

New, Novice or Nervous?

The *quick* guide to the 'no-quick-fix'



This page is for those **new** to the published writings of history teachers. Every problem you wrestle with, other teachers have wrestled with too. Quick fixes don't exist. But if you discover others' writing, you'll soon find – and want to join – something better: an international conversation in which others have explored, debated and tackled *your* problems. *This edition's NNN problem is:*

What makes a *good* enquiry question?

You can see the value of a carefully crafted enquiry question in securing both rigour and engagement. You already use enquiry questions to plan short, structured sequences of lessons that culminate in a substantial concluding activity to assess and reinforce pupils' learning. And yet...

Sometimes your enquiries seem less like an open-ended journey of exploration and more like an intellectual cul-de-sac. Pupils, far from being curious and intrepid explorers of the past, are behaving more like reluctant conscripts. The enquiry question, rather than capturing and sustaining their imaginations, seems to *bore* them. When you introduce the final outcome activity you find yourself looking out at a sea of blank faces, some uninterested, others clueless. Your enquiry has fallen flat.

How could others' work help?

What makes a *good* enquiry question? While curricula and specifications come and go, this is a question that never ceases to be relevant. Teachers over many years have reflected on the fundamental principles that underpin the crafting of an enquiry question.

A good place to start is **Riley (2000) in TH 99**. Riley's work showed how carefully-crafted enquiry questions, carefully positioned across Key Stage 3, can capture pupils' interest, secure rigorous substantive knowledge *and* conceptual understanding, and yield meaningful assessment through a substantial and enjoyable outcome activity.

Riley and Byrom (2003) in TH 112 built upon Riley's earlier work. They set the challenge of designing a good enquiry question within the wider context of the challenges faced by history departments in knitting together individual enquiries into coherent medium-term plans. In particular, they were concerned with how enquiries can be used to develop broad and coherent knowledge.

Now take a look at **Burn, McCrory, and Fordham (2013) in TH 150**. Tackling head on the view that the demands of GCSE require a 'content-coverage' approach, they argue that the same principles underlie effective teaching for students of *all* ages. In doing so, they show how enquiry questions can be used to build secure subject knowledge and to help pupils deploy it more effectively to explain, analyse and argue.

To see a teacher wrestling with the *process* of constructing an enquiry question, read **Fordham (2012) in TH 147**. By making explicit the process by which he developed and subsequently revised and refined a single enquiry question, Fordham models the kinds of professional thinking that underpin the crafting of a successful enquiry.

Meanwhile, inspired by Riley, **Hier (2001) in TH 103** sought to develop a genuinely collaborative approach to planning enquiries. Central to the department's approach was the use of peer review to stimulate debate

within the history department about the coherence, validity and wording of enquiry questions.

While these articles reflect explicitly on the principles underpinning the crafting of a good enquiry question, simply open any edition of *Teaching History* to find other teachers grappling with the same challenges in their own planning. So join in and start wrestling your way to that winning question.

