Key Principles for Teaching Thematic studies at GCSE

In this article our aim is to explain strategies which help students overcome the major problems they have in Thematic studies. These strategies have developed from lengthy teaching experience and are applicable to the teaching of all Thematic studies.

The examples are from our book on Medicine for the 2016 Edexcel specification but are just as applicable to other awarding body specifications and to other Themes.

1. Diagnose weaknesses in students' chronological knowledge and understanding

Chronological errors and uncertainty can cause major under-achievement. During the course itself, students' confidence ebbs away if they continue to be uncertain about the sequence of periods, their names and dates. In exams, mistakes in identifying periods and their dates could lead to students writing about the wrong period. Therefore it is crucial at the beginning of a Thematic study to diagnose any weaknesses in students' knowledge and understanding of:

- Period names and alternative names
- The sequence of periods and the approximate dates of periods
- The relationship between dates and centuries e.g. that 1439 is in the 15th century

It is also important to explain to students why this diagnosis is being undertaken and why you continue to work at this if weaknesses appear through the early diagnosis.

For exemplar tasks see Pages A&B of the examples HERE ...

Implications for KS3

Ensure this knowledge is consolidated throughout KS3 to reduce problems at GCSE (thus saving time) and to improve students' confidence. Don't just assume that students are developing their command of chronology but make sure they are building up the vocabulary of chronology they will need at GCSE.

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2. Establish the Big Picture immediately

Using a handful of lessons at the very beginning of a Thematic unit to build a durable overview is crucial. In other types of courses the creation of such an overview is less essential (though we'd argue it is still important) but in a Theme it really is vital. From the outset students need to be able to move confidently around the whole time period. Without this overview it's impossible, for example, to gain a good enough understanding the significance of each period as it's studied or to home in on the really important changes or continuities.

Consider the alternative – it's tempting to get stuck into the core detail by going straight into the Middle Ages but, while students will accumulate lots of knowledge within that period, there's no broad pattern to help identify the significance of this learning and that creates the danger of lots of reading and note-taking without any clear sense of direction. [The same problem exists for teachers new to a theme when reading up before teaching begins!]

Therefore it is vital to use the first week or so helping students to build an overview of the key aspects and events of the theme. The exemplar [Pages C&D] provide an example of an activity sequence that does this. In brief:

- Students are given a short summary of the key features and developments in the theme in each period and asked to summarise them.

- They then choose words or phrases (e.g. 'change', 'turning point' 'progress' that sum up the significance of the period within the overall story

- They create their own overview and re-tell it orally in a set time or write it down on, for example, one side of A4 at most.

Three points are worth emphasising:

a. don't waste time asking students to sort out what was happening in each period from 'sources' – give them a summary of each period to work with and so create their Big Picture overview from the Middle Ages to the present.

b. the use of key vocabulary relating to change, continuity and causation and also to major aspects of the theme

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c. the central importance of students creating their own overview and taking ownership of it in order to give this outline a chance of cementing its place in their memories. It is essential that students can reproduce a minimal overview prior to detailed investigation of individual periods and analysis of factors.

When drawing up summaries of each period for your students to use make sure these summaries are 'uncluttered' by excessive detail – students can acquire detail when they move on to study each period. Write these period summaries as mini-stories in their own right, avoiding disconnected facts if at all possible, and organize each period summary around the same headings [see the examples of period summaries on Pages C&D]

One challenge this may pose when first teaching a Theme is establishing in your own mind what counts as a minimum overview for the theme. However this is an important thing for you to work out, both to clarify the essentials for yourself and also giving an insight into the problems many students will face in developing an understanding of the theme.

Establishing this big picture of the theme at the very outset has a number of advantages:

- Students already have a basic understanding of periods when they begin to study them in detail. This increases confidence, reduces confusion and helps them focus on what is most significant in each period in terms of both changes and continuities.

- Students can make links and contrasts across time as soon as they begin the course in detail by studying the medieval period – they know what they are looking for.

- The overview can be used to generate questions from students when they begin work on each period in detail because they already have a grasp of the main issues and questions they are studying in the theme as a whole.

- Memory and recall is strengthened as students revisit that overview through their study of individual periods and relate it to new knowledge. Students are revising as they go along.

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Two final points in this section:

1. It is importance to have a visual representation of the overview on classroom walls and in students' books. This could take the form of an annotated living graph or a road map – whichever suits the topic best – plus their own written summary.

2. Take time after covering each chronological period in detail to revisit students' initial overview and update and amend it in the light of their deeper knowledge. Again this helps cement the overview in their memories. This is not time wasted.

Thinking History Activities

Activities on Thinking History which may help with developing overviews:

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

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

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

Implications for KS3

Students will find this approach of overview followed by deeper exploration of periods easier if they are familiar with it from KS3. However this approach is not simple mechanical preparation for GCSE but worthwhile in its own right, helping students place developments within a period in a wider chronological context and helping them see their KS3 history as a whole course, not the study of a series of separate periods. There are several activities on Thinking History which provide such overview activities, particularly:

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

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

See also:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityKS/ActivityKS3All.html#overviews

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3. Follow a core enquiry to create coherence across the Theme

How do you maintain the sense of history as an enquiry and help students see the relevance of the Thematic study to their own lives? There's a danger that it just becomes more 'stuff' to learn to pass an exam! In our 'Medicine' books in 2008 and 2016 and in Dale's teaching we have used an overall enquiry question to give the Thematic study coherence:

'Why do people today have better health and live longer than people in the past?'

Such an enquiry does not form part of any specification so why have we used this?

a. It unites the whole course and helps students to organize their knowledge. It is used at the outset to help students build their Big Picture outline because it is easier to do this in relation to a specific question than in a vacuum where information is not used for explanation.

b. It helps students see why the later specific 'period' enquiries have been set up.

c. It emphasises the centrality of enquiry in History and models good practise by encouraging students to refine their initial hypothesis.

d. It helps students relate their Development Study on 'Medicine' to the present day, showing how history provides a perspective on life today.

e. It helps create a sense of achievement in developing a deeper answer to the enquiry through the course than students can offer at the beginning.

However there is one important warning – the need to get the balance between keeping a core enquiry in mind and not overdoing it so that it generates 'not that again' responses or eats up valuable time. Maintain it with regular, light touches at the end of exploring each period in depth.

4. Introduce the key factors early in the course

Factors, in case you haven't met them yet, are the events or developments leading to change or continuity. Most specs identify the factors (e.g. war, science and technology, religion) whose effects students need to study.

It is important to introduce the key factors right at the beginning of the course, as part of the overview recommended in point 2 above, rather than wait for them to appear as part of the

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investigation of individual periods. At this early stage students will not have theme-specific knowledge to link the factors to but they do have their KS3 knowledge to use and they do have the capacity to think about the likely effects of factors.

The exemplar activities [Page E] show the kinds of activities that can be undertaken to get students thinking about the roles of factors:

- Identify the factors and give students brief descriptions of an event or development they'll meet later in the Theme – ask them to identify which factor/s are involved and what their impact was.

- Get students using their knowledge from Key Stage 3 of each major period to suggest which factors may have played the most important roles in each period.

One of the important points here is that students are not expected to be certain about the roles of the factors yet but that they have already built up knowledge in KS3 that will help them and they can begin to think intelligently about these factors. This builds confidence in their own learning – and maybe shows there was method in your KS3 History planning after all!

Implications for Key Stage 3

Build 'sense of period' work into Key Stage 3 so that students have a strong grasp of the key features of each period as well as knowledge of events and individuals. If they can bring those key features to GCSE and are able to compare and contrast periods through those features then they have a head start at GCSE.

Thinking History Activities

For activities which may help get students thinking about the roles of factors see:

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

5. Do continue to use stories about individuals and engaging activities

Some teachers assume that teaching a Theme is going to be dull because Themes are all about broad patterns and impersonal factors such as science or war. Themes aren't apparently about individual people and their experiences and therefore it's easy to think that this limits the scope for the kinds of engaging activities you may use in studying in periods in depth. This is NOT the case!

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The sample activity [Page F] for example, is a short decision-making activity in which students take the role of one of Charles II's doctors and choose the treatments they would employ when the King falls ill. It works very well as the first activity when studying the period 1500-1700 because, after it's completed and students find out what Charles' doctors did actually do, they can identify similarities and differences from medieval methods, creating a hypothesis about the degree of change that had taken place between 1500 and 1700. That hypothesis then sets up the study of medicine in this period in more detail.

That is just one example of the kind of activity or story about an individual's experiences that can encapsulate the nature of developments in a Theme within a period, whether the Theme is medicine, war, punishment, migration etc. Equally, using the stories of two or more individuals can show how generalisations about periods have to be handled carefully.

Thinking History Activities

For a range of other activities for teaching Medicine and Crime (which also provide models for other Themes) see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityKS/ActivityGCSEAll.html#medicine

6. Use individual people to help students remember and revise the big stories

Individual people are usually far easier to remember than technical developments, important laws or the moments when a factor suddenly changed the history of the Theme. Therefore use individuals to help students develop and reinforce their knowledge of the story of the Theme as a whole.

For example, create physical activities where students are given in tabards, each bearing a name. These need not just be significant individuals in the history of the Theme but also include people whose experiences exemplify key features of a period.

- Can they organize themselves by period?
- Can they sequence themselves in chronological order?
- Can they identify any links between individuals?

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- Can they tell their story in one minute, explaining their own significance or how their experience encapsulates the story of the Theme at that time?

- Can they identify the factors that affected their experience or breakthrough?

Next time give students a different person from a different period and get them to prepare in advance, bringing along a prop or picture to illustrate their role or experience.

And use photographs of these activities for class displays and the power of the personal reference to help recall - 'Do you remember when Natalie was Edward Jenner?'

7. Explain to students why they're studying a Theme across time

This is the idealistic bit! It's not essential for exam success and it will take up a little time – just a fraction – but it plays a part in students' broader historical education.

a. How does the Thematic Study fit into the GCSE course as a whole?

   This new 2016 GCSE course may look odd, even random, to students who are far more likely to say they've done 'Medicine, The Norman Conquest etc', an apparent jumble of bits of the past. In fact this GCSE structure provides students with a **deliberately diverse** set of approaches to history, of periods of history and of cultures. Therefore help students see this richness and variety by explaining this structure so that students understand how their whole GCSE course fits together and particularly what the aims of the Thematic Study are.

b. How does the Thematic Study inform students' understanding of their world?

   Bringing the history of the Theme up to the present day is important but even more helpful is to use students' newly acquired knowledge and understanding to reflect upon current news items related to the Theme. If this is not done explicitly then the Themes remains 'just' history and does not have the chance to demonstrate the value of studying the past for understanding the present.

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