Journey into the Middle Ages

Introduction

I was initially sceptical about using 'scripted dramas' in the classroom. It sounded too much like 'reading round the class'. Then I met Kate Brennan who completely changed my mind with her demonstrations and her scripts. Kate's scripts were engaging, enjoyable to take part in AND full of difficult history, enabling students to remember and understand events and issues they struggled with. Done well, scripted drama is no easy option but a great way of deepening students' knowledge of a topic. It really does help students to learn effectively – more so than some traditional methods.

This scripted drama, *Journey into the Middle Ages*, offers students an outline of the Middle Ages, concentrating on life and events in Britain. I hope it does more than provide an animated list of events but is an introduction to broader patterns of life and to changes and developments which challenge stereotyped ideas about medieval life. It is, therefore, my interpretation – and that may be another value.

The intention is that the script be acted or read out in a single lesson so that students begin to get a sense of the outline. It can then be revisited as a text to consolidate students' outline knowledge. More on classroom use below.

Do treat this script as a template you can change and improve – and it's important to personalise it for each class.

To read more on the impact and use of scripted drama see this article by Kate Brennan, Helen Snelson and Ruth Lingard via the HA's One Big History Department resource:

https://onebighistorydepartment.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/scripted-drama.pdf

Objectives

By taking part in this drama I hope students will:

- gain an overview of some of the major events and people of the Middle Ages

- realise that there were changes taking place in society as well as continuities

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- think about how they see this period and realise that many negative interpretations of the Middle Ages can be challenged

- enjoy finding out about the Middle Ages and begin asking questions about the period

Three issues about using outline resources and the content of this outline

1. Building students' knowledge of overviews - one outline activity, such as this, isn't enough to give students a strong grasp of any overview. My experience is that students gradually acquire knowledge of an overview and it's important that they understand that it will take time - or their confidence may drop. Ideally they need to revisit an overview several times in different forms e.g. a scripted drama, an outline in more conventional textbook form, as a visual, annotated timeline, though a card-sort which challenges students to put their own outline together. This may sound demanding on time but if we want students to acquire knowledge of overviews this needs to be planned as carefully as any depth enquiry.

2. The content of this overview - once I'd written a couple of pages I realised this isn't an outline of the Middle Ages but an outline of the English Middle Ages with a few British bits thrown in. All exceedingly old-fashioned though it does fit in with what most people teach to Y7. What this suggests is that I need to write more outlines to go alongside this first one, outlines that could be used at other points in the course e.g. one that's truly British with each country having equal weight, one that's broadly European, one that embraces a range of world-wide cultures – parallel outlines rather than one 'one and only' outline. . But to do that I need to learn a lot more history! Writing the outlines of individual themes is much easier – royal power, standards of living etc – and worth doing in its own right to create links across KS3

3. What does an outline include? That sounds a simple question but once I started writing I realised it's not so simple. Does an outline just include events and people or does it introduce key ideas held by people at the time and/or interpretations of the period and/or tackle the kinds of preconceptions students may have of the period? In this script I have some of all these which hopefully adds to its value but did make it more complex to write.

In the classroom

1. Personalise the script for each class you teach. I envisage that Prof Botchit is played by the teacher who can thus set the tone and inject some drama. Use your students' names for the

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characters – e.g. Intelligent passenger 1 becomes Sarah, an intelligent passenger etc. This will take time to sort out but is hugely worthwhile in terms of students' involvement and commitment.

2. Choosing roles - there's a list of the 27 roles and how many speeches each person has (and in which Acts) at the end of the script but you can obviously change these around to suit your class.

I tried to give some of the passenger roles some consistency – the Rich Passengers tend to ask questions and voice negative views of the Middle Ages, Intelligent passengers ask more intelligent questions (I hope), Ruth talks about books she's read, Matthew picks out examples of medieval people being clever.

Some students could also be asked to be official 'listeners' and be given things to look out for if they are not speaking in an Act – this may help sharpen their concentration.

3. Use costumes, hats etc if you wish, get students out to the front for each act – or they can read it out from their seats. The 'how' obviously depends on you, your relationship with the class, the time of the school year, the nature of the school etc. I didn't add stage directions (about tone of voice etc) as it takes up space on the script and may distract students but you could add your own.

4. Act 7 provides a conclusion – a very brief one, identifying some of the many points that could be picked up for discussion. However you could decide not to use it – and ask students to create their own Act 7 in which they write up/act out their conclusions from the trip to the Middle Ages.

5. Ideally, use it all in one go first time through – any outline has to be covered quickly to be effective. This could be straight through without breaks between Acts or take a break between Acts to refocus concentration by asking questions about the Act just completed.

6. After that first time through you can revisit the script in different ways:

a) Use it a century at a time to consolidate knowledge of each century or as context for studies of individual events e.g.

- what are the three main events/developments in each century?

- how might students complete the interrupted sentence (see 11th century) 'What I'm going to remember is …?' You could discuss it for each century.

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- review the ‘Century of …’ title for each century. Are other titles more suitable?

b) concentrate on the overview by asking students:

- to track themes across the centuries e.g. issues about kingship, population change

- what mattered most to people?

- what were they good at?

- has the content changed students’ perceptions of the period (e.g. that nothing changed)?

7. Use the script to create a timeline summary for the Middle Ages, thus transferring information from one form to another. All the dates needed aren’t in the script but events mentioned can be looked up!

8. Re-use the script at the end of work on the Middle Ages as recap. Would students change or add anything now that they have studied the period? Would students write it differently? Do they agree with its overall interpretation of the period.

Creating outlines for classroom use

This is a list of some of the issues I encountered while writing this script:

1. Creating outlines is hard! One obvious reason is that I was tempted to include all kinds of interesting details but they obscure the outline. Getting the balance right isn’t easy!

2. It must not get too detailed. I discovered decades ago that for outlines to help students they have to be ‘visible’ in one lesson – the longer it takes to cover an outline the less effective it is. Students may also need the whole story in one act – two pages – perhaps a summary task for students?

3. We never feel we know enough history and this is very obvious when writing an outline. I worried about what I was missing out and whether I’d got the balance of coverage right. The perfectionist in me would have taken a year and still not been satisfied but it’s better to have something good enough to use with Y7 than have an unfinished document mouldering in my laptop. I – or you – can always improve it next time round.

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4. All the points above suggest that it's essential to identify what you want students to take away from the outline before you start writing. For examples of takeaway knowledge see the list of takeaways about some aspects of the Middle Ages on p.101 of the HA publication 'Exploring & Teaching Medieval History' which is abstracted here:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/PlanningAtKS3p101.pdf

5. Be kind to yourself in creating outlines. Most of us are used to studying in depth. We worry about making generalisations that don't stand up to scrutiny. We fret about criticisms from the pompous and pedantic who believe the only way to teach is their way. But if we don't help students see the longer-term outlines they won't be able to do it for themselves. Lessons which embrace outlines are too few and much undervalued – maybe they should be the bedrock of KS3 schemes of work around which depth enquiries are built?

Links

Kate Brennan, Helen Snelson and Ruth Lingard, 'The best way for students to remember history is to experience it!' Transforming historical understanding through scripted drama'

Teaching History 148, 2012, via the HA's One Big History Department resource:

https://onebighistorydepartment.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/scripted-drama.pdf

What time does the tune start? Planning at Key Stage 3: Helping students see the bigger pictures of the Middle Ages.

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/PlanningAtKS3.pdf

For other examples of outline activities and articles on using outlines in teaching see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityPeriod/ActPeriodOverview.html

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueKS3Intro.html

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