

The importance of keeping Enquiry Questions flexible

This brief item is idealistic. It's a plea to adopt a flexible approach to asking enquiry questions with all age groups, from KS1 to A level. I accept that it won't appeal to departments who want everything cut, dried and adhered to, especially regarding assessment but I hope it may encourage those who put learning before assessment and want to help students develop the abilities to use the enquiry process independently and ask good history questions for themselves.

1. Firstly, a reminder of why we want to develop students' ability to pursue enquiries. It's to help students:

- Gain confidence, satisfaction and enjoyment from their work in History because the enquiry process provide continuity in students' experiences throughout their studies of history
- See the process of 'doing history' as a whole rather than involving work on individual concepts and content
- Understand why studying History is of value beyond the classroom

Finally, and crucially, the enquiry process develops students' ability to work independently by:

- Providing a clear structure and a sense of direction that students can follow
- Reassuring students that it is acceptable to know little or nothing at the outset, that uncertainty is a natural part of studying history and that 'changing your mind', otherwise known as 'developing your hypothesis' is a positive part of the process, not a weakness.
- Helping students become confident that they can move from knowing little to knowing a great deal about new topics. Enquiry is, in effect, a form of problem-solving.

2. To help students develop the ability to study independently we need to help them ask questions themselves. It's impossible for students to do this if they're only ever answering questions posed by teachers. This means creating the opportunities for students to investigate their own questions or to adapt the questions initially posed by teachers – this, in turn, requires a flexible approach from teachers and departments to the enquiry questions students explore. Teachers therefore need freedom to adapt lessons and sequences of lessons as those lessons develop, even if this means moving away from pre-planned departmental assessment opportunities based around specific second-order concepts.

3. It's therefore essential to give students of all ages practice in asking questions – and to be explicit in explaining that they're practicing asking history questions and why this is important in studying history. You can, for example, start a new topic with a brief story, source or other stimulus material and ask students 'what questions do you want to ask?' 'what do you want to find out?'. This helps to give students agency – they can suggest questions that matter to them – and then you can help them decide which specific question or questions you'll explore – and with a little guidance this may not be far from the direction you want to take!

4. Another way forward is to suggest alternative wordings for questions around the same theme and conceptual area. From there it's a small step to remaining flexible in the questions you and the class pursue – with the aim of the questions becoming 'their questions', giving them a sense of ownership rather than the questions being yet more tasks set by teachers.

5. As I said at the beginning, this is a plea to adopt a flexible approach to asking enquiry questions with all age groups, from KS1 to A level – enabling students to gain practice in asking questions. Without the ability to ask and pursue their own questions, students are not truly developing independence as learners and they're missing out on learning about a key element in the enquiry process. Students also need to feel they have agency in determining the questions they're exploring, not just answering them! Asking good historical questions is a key part of students understanding of how to study history and a sign of inventive and high-quality thinking.

This may, in turn, mean being much more flexible with a department's assessment scheme but sticking rigidly to a pre-ordained set of enquiry questions does seem to be putting the administrative needs of assessment before educational aims.

It's also very rewarding for teachers to feel they're developing students' ability to ask questions and work independently – and the value of professional satisfaction should never be under-estimated.

For a lengthy discussion of *'The nature and significance of Enquiry in history teaching'* see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/EnquiryImportance.html>

And other material on enquiry and independent learning is available here:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/index.htm>