

4. Telling your Big Story of Medieval Britain

Teachers' Notes

Introduction

This chapter is an experiment in helping students build up their own overview of medieval Britain by working through a set of layers from a very simple to a more complex overview. It's the first time I've written anything quite like this so, while the idea seemed simple in principle it's been hard to create. The historical information has had to weave a path between noting individual events and covering longer-term developments such as climate, population and the development of villages and towns. It's been equally tricky to work out the layers that help students build up their own picture, but I've clung to my own experience that overviews seep into our brains most effectively through learning in layers and revisiting those layers.

My main hope is that these resources provide a stimulus for departments and also trainees and their tutors to discuss how they could develop and teach overviews effectively. Overviews in my view are essential, providing a distinct contribution to understanding the past and, secondly, because creating an effective overview may free up teaching time, perhaps creating space for the histories of other places and cultures. If anyone uses these resources with KS3 students then that's a bonus.

One thing that might strike you when flicking through the pages is that some of them are very wordy, especially pages 6-10 and 12-13 which provide the bulk of the historical information. I did consider writing two versions of these pages, with a second level at a less demanding reading level, but in the end decided that I could write four or five versions and still not find the right level for a lot of classes. Therefore I have stuck to just the one version and assume that you will adapt this to the needs of your classes – it's far better for you if I write too complex a text and leave you to adapt it than for me to write a sparser text and leave you to add material, especially if you're not familiar with this period.

Terminology 1: I've tried to avoid suggesting that this chapter is setting out the 'one and only' Big Story of Medieval Britain. My first title referred to 'the Big Story' but I dropped 'the' and now use 'my' and 'your' instead to emphasise that the versions I have told are just my versions. This is also addressed explicitly in places (see page 13 for example).

Terminology 2: lots of terms are used for overviews e.g. outlines, big pictures, themes etc. I have stuck as closely as I can to Big Story so that students don't get tripped up by one of these other terms and are left wondering if it's the same thing or something different.

Resources

- A chapter of text for students which resembles both a textbook and resource book.
- PowerPoint slides which will help with the practicalities of teaching
- a scripted drama 'Journey to the Middle Ages' which can be used in conjunction with or instead of part of this chapter. This can be found at <http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/JourneyToMiddleAges.html>

Objectives

Using these resources will enable students to:

- a) develop an outline knowledge of medieval Britain, both in terms of broad developments (such as the importance of the harvest, the pattern of population change) and some individual events
- b) identify some of the major changes and continuities, challenging the assumption that nothing really changed in this period
- c) appreciate that people adapted to changing circumstances and handled crises and deserve respect for their ability to do so.
- d) develop an understanding of the value and dangers of generalisations
- e) think about the comparative roles of depth enquiries and overviews for learning about the past

On page 14, as in other chapters of this online book, students have the chance to identify their own takeaways (objectives) which has a powerful impact on the effectiveness of learning.

Using the Resources

There are several routes through this material and therefore decisions to be made by teachers. In writing this I have not expected classes to use all the pages – instead I set out to provide alternatives for teachers to choose from. These are explained below.

Getting Started: Pages 1-3

Page 1 and PowerPoint slides 1-4 introduce the idea of a Big Story as opposed to a Depth Study – the questions on page 1 are a means of getting students thinking about what they might learn from an overview. No-one should expect detailed and wonderful answers – but asking these questions and giving students thinking time is important for identifying what this chapter is about.

Before you move onto page 2 another question that's important to raise is how students see life in the Middle Ages i.e. what are students' ideas about the Middle Ages – how do they see the period? Was there much change? What colour/s spring to mind to represent the Middle Ages? Many adults see the period as one of continuity, perhaps stagnation and see it as one period, not as five centuries or many generations, coloured dark grey or muddy brown. These questions are a lead into page 2 and the core activity of the chapter.

Pages 2-3 and PowerPoint slides 5-7 provide the first layer of the story, an inaccurate one but this is about getting students to challenge that standard, gloomy interpretation of the period. I've set up that view in the grey and brown timeline on page 2 – a story of continuity and hardship. Students are asked to use the cards on page 3 to look for evidence that either supports or challenges that story of continuity and hardship. You could use the 9 cards on the page, or cut them into a set of cards for sorting into categories, perhaps on a continuum of change and continuity or of hardship to fun.

The aim here isn't to pore lengthily over the details but to start ideas flowing – ask students what's surprised them about the information on the cards and why is it surprising? Question 3 also looks ahead to the next stage by asking students to think about which other colours could be used in the timeline, based on the cards on page 3.

This chapter doesn't set up a specific enquiry question to pursue but this initial timeline in grey and brown can create an enquiry question if you wish – 'Was life in medieval Britain really so harsh and unchanging?' This can be revisited later in the chapter at intervals.

Finally, it may be unusual for an author of material for schools to identify him or herself so clearly but I think it's important that students know books are written by individuals with opinions of their own – particularly in this case to avoid the belief that there's only one unquestioned Big Story.

Core Activity: Pages 4-10

Pages 4-5 and PowerPoint slide 8-11 set up the core activity, asking students to create their own timeline and the colour code to tell an outline story of the Middle Ages.

Page 4 sets up the overall idea by providing a more complex timeline in terms of colours, keeping the two original colours of brown and grey but also differentiating the centuries by colour - red for danger for the 11th century, amber for slow change for the 12th century, then dark green (13th), black (14th) and blue for the 15th century. The colours make a very broad generalisation about each century, generalisations students can challenge during this activity.

The bulk of page 4 provides text which tells the story in the timeline in colour, providing a possible model for how students might go about telling the story themselves. I haven't added tasks here to focus students on the details in the text – that will vary so much from class to class it's better to leave that to individual teachers but the main drive will be to get students to pick out of the text the reasons for using each colour and why brown and grey remain.

Page 5 then provides the core activity relating to the text on pages 6-10 and a discussion of the value and problems of generalisations. I wanted this discussion to be explicit somewhere in the chapter but where you tackle it is clearly up to you – I think it may help best here to reduce the possibility that some students may think that the best answer is the most-multi-coloured. Clearly there's a balance between too few and too many colours in order to achieve clarity.

Pages 6-10 and the scripted drama provide the material for the core activity. The text on these pages may be too demanding for some students but I have assumed that you will adapt them to the needs of your classes – you know those classes and I don't, as I said in the introduction.

The pictures of people in the margins of pp.6-10 are not of real individuals but are there to show some styles of clothing.

Where does the scripted drama *Journey to the Middle Ages* fit in? You could use it first as a lively and different activity – having read it aloud in class students could be organised into 'century

groups' with each group using the information from the script to suggest how they would colour in their century in the timeline. Alternatively you could use it as a back-up later, though I think this would have less impact. The feedback I've had from teachers who have used this script has been extremely positive about students' recall and interest with teachers being surprised by how much students remembered from just one reading and, in one case, asking to read it again just before Christmas.

Other choices – does the whole class tackle the text for all the centuries or groups tackle individual centuries. If they have all read the whole drama script and got a sense of the whole then this makes splitting the centuries around the class less of a problem in terms of them all gaining a sense of the whole period. But those decisions have to be taken for each individual class.

The content for each century is clearly my choice – and a hard one it was with a maximum of around 500 words per page. I would have liked to include more art and culture but brief references aren't necessarily useful. Other people would choose other details and topics and you may wish to add in other emphases. Pages 15 and 16 provide two extra pages of information about the inter-relationship of the countries within Britain which you could decide to use if you wish.

If you wish to have students working on creating a more conventional timeline of events the activity on pages 17-18 asks students to create a timeline from a set of dates and clues. This could be run as a homework alongside the core activity.

Conclusions: Pages 11-14

Pages 11-14 and PowerPoint slides 12-16 provide conclusions to chapter and again you have choices about which pages you use and what order to use them in.

Page 11 firstly discusses idea of learning by building up an overview in layers. This is included because it's important to help students think explicitly about how to learn effectively. The rest of the page contrasts the different kinds of things we learn from an overview and a depth enquiry – you can add more ideas of your own here – this relates back to the questions on page 1.

Pages 12-13 provide another version of the Big Story in two pages. This is essentially to be read though there are a couple of questions at the end and you can obviously add your own if you wish. This is more detailed than the story on page 4 and introduces a few more details but really this is about adding another layer of reinforcement and you can return to the possible enquiry question

here if you have used it – ‘Was life in medieval Britain really so harsh and unchanging?’ As with pages 6-10 you may wish to write your own version to suit the needs of your classes.

Page 14 provides asks students to think about what they’ve learned from this chapter, about the Middle Ages, about overviews and about the process of learning. This page repeats the approach taken in each of the other chapters of this online book – a strong focus on metacognition.

Additional Material: Pages 15-18

Pages 15-18 Additional pages of material on the relations between the countries of Britain and an activity creating a timeline – as noted above these pages provide material which aren’t essential for the core activity but you may choose to use. See above for possible uses re pages 6-10.

Reading

If you aren’t already familiar with this period there’s an introductory reading list here:

<http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/IntroReading.html>

And the book I’d pick out above all is:

Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850-1520*,
Yale UP, 2002