. How do we help students remember those 'takeaways' from Key Stage 3 that provide such a useful context for their GCSE and A-level studies? First, we must look at our long-term planning. Schemes of work need to provide meaningful opportunities for pupils to revisit the Middle Ages and return to those crucial 'takeaways'. To make learning 'stick' we need to regularly revisit what has been learnt. This does not have to take a lot of time away from teaching subsequent topics. For example, the following questions can be used as 'Review Challenges':

- Give me two similarities between X (new topic) and the Middle Ages
- Give me two differences between X and the Middle Ages. This can be 'theme' specific – e.g. beliefs, warfare, political systems
- What would someone (vary the social group to add

extra challenge) from the Middle Ages be surprised/shocked by in X (the new period)? Why?

- You have just identified X in the new period being studied. Find me two examples of this from the Middle Ages.

Regular 'low-stakes' tests or quizzes can also be built into the 'gap' between the pupils' Key Stage 3 study of the Middle Ages and their GCSE course. Students need to practise recalling the key takeaways that have been taught. This means that teachers need to:

- identify the key takeaways from the Middle Ages
- generate questions that test the students' understanding of these takeaways
- slot them into tests/quizzes while teaching future units

Retrieval practice – recalling facts, concepts or events from memory – is a more effective learning strategy than review by rereading. Testing should be used as a learning tool. This does not have to be 'formal' testing. Pupils can be set recall tasks such as 'Just a minute' style challenges where they have to speak without pause or repetition about a key aspect of the Middle Ages. Key first-order concepts, individuals, events and developments can be given to pupils to learn/revise for homework and followed by keyword games (such as Taboo, odd one out, Pictionary, charades and dominoes) in lessons. Recalling what you have learnt causes your brain to reconsolidate the memory, which strengthens its connections to what you already know and makes it easier to recall in the future. In addition, because testing helps us to identify whether we have learned and understood the key information, it provides a useful meta-cognitive insight and students become more aware of their own learning.

In the short term, while teaching the Middle Ages in Key Stage 3, the main takeaways need to be taught in a memorable way. Elaborative encoding (putting the information into a new form e.g. as an acronym) is very important and new information needs to be presented to students in an engaging and meaningful way. Carefully structured role-plays and active demonstrations can help students build a clear understanding of 'difficult' areas of a course. A role-play should not be a bolted-on extra or 'treat'. It needs to be a central learning activity, with very clear objectives that helps students understand the takeaway concepts and ideas. Follow-up work benefits from both the excitement and the clarity of the thinking generated by the activity. Moreover, students tend to remember anything with a strong emotion attached to it.

Visual hooks are very important for memory, particularly if pupils have been involved in creating them. Using props and visuals, pupils can create freeze-frame visuals (captured with a camera) showing the key features of a period or the power relationships that existed at particular points in history. These can be displayed and used to provide a recall hook for comparisons with subsequent periods. Using the classroom or an outdoor space as a living map can also be an effective way of showing key features such as migration patterns, changes in population distribution or land ownership.

Pupils can also be encouraged to come up with creative ways of remembering the key takeaways from the Middle Ages. Model effective revision strategies by displaying good examples that students have produced. Talk through how *you* would remember the key takeaway points and model how to construct a good concept map, mind map or memory palace. A gallery of memory aids helps them see what good revision notes look like. History students must have a deep foundation of subject knowledge but also need to learn to take control of their own learning – their metacognitive ability to employ effective and flexible strategies that help them memorise and recall the key features of the past is crucial in achieving success in history.

This means we need to be explicit about *what* they need to remember and we need to explicitly teach them *how* to remember. In lesson planning, we therefore need to think about the following:

- Why are we doing this? (Relevance)
- What do you want the pupils to take away from the lesson? (Building the big picture)
- Where will we help pupils with how to remember these key takeaways?
- How will we check understanding? (Retrieval practice and low-stakes testing)
- When will we return to this? (Interleaving and revisiting)

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Resources linked to this article

For further discussion of the ideas described in point 3 of this article see the Raising Attainment section of www.thinkinghistory.co.uk.

In *Teaching History*, for example, see the articles by Nick Dennis in number 164 and by Michael Fordham in edition 166 (and the references therein) on cognitive psychology and allied issues.