The Impact of the Normans: A Character Card Activity

This excellent activity comes from **Catherine Priggs** who has done both a great deal of research to create the character cards and has suggested a wide range of ideas for using them to develop students' understanding of the impact of the Conquest.

I took part in a CPD session at SHP Conference in 2016 when Catherine showed us the potential in this activity and I'm very grateful to her for contributing her work to the site.

Catherine is an Assistant Head at Woodlands School, Essex and if you use twitter you can hear from her @CatPriggs

Core Activity

There are 30 character cards providing biographical details of individuals who lived through the Conquest. Distribute the cards amongst your students so they each identify with the person on their card. Then set them a task or task – a variety of possibilities is listed below.

While Catherine originally devised this activity with GCSE in mind, one of its great strengths is its flexibility in terms of:

- **which age-group you use it with** – KS3, GCSE or A level

- **what objectives you have** – consequences of 1066 but possibly also work on interpretations, how we know and developing understanding of the enquiry process

- **when you use it** (to begin a unit on impact and create hypotheses or later to test initial answers or revision)

- **how you use it** (in the classroom or for research or consolidation at home)

Three other things which are important to mention at the outset:

1. This is an excellent activity for really deepening students' understanding of the complexity of the impact of 1066 and for greatly increasing their depth of knowledge in a way that has a much higher chance than most of sticking in their memories. At the same time the physicality of the approach makes the complexity very accessible.

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2. It's a great model for applying to other topics – so don't switch off if you don't teach 1066.

3. And you can use it with much small classes – see below!

Possible objectives and uses of the character cards

What follows isn't a step-by-step guide to using the activity because it's a resource you can adapt to a variety of teaching contexts. Here are some of the possibilities – some could be seen as degrees of demand or you could well use more than one of these approaches as you progress through the course which has the advantage that students gain confidence because they become used to the nature of the activity.

Note – you may wish to have a map of England visible for reference because of the references to places in the cards.

Simple

Find someone who has benefitted from the Norman Conquest *or*

Find someone who has suffered from the Norman Conquest *or*

Find someone who has had a similar experience to you

Then ask them to explain their choices to the whole class.

A bit tricky

Find someone you might have had something in common with **after** the Conquest

Find someone who may have been affected by religious change

Then ask them to explain their choices to the whole class.

Harder

(Students here are acting as historians rather than identifying with the individuals and they're looking at interpretations)

Find someone whose experience you can use to corroborate your own knowledge of the impact of the Conquest

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Find someone who challenges Simon Schama's theory that change after he Conquest arrived "**in a violent rush,"** and that the change was **"decisive, bloody, traumatic"**.

(the latter could also be done to support the theory – if you do both it would help discuss the lance of the argument and why historians have different views)

Categorisation

Continuum line work - organize by

a) lots of change to little change

b) loyal to disloyal to Normans;

Timeline - Get into chronological order – what can this tell us about change over time?

Developing generalisations or hypotheses to test

As an introduction to the impact of the Conquest – give students a set time (e.g. 3 minutes) to speak to 3 other characters. After they have done this they have 3 minutes to create a generalisation about Norman England, then see if they can find anyone in the room whose experience can be used to challenge their generalisation.

Generalizations/hypotheses could be about:

- the impact of the Conquest in general or on a particular aspect such as religion or landowning

- the extent of rebellion in Norman England

- did William try hard to win the support of the English immediately after 1066?

Exploring the value of Domesday Book

As an introduction to Domesday Book use the cards containing references to Domesday – ask students to work out from them what kinds of information are in Domesday and why it's useful to historians.

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Building knowledge of Who's Who

Ask students to create groups of people who had strong connections or things in common – how many different groups can they come up with? (some overlap e.g. Odo is both a bishop and relative of William, hence the value of identifying a variety of groups). There is a character card for everyone whose name is underlined the cards - this is will help students see links between the individuals.

This could link to this activity which aims to help students build their knowledge of the individuals in a Depth study:

https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhoIsWho.html

There might also be a value in organising the individuals on a notional map – who's mostly linked to the north, who to the south-west etc.

Other thoughts

a) Depending on your group and what will benefit them this activity could be used as a starter on the impact or part way through work on the impact to test initial ideas against individuals' circumstances. It could also be used as revision to consolidate knowledge.

b) You could give students sets of the cards to use for revision and set tasks using them – selecting individuals from the pack to support or challenge interpretations.

c) If you have a small class you can start with each group having a pack of cards to organize on their desks/tables in whichever ways you choose – then get them to explain patterns or choices to the whole class or explain the standpoints of individuals in role.

d) Show a few of the cards to an A level class, then set them the task of creating a whole set (you could give them a list of names or some names and ask them to find three others). This needn't be a whole set as that would be ambitious (especially given how much research Catherine had to do to create this set of cards) but if helpfully structured it could pass the initiative for creating part of the set to students.

e) use this as a model for a similar activity on other topics. Either create a complete set of cards to show the impact of whatever you are teaching or use these as a model and ask A level students to create some or all a set for themselves on The Civil War or whatever they are studying.

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