What time does the tune start?: From thinking about ‘sense of period’ to modelling history at Key Stage 3

A ‘sense of period’ is the contextual backdrop to the study of any aspect of history. As experienced historians, we can tend to take for granted both our structural map of the past and our rich descriptions of different periods. The ability to draw generalisations about certain periods, is arguably just as vital as recognising the diversity within that period. Yet how is such a sense acquired? Ian Dawson

As experienced historians, we can tend to take for granted both our structural map of the past and our rich descriptions of different periods. The ability to draw generalisations about certain periods is by now very familiar to readers of History articles, Dawson explores a definition of the term ‘sense of period’. He takes us through some familiar activities that perhaps haven’t worked so well in the past and suggests alternative questions and approaches.

The idea for this article came from my puzzlement over the idea of a ‘sense of period’. It is a sense I use a lot, from mulling over the motives of fifteenth century men and women, to guessing the dates of effigies before I read the information boards. Sense of period is also integral to the perspective history provides on our own time and lives. That perspective requires awareness of the continuities and disparities between ourselves and people of other times; what we have in common with our forefathers and what we do that would leave them utterly perplexed.

What intrigues me is that I have never been taught to develop a sense of period. It seemingly happened while I wasn’t looking. Nor have I ever taught anyone to develop their own. And yet, it is in the 2008 National Curriculum, so I really should think about how to teach it. I realise that I need to be much clearer in my mind about what ‘sense of period’ is, so I will start by the beginning by trying to define it.

What is ‘sense of period’?

In Penelope Lively’s The Driftway, Paul, full of resentment until …

...I realised that I need to be much clearer in my mind about what ‘sense of period’ is, so I will start by the beginning by trying to define it.

Confession time: how to tackle ‘sense of period’ badly.

In the past, I had a vague awareness that I needed activities to develop pupils’ sense of period but the key word here is ‘vague’. I never thought it through carefully. There are some good individual activities on developing a sense of period in the pages of Teaching History but sometimes we can learn more from less successful efforts, so here are two activities of mine that, in practice, do not achieve much.

1. Spot the Anachronism activities

You know the sort of thing: ‘Can you spot the anachronisms in the picture?’ e.g. the Roman soldier wearing a watch. Fun, possibly even useful for filling ten minutes, but, as an individual activity, it is of no value because it does not lead to any other learning. It can only have value if it is used to start students thinking about contrasts between different periods. Areas for questioning might include, what other concrete differences can you suggest? Given these concrete differences between past and present what questions do you want to ask about the ideas and attitudes of people at that time? How far do you think their ideas differed to those people have today, or to those people in other periods had? It is a way of helping students to begin constructing Figure 1 themselves.

2. Concluding ‘ideas and attitudes’ activities

Imagine you have spent time investigating the Middle Ages. You might pull threads together with an activity such as that in Figure 2, a reduced version of a textbook activity that I now feel unhappy with. This activity seems more demanding than spotting anachronisms because it deals with ideas, not ‘things’, and because it is distinguishing between ideas within the Middle Ages rather than simply between the Middle Ages and today. Yet when published, it was placed at the wrong place in the learning sequence – the end. Students can do it, but what follows? Where does the activity take them? For this activity to be of value it needed to be at the beginning to help students ask questions about the ideas and attitudes of the period and then deepen and use their understanding in the ensuing enquiry.

The Historical Association

Ian Dawson

Ian Dawson is SHP Publications Director, a National Teaching Fellow and creator of www.thinkinghistory.co.uk

Figures 1 & 2: Ideas for defining sense of period
The limitations of these individual activities made me realise that, to work effectively on sense of period, it is essential to ask where it fits into the whole process of ‘doing history’ and what it contributes to a history course at Key Stage 3. But that requires a clear idea how Key Stage 3 History works as a whole course, not just as a series of exciting individual enquiries and activities. We need to hear the music, not just the individual notes!

**What time does the tune start?**

> ‘What sort of music are you going to make me listen to tonight?’
> ‘Jazz.’
> ‘Obviously. But what kind of jazz?’
> ‘Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?’
> ‘I know three kinds. Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?’
> ‘What time does the tune start?’
> ‘Obviously. But what kind of jazz?’
> ‘Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?’
> ‘I know three kinds. Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?’
> ‘What sorts of music are you going to make me listen to tonight?’
> ‘Jazz.’
> ‘Obviously. But what kind of jazz?’
> ‘Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?’
> ‘I know three kinds. Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?’

I suspect ‘what time does the tune start?’ sums up the struggle many students have to make sense of Key Stage 3 History. They enjoy the notes - individual lessons and activities - but many students have to make sense of Key Stage 3 History. I am slightly nervous about this figure because historians often feel uncomfortable with models. We are always aware of exceptions, but I suspect new teachers may appreciate something like this to make sense of what they are doing and to communicate to their students how history works. And models are there to be debated and developed, rather than unthinkingly followed. I cannot say too loudly that this model is offered as a launch-pad, not a straitjacket.

**So, how does this model work?**

1. **Enquiry.**

Enquiry runs through this model like Blackpool through a stick of rock because enquiry is the glue that holds everything together. Four points are critical:

a) Enquiry must be seen as a repeatable process, along the lines of ‘question, hypothesis, testing, reformulation of hypothesis,’ that students can explicitly explain and re-use with increasing confidence and independence across Key Stage 3.

b) Enquiry is at the heart of arguments about the value of studying history. It helps students, parents and school management see the important benefits of studying history, thinking and planning a way through a problem by research, asking questions, independent thinking and effective communication.

c) Having a scheme of work full of enthralling enquiry questions is not enough to develop students understanding in Key Stage 3 History could inter-relate to create a course (see Figure 3). I am slightly nervous about this figure because historians often feel uncomfortable with models. We are always aware of exceptions, but I suspect new teachers may appreciate something like this to make sense of what they are doing and to communicate to their students how history works. And models are there to be debated and developed, rather than unthinkingly followed. I cannot say too loudly that this model is offered as a launch-pad, not a straitjacket.

For a scheme of work full of enthralling enquiry questions is not enough to develop students understanding in Key Stage 3 History could inter-relate to create a course (see Figure 3).
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.

c) Students often tackle enquiry through mysteries of the ‘What happened to the Princess in the Tower?’ type. These activities can be valuable as a means of identifying and clarifying the process of enquiry, but otherwise have limited value; one-off activities divorced from the rest of the course. Enquiry needs to be embedded into the warp and weft of Key Stage 3, by which

What intrigues me is that I have never been taught to develop a sense of period. It seemingly happened while I wasn’t looking.

I mean the relationship between two other core components – the thematic stories and the depth enquiries.8

2. Thematic stories.

These, the core of the content studied, provide two things:

a) they show students what ‘doing history’ produces; that the results of all these enquiries, of the myriad pieces of research undertaken by historians, are narrative accounts and explanations of developments over time.

b) To return to my musical metaphor, thematic stories are the tunes that students can sing on leaving Key Stage 3. They link all those bits of history across time and are the content take-aways that can give students a sense of achievement: ‘this is what I know and can understand after doing history’.

Three other points about thematic stories are also important:

c) When I started thinking about thematic stories, I saw them as narratives that students built up across Key Stage 3. That now seems rather impractical because it means that students only see the completed stories at the end of their course. Students would make far more sense of these stories across time if they met them in complete, simplified form from the beginning of their course. Each story needs to be visible and tellable in one lesson.

d) Treating the thematic story as a hypothesis to be investigated and reformulated through depth enquiries. Thematic stories are therefore intertwined with depth studies by the process of enquiry. And this should help students see that thematic stories are not unchallengeable constructs, but that they keep changing as more is discovered or different approaches to enquiry are taken.

e) These thematic stories raise the question of what kind of knowledge we want students to take away from Key Stage 3? Is it an overall history of Britain, as was assumed for so long to be the objective, or is it an ability to tell several of these thematic stories individually? Perhaps this is a more realistic, more achievable goal?

3. Depth Enquiries.

Depth enquiries do not stand apart from thematic stories. We use them to test the validity of the interpretations in the thematic story or, as Rogers has described, to enhance students’ understanding of the inter-connectedness and significance of events including links to the present. Figure 4 shows a handful of question types that could be revised to fit individual localities or individuals. Some of these could be used across Key Stage 3 to test an outline story of ‘standards of living’. The graph is one of my own devising, but does not claim to be utterly accurate. Total accuracy is not the point.

The purpose is to give students an outline to question and revise through their enquiries, which then becomes their own account, their own piece of history.

One result of this inter-relationship is to make us look hard at our enquiry questions and activities. To be puritanical, choosing a depth enquiry solely on the criterion of interest will not do, if it does not also test and reformulate the relevant thematic story. Figure 5 provides an example of this in the well-worked context of the Norman Conquest and the thematic story of ‘conflict’. I suspect that the most common enquiry questions on 1066 are ‘Who would you choose as king after Edward died?’ and ‘Why did William win at Hastings?’, but neither of these questions fit into this broader study of conflict which revolves around investigating ‘Why have people risked their lives in warfare?’ Within this broader context, neither of these smaller, familiar questions lead anywhere as what is learned is not going to be re-used later in work on conflict. However, asking ‘Why did so many people risk their lives in war and rebellion between 1066 and the 1070s?’ provides the means to test the initial outline story for one period and reformulate the story for that period. It could then provide a basis for helping students create their own questions around this theme and for comparisons with events today. The argument could be raised that the enquiries are repetitive, but it is the very repetition of the enquiry, set in different periods, that enables students to grow in confidence. We want them to think, ‘I know how to go about this kind of enquiry’. We want them to be able to compare across time periods: ‘In the 1060s the motives were x and y; which of those motives also existed in the 1960s?’

4. Process and concepts.

These are the tools we use when undertaking enquiry: the use of sources as evidence, an understanding of causation, similarity and difference and, among others, ‘sense of period.’ Like the other concepts, ‘sense of period’ is important because it helps us answer questions. As an example, another classic topic is the execution of Charles I in 1649. To place this event in a long time-frame, we need to make connections between 1649 and what happened in 1215, 1327 and 1399; other occasions when kings were in conflict with elements of the ruling class, but which led to different outcomes. To
The Historical Association

Figure 5: Embedding sense of period into enquiries about conflict

**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 in 1066-1071? Then revisit Stage 1 hypothesis for 1066-1071.

**STAGE 3 Outline**

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

**STAGE 4 Depth Enquiry**

Why have so many of our families risked their lives in wars since 1900? 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?

This article will not leave you thinking ‘I would love to try that out next week.’ Articles on long-term planning do not have that effect because they focus on the head, rather than the heart of history teaching. However, I will finish with the most important thing I have learned in the 30 years since I first had an article in Teaching History. No matter how good our planning, no matter how carefully thought-out our objectives, they matter not a jot if we do not communicate to students that history is our valentine, the subject that makes us smile with our hearts.

**REFERENCES**

5. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of making clear to students what they can gain from studying History. See Harris, R. and Rout, T. (2008) ‘Children’s ideas about school history and why they matter,’ Teaching History 132, Historians in the Classroom Edition especially pages 44-45 for students’ difficulty in explaining why history is useful.
6. For further discussion of ‘ enquiry,’ resources to help students identify the process of enquiry and resources linked to the activities on everyday life and conflict over time described below see www.thinkinghistory.co.uk

The Historical Association