



## The problem page for history mentors

This feature of *Teaching History* is designed to build critical, informed debate about the character of teacher training, teacher education and professional development. It is also designed to offer practical help to all involved in training new history teachers. Each issue presents a situation in initial teacher education/training with an emphasis upon a particular, history-specific issue.

Mentors or others involved in the training of student history teachers are invited to be the agony aunts.

### This issue's problem:

Sam Holberry is getting very confused about the concept of similarity and difference

Sam Holberry has returned to his main training school after a short placement in another school. Although he found it challenging to work with students he didn't know, he enjoyed seeing a wider range of practice and is grateful that the experience prompted him to look carefully at different exam specifications, alerting him to important distinctions between them of which he had previously been unaware. Unfortunately, one specific issue, related to the exam boards' treatment of the concept of 'similarity and difference', has left him pretty confused. While he had previously felt that he was well supported in his main placement, he is now beginning to question whether he has been getting the right advice, and doesn't quite know where to turn.

Sam first encountered the second-order concept of 'similarity and difference' in his Key Stage 3 teaching. The head of department, Fergus, had encouraged him to focus on differences *within* groups to develop a more nuanced picture of life in the Middle Ages, looking not just at the pattern of farming over the course of the year, for example, but also at the differences between different sorts of villagers, all of whom Sam had initially classed as 'peasants'. Fergus had suggested that Sam could build on this idea in a later Year 8 enquiry about the impact of the British Empire in different contexts, stressing that the focus of the enquiry and of the students' analysis should be on the extent of variation *between* different parts of the Empire and the peoples within it, rather than simply considering how the process of colonisation (in general) transformed people's lives.

Sam had felt that he was beginning to grasp this distinction until he was asked in his second school to teach a short series of lessons within the Year 10 thematic study of medicine over time. These lessons included work on a practice question about similarities between people's reactions to the plague in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. When Sam expressed his surprise that the mark-scheme referred explicitly to the second-order concept of similarity, rather than to change and continuity (which is what Fergus's explanation had led him to expect), the regular class teacher suggested that he must be confusing 'similarity and difference' with 'diversity' which used to be part of the National Curriculum before it was dropped in the 2014 version. Sam is now bewildered by the conflicting advice!

## Sam's notes from a planning meeting with Fergus (the head of department in his main placement school)

Planning ahead for Year 8 (to pick up *after* my second placement experience)

- Take on responsibility for planning and teaching two weeks after I get back.
- Fergus is currently teaching the origins of Britain's Empire (with particular focus on America and India); the main focus is on motivation and factors/circumstances that made it possible (*causation*). He'll also teach the overview (long-term) *consequences* enquiry into the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on Africa, America and Britain.
- My next enquiry should build on this – but with scope for a more detailed focus on the *changes* brought by colonisation and the *similarities/differences* between different colonies.
- Could go for a provocative enquiry question – something like 'The British Empire was a catastrophe for the colonised.' How far do you agree with this claim? (Answers need to include reference to at least three different British colonies.) Perhaps find specific historians to cite/challenge in setting up the question. Or maybe make more explicit the focus on similarity and difference: e.g. 'How similar were the experiences of Victoria's colonial subjects?' or 'Did Empire mean the same thing everywhere?'
- Key advice from Fergus: remember that 'similarity and difference' essentially deals with the extent of variation within a particular time period whereas 'change and continuity' is concerned with the differences (or not) *between* one period and another. The enquiry obviously includes a focus on change over time (did being colonised make life better or worse than before?) but it also includes comparison between different contexts/people at the same time. Were the effects *equally* extensive/dramatic/devastating/positive etc.?

## Email from Fergus to Sam's mentor soon after his return from the second school

Hi Mary

Any chance of a quick word before your mentor meeting with Sam on Friday? He seems quite anxious about the plans that we mapped out last term for Year 8 – but I can't quite work out what's troubling him. I know he thought my aims for Year 7 were quite ambitious when I encouraged him to distinguish between different kinds of 'peasants' and the different roles that people played within a medieval village – but he seemed to grasp the importance of the concept when I talked about GCSE questions (admittedly from the old specs) that asked about the experiences or reactions of 'women' or 'young people' to the Nazi regime and rewarded recognition of diversity *within* particular categories or groups. But he seems to be focusing his British Empire enquiry entirely on change over time, emphasising the need for students to be able to compare one period with another (pre-colonial with the colonial era) and has effectively ignored my reminders about similarity and difference. I'm not sure if he just thinks that what I'm suggesting is too difficult (but is too polite to say so) – or whether he doesn't really get it.

Fergus

## Message posted by Sam on the history trainees' discussion forum

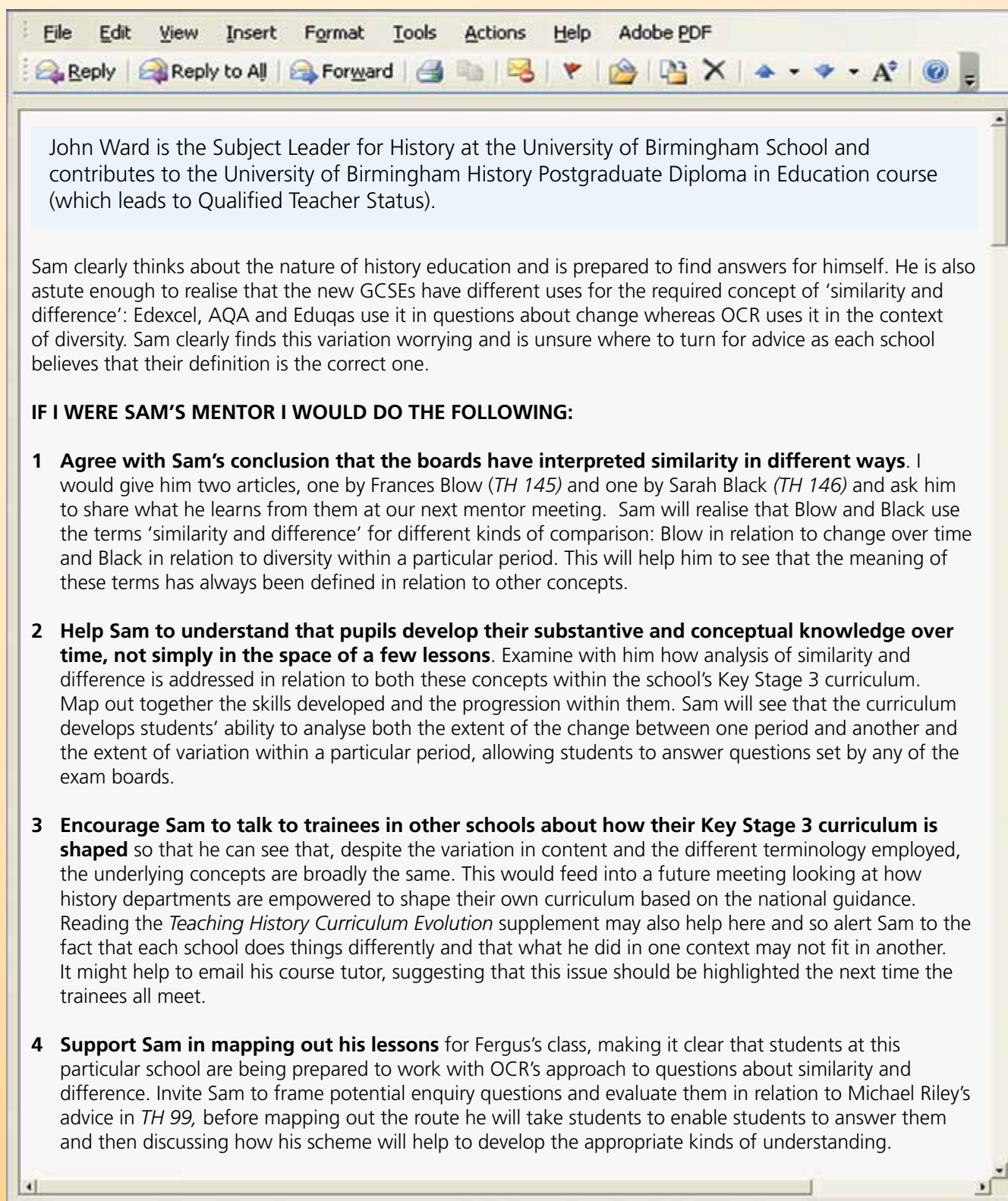
Can anyone help with some advice on 'similarity and difference'? I've received contradictory advice from my two different schools and I'm not sure what to think now! I've tried digging out my notes from the training days we had looking at the 'second-order concepts' within the GCSE national criteria, but have to confess that they aren't among my most lucid. I know we discussed the fact that different versions of the NC referred either to 'diversity' or to 'similarity and difference' and I thought I'd got a reasonable handle on things when my HOD encouraged me to look at different kinds of villagers in the Middle Ages (villeins, freemen, the reeve, women etc.). But the new GCSE paper for Edexcel has got a sample question about the second-order concept of 'similarity' that compares the 14th century with the 17th!. AQA seems to do the same thing – comparing the Peasants' Revolt with the Chartists. Does that mean my HOD has got it wrong? Is he out of date now? Or is he just following OCR? And if the GCSEs are different from each other should we follow them, or is there something more specific we should do at Key Stage 3? The NC itself seems pretty vague. I'm seeing my mentor to ask about it but any feedback about what other schools would be useful.

Hugh Richards is Subject Leader for History at Huntington School (11-18 comprehensive) in York and is a mentor and visiting speaker for the University of York's ITT programme.

Sam needs to clarify his thinking about two distinct issues. Initially, he must explore the meaning of 'similarity and difference' as a stand-alone historical concept. In this context he needs to understand that most schools' existing Key Stage 3 teaching may still be informed by the way in which the second-order concept of similarity and difference (or 'diversity' as it was then named) was defined in the 2008 National Curriculum. Only when this understanding is secure can Sam develop his awareness of how different exam boards have shaped its meaning in the context of different assessment models for the new GCSE.

### IF I WERE SAM'S MENTOR, I WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING:

- 1 Encourage Sam to observe colleagues from other subject areas with the aim of developing an awareness of the concept that is distinct from the specific content.** Students may encounter similarity and difference in a range of subjects: English language, human geography and religious studies to name just three. Ask Sam to observe the processes of learning involved with it and to consider what might make 'similarity and difference' in history distinct. Direct him to the 'New, Novice or Nervous' article in *Teaching History* 155. It is worth noting at this point that the processes of analysing and comparing remain similar whatever is being compared, whether this is across time periods or across different social groups experiencing the same event. Once he can appreciate this, it will be possible to start planning and teaching and exploring the different angles from which the exam boards have approached it.
- 2 Develop Sam's subject knowledge.** Breadth of knowledge really matters when exploring variations within a topic. In Sam's case, ask him to scan sections of Linda Colley's *Captives* or Ronald Hyam's *Understanding the British Empire* to get a sense of the wide-ranging similarities and differences in the human experience of the Empire. Briefly discuss his own process of learning at a mentor meeting, asking him to explain how this could inform his planning and perhaps suggest how extracts from these texts could provide materials on which to base his teaching. This process may also help Sam to understand the need for a solid knowledge base from which to explore similarity and difference.
- 3 Then ask Sam to plan his enquiry sequence for the Key Stage 3 British Empire topic with the emphasis on exploring the similarities and differences between people's experiences of empire.** Collaboratively review and refine this medium-term plan before embarking on the resourcing, delivery and evaluation. Focus here on questioning how conceptual understanding is balanced with, and dependent on, the students' growing understanding of the content.
- 4 Finally develop Sam's awareness of the practices of different exam boards through a comparative study of specimen papers and mark schemes.** Ask Sam to make a table or Venn diagram showing the common, and discrete, skills and attributes required of top-level answers, thereby shining a light on how different exam boards treat this concept. Sam's initial broader exploration of the concept should help him see that the exam boards' decisions are deliberate and in some respects constrained by the need for standardised assessment. While this is a somewhat academic exercise – since he will have to accept the emphases of his school's chosen board – the task retains merit in helping him to appreciate that exam boards can project a particular slant on second-order concepts, just as they shape the specific substantive content to be taught.



## Next issue's problem:

In her concern to capture students' interest, Jennet Preston tends to present people in the past as weird and wonderful aliens. For details of her mentor's problem, contact Martin Hoare at the Historical Association email: [martin.hoare@history.org.uk](mailto:martin.hoare@history.org.uk)

Responses are invited from mentors and trainers of trainee history teachers.

Responses for the September edition must be received by 17 October 2016

Sam and Jennet are both fictional characters. Thanks to Katharine Burn,

Department of Education, University of Oxford, for devising the Move Me On problem.