

Building explicit understanding of historical periods into KS3 planning

The simplest way to begin is with examples of enquiry questions which may develop students' understanding of historical periods:

'Nasty, stupid and stagnant.' Is this a fair summary of people and their lives in the Middle Ages?

Was the Early Modern period really so different from the Middle Ages?

Has the modern world been war-mad since 1750?

Such overview questions can pull together the work students do on a period of history but then lead into a second, equally important question:

How helpful is the name of this period for understanding events and people's lives at this time?

This can then prompt students to suggest alternative names for the period or a different set of start and finish dates.

There's a discussion of these sample questions and other issues related to individual periods later in this article but, first, what are the potential benefits of this approach?

Why use questions about periodisation to help plan KS3 courses?

Teachers refer to periods a great deal but you have to ask explicit questions about periodisation to help students realise that (a) such period names are constructs, not a set of unchallengeable names, and that (b) every term has advantages and problems though, to be honest, there's very little value in the three terms in the questions above i.e. the Middle Ages, Early Modern and Modern.

Here are some of the likely benefits of such questions and linked discussions about periodisation:

1. Such questions give students plenty of practice in using essential historical language but, more than that, they are having to think about the strengths and limitations of each term.
2. This work shows that periods are constructs and so can be discussed and challenged in terms of whether they enhance or distort our understanding of life at the time and also in

terms of the suitability of their date boundaries. This emphasises that history is about debate: students can practice selecting and arguing with evidence when answering these questions.

3. Questions engage with students' preconceptions about periods, creating the opportunity to move students' thinking forward. Failure to identify and work from students' preconceptions (however vaguely held) is a major obstacle to effective teaching

4. These questions build a deeper understanding of the diversity of each individual period, challenging generalisations which limit and distort understanding of life in the period. This provides good practice in exploring the advantages and disadvantages of generalisations.

5. Such broad questions help students develop an overview of the past, something that students struggle with, especially if their work focusses almost entirely on individual events.

6. Focus on the variety of life and ideas within periods is excellent preparation for work at GCSE, especially for Thematic units where students need a strong understanding of major developments and the pace of change within a period rather than, for example, assuming there were few, if any, changes in the 'stagnant' Middle Ages.

Questions about the Middle Ages

People's ideas about life in the Middle Ages are almost universally negative. In his book *Medieval Bodies* (2018) Jack Hartnett quotes from research undertaken by a London museum which asked people what they thought they'd see if projected into the Middle Ages or the Renaissance and how they'd feel about the world around them. Hartnett quotes two typical responses:

There are soldiers, peasants, high castles, muddy lowlands ... Black Death and Plague are all around. It's raining. People are drunk on mead and fighting among themselves.

The sunshine sparkles, there's a little glade and a little lake. There's philosophy, people sitting round talking about politics, books. Music ... I want to stay and dream.

No prizes for knowing which period each refers to!

Such negativity about the Middle Ages is also reflected in the results from Jason Todd's research into students' perceptions of the period. Therefore it's vital, as argued ([HERE](#)) that students identify

their ideas about the Middle Ages in order to learn most effectively. Hence the suggestion of using a question such as

‘Nasty, stupid and stagnant.’ Is this a fair summary of people and their lives in the Middle Ages?

or, better, a similar question incorporating students’ own preconceptions in the quotation, based on identification of these preconceptions before teaching begins.

Some comments on this question:

- ‘stagnant’ could be seen as a ‘difficult’ word but students often enjoy the challenge of such words! Plus it’s a variation on the over-used ‘continuity’ and much more nuanced too.
- words such as dirty, superstitious, selfish and miserable could also be used. However I opted for ‘stagnant’ because it combines the erroneous belief that there was so little change in the Middle Ages with a sense of people wallowing in poverty and dirt.
- different Y7 classes can have different sets of words in their questions if they have different preconceptions about the period at the outset.
- the question wording relates to political events as much as to social history – all the classic political topics from 1066 onwards can inform answers. For example, ‘nasty’ can relate to political behaviour as well as to living conditions, ‘stupid’ can relate to people’s choices and problem-solving, assuming that work enables students to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of much medieval problem-solving, whether it relates to agriculture, politics, warfare or social welfare.

One final point – there’s many ways of defining the Middle Ages. Historians use this term to refer to c400 to c1500, c1000-c1500 and several other combinations. Is it important that students are aware of how flexible this term is? Maybe it’s more helpful to know that it’s a flexible phrase than believe it has only one set of date boundaries? Which brings me to the date 1066 which plays a major part in defining the beginning of the Middle Ages in the KS3 curriculum. In some ways it’s an obvious starting point but it’s also problematical and can lead to the omission of some very important developments. Hence I’ll be writing a separate article on 1066 and its role in planning [\(HERE\)](#).

Questions about the Early Modern World

A strong candidate for the most unhelpful period name - doubly unhelpful because (a) it's not telling us about the period but only about its relationship with earlier and later periods and because (b) that reference to modern is saying 'Phew, at last we're moving on from that terrible time, The Middle Ages. Things change and improve at last.' Hence the suggested question:

Was the Early Modern period really so different from the Middle Ages?

This change the emphasis to similarities and differences with Middle Ages, not to a 'better future' which students haven't yet studied and the assumption of constant progress towards a better world.

One way to illustrate this idea is to create a timeline and place topics on the timeline to show when they saw the greatest changes. A host of topics central to day to day life continued to see gradual or occasional change during the Early Modern period just as had done in the Middle Ages. These topics include farming and harvest dependency, life expectancy, health and medical care, the size of the population, the extent of urbanisation, transport and communication, care for the poor, the role of religion in people's lives, the power of the landed classes, the extent of the right to vote, attitudes to gender, policing, pastimes and ways of having fun, types and hours of employment etc.

Some topics (e.g. urbanisation and population size) saw more change in the Middle Ages when, contrary to many assumptions and, I fear, some GCSE specifications, significant changes and developments did take place, even if not with the frequency and the scale of the changes from the 18th century onwards. So much seems to depend on our assumptions – it's too easy to pick out continuities in the Middle Ages if our perception of the period is of continuities and stagnation, too easy to pick out changes if we are enticed by the 'Modern' in Early Modern. The more we underestimate changes before 1500 we overestimate the degree of change between 1500 and 1750

Hence the importance of seeing developments in the really long-term if we are to help students gain an overview of the past at KS3. Religion is a good example. Yes, there's a major change in the branches of Christianity that people in Britain belonged to in the 16th century but step away from the narrow focus on church-going Christianity and we see that the role of religion in people's lives and the diversity of religion in Europe hardly changes in the Early Modern period in the west. Far greater changes took places later – in Christianity with the freedom created by industrial towns and with the development of a multi-faith society in the 20th century. Not only that, the Reformation can

hardly be seen as progress towards modernity (as implied by the Early Modern label) when it led after 1500 to a vast increase in persecution and murder for religious reasons.

None of this denies that changes did happen in this period. Some things begin to change but there's a danger of over-emphasising change to fit that 'Early Modern' label. For example, there were elements of change in diet, the relative power of monarchy and parliament, empire, industries, the relationships between the countries within Britain, the nature of warfare and in other topics but none saw the revolutionary changes that they experienced later in history.

One possibility therefore is to ask students whether there's any need for a break in periodisation before c1750. If the periods we routinely refer to as 'The Middle Ages' and 'The Early Modern period' have far more similarities than differences then why create a split which distorts our understanding of that pattern of similarities and differences and of the overall story of gradual change all the way through to the 1700s? How about the Age of Harvest Dependency c400 to c1750? What other ideas can students come up with and will this help them develop a stronger, more realistic overview of the past? And with so many schools moving to a 2 year KS3 maybe there's a pragmatic value to such an approach too?

And by way of conclusion on the unhelpfulness of the 'Early Modern' label here's a distinguished historian, Blair Worden, in his review in *The Literary Review* of Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England*, 2018:

'What is it about the three centuries from 1500 that makes them an appropriate subject of study? Have they their own unity or distinctiveness? Patterns within the period prove elusive.'

As with 1066 I plan to discuss the role of the Renaissance in KS3 planning separately.

Questions about the Modern World

The years since c1750 are normally split for planning purposes into two periods – The Industrial Revolution and history since c1900, maybe 1914 – but if the Industrial Revolution has been the motor for so much that took place in the second of those periods then why not help students see the links by treating this more explicitly as one period? Hence using an overview question such as:

Has the modern world been war-mad since 1750?

This question has the immediate value of exploring students' understanding and interpretation of the word 'modern'. Do students associate 'modern' with things – computers, mobile phones etc – or with ideas such as progress and improvement and believe that history is the story of the unending improvement of life over time? It's likely that both these will be in students' heads (even if implicitly held) in which case how do they handle the paradox of 'modern' society witnessing so much war and extremism, especially since the early 20th century?

Some further comments on this question and periodisation:

- this question may help create a stronger balance in schemes of work in terms of topics studied. We can see a great deal of improvement in many parts of the modern world – much longer life expectancy, better health, reduced infant mortality, improved gender equality, the spread of the right to vote and education, new working opportunities because of industrialisation, improvements in communications, technology, transport, opportunities for migration and the greater diversity of faiths. But clearly there are many negatives too, not least the frequency and scale of wars and their long-lasting effects, the impact of industrialisation on many lives in the 19th century, the impact of empires, climate change, extremism etc. A question which prompts an overview of this wider period may help students develop more perspective on the recent past. This could include, for example, discussion of why wars have occurred in the last 250 years – have reasons changed, are they different from the causes of wars before 1750, have there been periods of relative peace and why?
- this doesn't mean an end to detailed enquiries about, for example, the causes of the Great War or the rise of Hitler but they can be studied in their own right and contribute to answers to the bigger question.
- this kind of overview question may also help create a more balanced understanding of the impact of the Industrial Revolution. A great deal of work on this topic paints a profoundly negative picture and, to an extent, rightly so. My own great, great grandmother died of cholera in a Liverpool slum in 1849 so I'm not going to downplay some of the horrors that flowed from rapid urbanisation. But other members of my family migrated to the same city, finding work and opportunities they had not had before. They may well have been excited by such opportunities, as many people were. Hence the big Modern World question can

easily subsume and be informed by this kind of sub-question: **Was the Industrial Revolution a time of misery and exploitation or of opportunity and improvement?**

- one final issue here is the use of the word 'world'. Most KS3 schemes are very focussed on Britain (England?) but do broaden in covering the 20th century though again this tends very much to involve exploring conflicts rather than looking at societies at peace. Maybe there's the opportunity, however brief, to look at the extent and impact of modernisation world-wide?

[As an aside, 'war-mad' is an echo of an SHP GCSE book on the Roman Conquest of Britain, written by Chris Culpin c1989 but never published because of the advent of the National Curriculum. 'War-mad' was used in an enquiry into Iron Age society. I've enjoyed applying it to the modern world!]

Beyond Britain and Europe

This brief section is about identifying issues, not providing answers, at least for the moment.

'.. a little consideration reveals how profoundly political the act of demarcating historical periods can be ... As serious students of history, we may like to think that our own chronological demarcations are more subtle, better justified, less ideological ... Even as historians come to recognise Eurocentrism in many of its guises, we continue to operate within many of its central categories (such as 'the modern').'

Professor Rebecca Spang, *History Workshop Journal*, 2007 (see Links below).

It's understandable that students assume that terms such as Middle Ages and Early Modern apply to the history of 'everywhere'. This can then lead to an expectation that all societies experienced the same patterns of change at the same pace of change. Should this issue of the diversity of periodisation from culture to culture be tackled in a KS3 scheme of work? That's obviously a question for individual departments but it wouldn't be difficult to challenge this assumption by asking 'if you were living in society X would you use the term Middle Ages in explaining the history of your society?' Of course, the main problem for most of us is that we don't have the knowledge needed for this kind of task but, hopefully, helpful material will be added to this website in due course that offers ways of tackling this issue.

Teaching and materials

How much teaching time would this approach require? Probably a lot less than might appear from this lengthy discussion! There's a need for time to introduce and conclude the enquiry but you need such lessons for the sake of coherence anyway. In between, references and questions need only be occasional and brief, sufficient to keep students aware of this big enquiry. Whether the time taken is too long depends on the value you place on teaching explicitly about periodisation.

Resources linked to this discussion will appear on website as part of work on Middle ages

By way of conclusion: What understandings about periodisation might we want students to take away from KS3?

Some possible objectives for students to achieve during KS3 based on the discussion above:

1. the ability to use accurately a range of common terms relating to historical periods and their approximate date boundaries
2. awareness that historians and others have split western history into periods and that it's possible to suggest other approaches to periodisation.
3. awareness that the periodisation that we commonly use does not apply to or help us understand the patterns of history of other societies.
4. Students become aware of their own preconceptions of a period and how this has changed during their work
5. knowledge of the major developments in a period and a deeper understanding of the diversity of people's experiences within a period.

Links

For an example of an overview activity on wars from c1000 to c1900 see

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BigStoryConflicts.html>

For material exploring the Industrial Revolution developed by Professor Hannah Barker, Sarah Alderson and Historic England see

<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/-were-mills-and-factories-the-only-basis-for-the-industrial-revolution-in-manchester-12048824>

For a discussion by Nick Dennis of issues related to the absence of Black and British Asian history from the curriculum

<http://www.nickdennis.com/blog/2019/01/06/absent-from-the-curriculum/>

For a range of resources written by teachers which explore events world-wide see

<https://meanwhileelsewhereinhistory.wordpress.com/>

For the short introduction by Professor Rebecca Spang to a collection of articles on periodisation in *History Workshop Journal* see

http://history.furman.edu/benson/hst121/Spang_Feldman_Periodization.pdf

A TED talk by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - *The Danger of a Single Story*. This does not relate directly to periodisation or the Middle Ages but I think there's overlapping ideas – do students only receive a single story about the Middle Ages or about periods

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=social&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_content=talk&utm_term=

The prehistory of enquiry questions

This use of questions about periodisation takes me back to the very beginnings of the use of enquiry questions in the 1980s when such questions were developed as a means of giving coherence to a range of content that might otherwise have seemed just one darn thing after another. I think that period of the mid-80s to the mid-90s can be termed the 'prehistory of enquiry questions' as much was happening that wasn't recorded in the pages of *Teaching History*. In my memory (which could be fallible!) enquiry questions appeared out of the mix of changes taking place in the 1980s, especially GCSE replacing O level and CSE and the planning that went on before the first teaching

of the National Curriculum in 1991. Colin Shephard and I both ran workshops on using enquiry questions to give greater coherence to courses at this time at HA Conferences, the first SHP Conferences and other CPD sessions– and we used them in the first National Curriculum publications we edited for John Murray and OUP. So really there's nothing new in this particular article!!