Creating an overview resource for KS3 on Medieval Britain – the dilemmas

I'm writing this with the dregs of energy left after finishing *Telling Your Big Story of Medieval Britain,* a resource for KS3 that you can find via the link at the end of this article. Although the broad idea had been in my mind for some months and I was excited about it, the actual planning and writing were much harder than I expected, far harder than writing a depth enquiry. This may be surprising as I've written a number of Development Study/Thematic Study/Overview books for KS3 and GCSE and run plenty of CPD sessions on teaching overviews – I think this just shows that creating this kind of resources is genuinely difficult. Hopefully, explaining the dilemmas I faced may help teachers putting together their own resources – at the very least it may be reassuring if you find it tricky too.

1. What content do I focus on?

Some overviews are much easier to write because they are overviews of single themes – Medicine, Punishment, Leisure. However this is an overview of a period so it possibly includes lots of those single themes. So where should I put the emphasis – on events that are familiar, the classic 'history as general knowledge' events or 'bigger' themes such as changes in population, climate, urbanisation etc?

My answer to this was to think about the likely preconceptions that KS3 students may have about the Middle Ages. The research suggests that many people – adults and youngsters – have a deeply negative view of the Middle Ages and see the period as an undifferentiated grey mass occasionally populated by knights in armour and damsels in distress (though hopefully not dragons!) And the events people are aware of are almost all violent in one way or another.

Taking this as a starting point I decided that I wanted students to have a different perception of the period so I set out to help students appreciate that there were plenty of changes as well as continuities between 1000 and 1500 and changes that had long term effects on the way people lived. I also wanted students to realise that people were not hapless victims of events beyond their control but were capable of improving their own lives. Out of that came the wish that students could see a pattern across the Middle Ages, that centuries were not all the same but had, in a very generalised way admittedly, key features of their own.

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That pattern pushed me towards focussing on those bigger themes (population change etc) rather than the individual events you find on a timeline. The difficulty with putting events at the centre is that it doesn't create a distinctive pattern in the same way. So if you read pages 6-10 and then 12-13 you'll find the bigger themes of continuities an changes emerging more strongly than perhaps might be expected.

One last point here – I'm not expecting students to have detailed recall of all the information I've provided but to move on in their perceptions of the Middle Ages. How far they move on clearly relates to their starting point but that's the only way of measuring progress – how has their understanding of the period changed along with their ability to explain their understanding using details as evidence. That said, the scripted drama is brilliant for enhancing recall and understanding.

2. How do I tell the story?

If you tell the story of a single theme you can use a graph or other diagrammatic approach to tell the story alongside the words but this doesn't work successfully with an overview of a period where there's so many themes juggling for space. I could have just stuck to words but I felt I needed something more, something visual that the text could relate to. I don't know how the idea of using colours to tell the story dropped into my mind but it felt worth experimenting with, especially as it helped considerably with the idea of the value and dangers of generalisations. Perhaps it all came from that original idea that people think of the Middle Ages as grey or muddy brown – so what colours would I use for each century? That would show very obviously that the period was not one unchanging mass – and is one colour per century too much of a generalisation? Could students grapple with several colours per century without it becoming too complex?

So the idea of using a colour code to explain the key features of each century became the bedrock around which I built the chapter. The other key element was to build in levels of story, starting with a very simple story in a few lines (it's on page 2) that could be questioned quickly with just a few resources, then a more detailed summary at the level of one colour per century (page 4) that then sets up the main task for students, to use the text I provided to colour in their own timelines and so tell their own story of the Middle Ages. I also needed to model the task (page 4 again).

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So that was the structure settled, along with other features that are part of all the chapters in this *Medieval Lives Mattered* project – talking explicitly to students about how to learn more effectively and asking them at the end of the chapter to identify their own takeaways so they have to focus very clearly on what they think they have learned.

3. How much text?

This is where I wobbled most, especially after a preview of the very visual first page on twitter brought a lot of interest. But, I thought, the core pages are much less visual, much more wordy. Will everyone flick through and say 'that's just too hard'? So how did I end up with wordy pages?

The first decision was to use just one page per century. Using more meant the whole task would take ages and it would look as if it would take ages when teachers flicked through the pages.

The next stage was to try summing up a century in 520 words – a full page. It's quite a task of compression but do-able (hopefully!) – it seemed to work but compressing it further in prose looked really hard. The trouble is that 5 pages full of text may look too demanding, too threatening for some students.

So for a while I thought about writing two versions for each century – the full 520 word version and a reduced version with headings, shorter sentences, maybe a few bullet points. That would maybe look less intimidating – and for a few hours that was the way I decided to go and then … I changed my mind and stuck to the one long, wordy version. Why?

The reason is that teachers can do this abstraction better than I can because they know their classes. I would just be guessing if I provided a second version. I realised that my version can be used by some teachers but others can simply use it as a quarry – it provides the information that they can pick and choose from to write their own version of the 11th century etc. It makes more sense for me to write a full page which you can adapt than for me to write half a page and leave you to add more, especially if you're not too familiar with the period. So I'm not saying that my text should be the text you use – it's simply a base from which you can create your own version.

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4. Are there other resources that could be used?

I've never been good at 'just' using a book – books are very important, central to studying history, but we all benefit from variety so I wanted to add the opportunity to do some of the work in a different way. That's where the scripted drama *A Journey to The Middle Ages* came in as it provides an alternative to the core text pages 6-10 discussed in point 3 above. In fact the drama script has more content in it even though it won't look like it at first glance and the feedback I've had has been very positive about students' recall after using the script. So this offers teachers a choice – to begin that section of the activity with the script and use the text as back-up or just use the script or use it at the end to revisit the overview as a fourth layer. The choices are yours! See the teachers' notes for this discussion.

5. Easier Issues!

a) Do I have an Enquiry question? I do but it's implicit – the question is based around the very simple outline on page 2 i.e. 'Was life in medieval Britain really so harsh and unchanging?' This can be revisited later in the chapter at intervals but I've left it implicit rather than adding an extra layer of 'stuff' to do in addition to creating the coloured timeline. Again – see the teachers' notes.

b) Do I include anything on what historians say? I've referred to historians' work in the other chapters of this online book but in this case I've just used a few book covers to show the kinds of topics historians write about. Historians' interpretations would just be an issue too many to juggle. The nearest I got was when I realised I was veering too close to the 'Postan thesis' in simplifying discussion of the impact of the effects of population growth and decline and momentarily wondered if I could refer to Postan and more recent research and arguments – and then I thought 'stop being daft, there's no room!'

c) How do I avoid making it look as if there's only one right version of the Big Story? I fell into this trap at first as I initially called this chapter 'The Big Story of Medieval Britain' which implied there was only one 'proper' version. I then added 'Telling the Big Story …' but that didn't solve the problem. Hence I finally stopped referring to THE Big Story and changed the title to 'Telling your Big Story …' and built clear references into the text to the fact that other writers would include other details and emphasised that this is my version by adding my photograph to identify that this chapter is written by an individual, in contrast to most school texts where the author is virtually anonymous.

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So that's it.

Having explained those dilemmas I can see why writing this chapter took longer and was a far more intense experience than I expected. That said, I'm glad I struggled with it and came up with a structure (built around the layers and colours) that may help students develop an overview of medieval Britain. It would be nice if some teachers use it – or an adapted version of it – but more than that I hope it provides an example that helps teachers, trainees and their tutors discuss the nature of overviews of periods, how to build them into schemes of work and what impact such an overview might have on what else is taught.

Telling Your Big Story of Medieval Britain is at

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section4.html

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