4. Telling your Big Story of Medieval Britain

Teachers' Notes

This resource was heavily revised in August 2021, reducing the number of pages from 18 to 11. This streamlining involved simplifying the core activity and removing some text though some of the features removed are available in the PowerPoint resource.

Introduction

This chapter is an experiment in helping students develop an overview of medieval Britain – a simple sounding idea but it's important that I begin by explaining what kind of overview I mean. I haven't created an activity aiming to give pupils a list of events one after another in strictly chronological order – that's a different activity and details of one such activity is listed at the end of these notes. What I have focussed on is the pattern of changes and continuity (e.g. longer-term developments in climate, population and the development of villages and towns). Individual events are mentioned and the core material is set out century by century but the overall aim remains focussed on changes and continuities through the core activity.

The activity therefore begins with two myths about the Middle Ages – that nothing ever changed and that life was always hard and difficult – and the aim is to use the core activity and text to challenge these myths. The task is for pupils to choose colours (for a colour code list) which represent the main features of each century – blue for optimism, green for rapid change etc. I haven't set up an enquiry question or a big written activity but the timeline in grey and brown on page 1 can create an enquiry question – 'Was life in medieval Britain really so harsh and unchanging?' – which could be answered by way of conclusion.

Some warnings:

One thing that might strike you when flicking through the pages is that some are very wordy, especially pages 3-9 providing the historical information. I did consider writing a second level at a less demanding reading level but decided that I could write four or five versions and still not find the right level for a lot of classes. Therefore I've stuck to one version and assume you will adapt the text to the needs of your classes – it's far better if I write too complex a text and leave you to adapt it than to write a sparser text, especially if you're not familiar with this period.

Terminology 1: I've tried to avoid suggesting that this chapter is the 'one and only' Big Story of Medieval Britain, hence using 'my' and 'your' to emphasise that more than one version can be created. This also explains why I've identified myself so clearly as the author 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.

Terminology 2: lots of terms are used for overviews e.g. outlines, big pictures, themes etc. I have stuck 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.
- PowerPoint slides which may be used instead of the text in places
- 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: https://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 11, 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

The core activity

Page 1-2 and PowerPoint slides 1-4 introduce the main task of creating a coloured timeline, the colours representing different aspects of the period to create a sense of change and variety of experiences. You could use either the slides or the pages to introduce the activity.

Page 1 and/or slide 2 introduce a grey and brown timeline, the colours representing lack of change and hardship. Use this to find out whether this is how pupils see the Middle Ages or whether they have knowledge that challenges this interpretation.

Page 2 and/or slides 3 and 4 set up core task, asking pupils to:

- Find evidence to support my choice of a third colour for each century
- Choose a fourth colour for each century which represents an important aspect of the century concerned. Together the colours create a broader picture of each century and of the whole period.

Other questions you could ask include once the tasks on page 2/slide 4 are completed:

- Which colour do you think dominates each century and why?
- Would you like to use more than four colours for any of the centuries – and why?

Pages 3-7 and the scripted drama provide the material for pupils to use 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.

How could you use the scripted drama *Journey to the Middle Ages*? You could use it first as a lively and stimulating activity (but pupils need to familiarise themselves with it, perhaps at home, rather than going in 'cold') – if you read it aloud in class students can then be organised into 'century groups' with each group using the information from the script to tackle the core activity.

Alternatively you could use it for reinforcement later. Feedback from teachers on the script has been extremely positive about students' recall and interest with teachers surprised by how much students remembered from just one reading and, in one case, asking to read it again just before Christmas.

Other choices – using the Eleventh century with the whole class to model the activity seems a helpful way to start and then you can decide whether all pupils tackle all centuries or do one or two as homework and then complete the others in class or split the centuries up around groups in the class. 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.

Choosing the content for each century was hard 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.

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.

Debriefing and conclusions

Pages 8-11 and PowerPoint slides 6-11 provide conclusions to consolidate pupils' learning and some of the slides can be used to introduce new ideas.

Pages 8-9 provide an overview in two pages, another layer of reinforcement focussing on changes and continuities. This could be read at home, using whatever questions you wish to devise and this might be the place to return to the possible enquiry question – 'Was life in medieval Britain really so harsh and unchanging?' and ask pupils to write an answer or summarise the main features of an answer or whatever type of answer suits your needs.

Page 10 and slides 5-8 provide wider possibilities for discussion, depending on whether these ideas fit your plans. Slides 5-6 look at the advantages and disadvantages of generalisations and page 10 and slides 7-8 contrast the different things we can learn from an overview and a depth enquiry.

Page 11 and slide 11 provide the main conclusion, asking students to think about what they've learned from this chapter, repeating the approach taken in each of the other chapters of this online book – a strong focus on metacognition.

Linked Resource

If you wish students to work on creating a more conventional timeline of events then see 'The Middle Ages: What happened when?' an activity which asks students to create a timeline from a set of dates and clues. This could be run as a homework alongside the core activity.

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/MiddleAgesWhatHappened.html

Reading

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

https://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