

What's the wisdom on...



similarity and difference

The purpose of this guide

This short guide provides new history teachers with an overview of the 'story so far' of many years of practice-based professional thinking about a particular aspect of history teaching. It draws on tried and tested approaches arising from teachers with many years of experimenting, researching, practising, writing and debating their classroom experience. It therefore synthesises core messages from key *Teaching History* articles, blogs and other publications. The guide includes a range of practical planning suggestions suitable for any key stage and signposts the basic reading essentials for new professionals.

A summary of the wisdom

How often have you found yourself challenging a pupil's use of 'they' or 'people'? How often have you teased them with, 'Really? All of them?!' Every time we do this, we are pushing our pupils to respect the complexity of the past. We are pressing them to use their knowledge in pursuit of more careful consideration of similarity and difference.

Or you may have made similarity and difference the central focus for a task or whole enquiry: *Who* supported the Nazis? What types of people joined the Chartists? How different was life in the countryside from life in industrial towns? Compare fascism in Italy and Germany. How far did campaigners for women's suffrage have the same aims? Such 'similarity/difference' problems require pupils to probe or question how historians group people, situations, structures or phenomena. These range from individuals, to villages, to systems, to cultures. When asked directly to analyse similarity/difference, pupils are being asked to consider how 'good' those groups are.

This has a long pedigree in schools. When a National Curriculum for history was introduced in England and Wales in 1991, it named 'similarity and difference' as a distinct concept, alongside causation and change/continuity.¹ For history teachers in England, similarity and difference is distinct from similarity/difference *over time*: that is change/continuity. Because things are always in flux, thinking about change/continuity is never far away but sometimes we choose to focus on a defined period in time, asking how far contemporary situations, institutions, ideologies, experiences or practices were similar or dissimilar.

In the 2000 version of the National Curriculum, the terms 'similarity and difference' were replaced by 'diversity'.² This led to a lot of confusion! Including diverse or representative content in the curriculum is one thing. But finding a particular analytic lens to ask questions of curriculum content, through a second-order concept, is quite another. Teaching about diverse experiences in the past – diversity in geography, religion, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality or gender – is vitally important, but is a matter of content. In the 2014 National Curriculum this confusion was sorted out, with similarity/difference restored as a second-order concept, and the very important requirement for diversity in content specified separately.³

Despite the conflation of content and concept in the 2000 NC, of course, many history teachers continued to use similarity/difference in a conceptual sense. The editors of *TH135* suggested things that pupils might do with similarity/difference, including discerning difference, questioning how people in the past are grouped, and re-shaping or refining those groups. They shared some enquiry questions which offered opportunities to focus pupils' thinking on similarity/difference. These included:

- Who were the Chartists?
- Who stormed the Bastille?
- Were all Indian nations the same?
- Who went to market?
- How different were Italian and German fascists in the 1930s?

One head of history, Bradshaw (*TH135*) led the way in starting to theorise progression in thinking about similarity/difference, outlining plans for enquiries exploring similarity/difference across Key Stage 3, from the local to the global. Experienced history teachers Byrom and Riley, in a CPD for the Historical

Association, explored *why* it was important to teach pupils to analyse similarities and differences, observing,

*discourse in history is impossible without... generalisation. The skill of the historian lies in managing the tension between making generalisations about past societies and revealing social complexity. To do history at any level we have to move between the two. Historians write of 'The Tudors' or of 'medieval villagers', and, at the same time, reveal the complex social reality that lies beneath these terms. ... 'To they or not to they, that is the question.'*⁴

Building explicit analysis of similarity/difference into our curricula also helps teachers to find meaningful questions to ask about past diversity itself. For a very thorough and practical exploration of how this helps, see McCrory (*TH152*). By drawing diverse content and means of analysing it together, McCrory shows how she built a more representative, authentic understanding of the past: one that includes the marginalised and avoids the dangers of a 'single story' which 'flattens humanity'.

What do historians do with similarity and difference?

Byrom and Riley took their lead from what historians do. So what does an historian's analysis of similarity/difference look like? Pick up a work of historical scholarship, and you will find passages where the historian is not primarily analysing causes or change (though these are always present to a degree) but deliberately questioning similarity/difference within a phenomenon or state of affairs. Whether Toby Green, writing, in *A Fistful of Shells*, of similarities and differences between African kingdoms in the period of the transatlantic trade, or Emma Griffin, writing of the lived experience of the industrial revolution as revealed by working class autobiographies, in *Liberty's Dawn*.

When historians such as Green or Griffin write about the past, they deploy categories and typologies to describe people, places, experiences and states of affairs. They write about Britain, or the Kingdom of Dahomey, about Kongo's political elite, the British, or the working class, about towns and countryside, men and women, Protestants and

Catholics. These categories, typologies and labels may be general and universal, carrying meaning across time: merchants, slaves, labourers, artists, artisans, migrants. Others are period-specific and topic-specific: suffragists, radical suffragists, suffragettes. Sometimes categories are taken as read, sometimes they are carefully defined, and sometimes they are problematised.

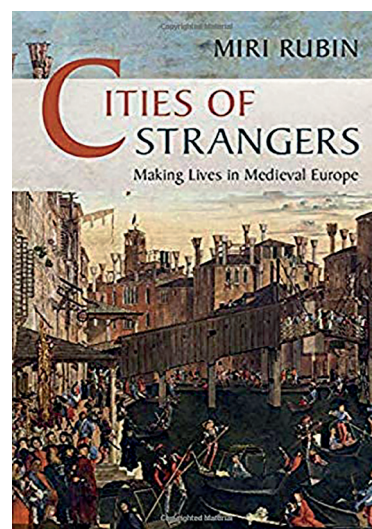
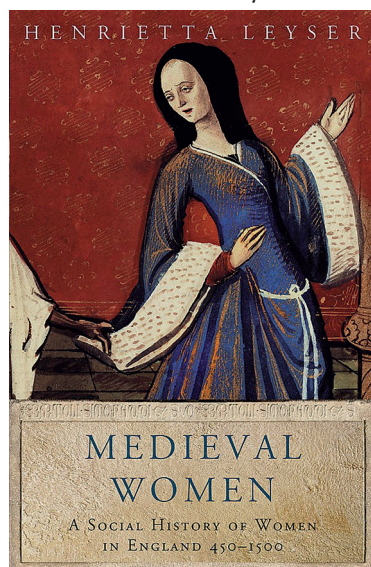
Let's look at how a couple of historians tackle this.

Henrietta Leyser, writing about medieval women, says, 'class is the all-important factor' which determined the kinds of education children received from their mothers. Leyser compares the opportunities open to girls and boys and identifies exceptions to the assumption that girls followed their mothers, such as 'in London, c.1286, Katherine "la surgienne" working alongside her surgeon father and brother'. Here Leyser is problematising commonly-accepted categories: 'Discussion of the English medieval peasant is further bedevilled by the question of definition: who is a peasant?', warning that 'since no two manors are alike, generalisations are especially risky'.

Sometimes historians make the problematising of a category the main thrust of their argument. Here, Ed Melton suggests that the term 'Prussian Junker' is inadequate. Notice how he sets up his case using similarity/difference as his main analytic device for building his argument. He is saying that the assumption of social and territorial cohesiveness among the Junkers conceals more than it reveals:

*In his Political Testament (1769), Frederick the Great did not talk of a single Prussian nobility, but rather of the different territorial nobilities within his monarchy, each with its own characteristics: Pomeranians were simple and forthright, and made the best soldiers; East Prussians were spirited and refined, but also too attached to their particular traditions; Brandenburgians were too pleasure-loving, and had neither the esprit of the East Prussians, nor the solidity of his Pomeranians; lower Silesians were a decent lot, but lazy, and lacking in refinement and education, while upper Silesians had all their flaws plus a stubborn attachment to the Habsburgs. Accurate or not, Frederick's rather mean-spirited characterizations suggest the inadequacy of the term 'Prussian Junker'. And while this heterogeneity creates endless problems of comparison and definition, it is an essential feature of the Junkers, and one overlooked by many historians, who have often assumed a social and territorial cohesiveness that never existed.*⁵

Sometimes, such analyses see historians challenging one another's labels and categories for talking about the past. Is Anglo-Saxon the best term to capture the range of Germanic peoples in Britain in the late fifth century? Who were the 'peasants' in 1381? At other times, historians explore the meaning of labels applied by past actors, and how identity has been defined. Who were 'the English' in the ninth century? What identities did black people embrace in twentieth century Britain, and how were they identified by others? Historian Miri Rubin explores who was considered an alien or stranger in medieval cities.⁶



What do history teachers do with similarity and difference?

Similarity and difference has often provided a focus for work on social and cultural history, and a way to approach 'history from below': see, for example, Kitson (TH111), Carr (TH146) and Black (TH146). Its power has been harnessed by Counsell (TH99), Bradshaw (TH135), Anthony (TH135) and others to help pupils to work constructively with historical sources.

Teachers have found that similarity and difference lends itself to thinking about the diversity and typicality of individual human experience (Card, TH160) and to challenging generalisations about social, religious or ethnic identity (Mohamud and Whitburn, TH154). Stephen (TH120), Ollerenshaw (TH120) and Worth (TH154) have deployed it to challenge shallow assumptions about the past. Some teachers, including Beer (TH120) and Morgan (TH169), have found similarity and difference a helpful lens for emotive and controversial history.

Above all, history teachers have shown that engaging critically with similarity/difference strengthens pupils' grasp of history as a discipline because it builds a disposition to question labels, categories and generalisations. It builds an expectation of complexity. It shows pupils why generalisations are essential to say anything at all, but why generalisations must always be subject to renewal and open to question. Here are some practical approaches that teachers have developed to realise this vision.

1. Support pupils to challenge categories and labels, and to construct their own

Create activities which problematise the categories or generalisations historians use for people in the past: labels such as Victorian, Roman, working-class or Protestant. Try using character cards, society lines (Luff, TH100), living graphs, and arranging sources or examples along a spectrum. Using character cards and a society line, Carr's pupils (TH146) explored the limitations of categorising Victorians by class and the meanings of 'Victorian'. Worth used paper dolls as a simple but powerful device for her Year 8 pupils to examine 'Who challenged the Church?' By making and breaking groups of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century reformers, Worth's pupils challenged a narrative of the Reformation dominated by Luther.⁷

Create opportunities for pupils to be *constructive* with groups and generalisations too. We can't jettison generalisations altogether: we would have no means of communicating! We have to make generalisations *better* (Counsell, TH135). Bradshaw (TH135) asked his pupils 'How did different people experience life in Attleborough?' With support to find appropriate categories and groups, they organised evidence from sources about their local area to make claims about similarities and differences. Studying the experiences of migrants to Essex in the twentieth century, McCrory's pupils (TH152) challenged conventional categories such as ethnicity or gender by identifying similarities running across these.

2. Question generalisations and typicality

Use provocative 'sloppy generalisations' to stimulate discussion (Counsell, TH135). See Worth (TH154), Carr (TH167) and Coleman (TH167) for more practical examples of this approach. Coleman had her pupils tessellate examples on hexagons, creating a visual web of similarity and difference to answer the question, 'How swinging were the 1960s?'

Create activities that contextualise individual stories or sources within a broader picture, in order to question typicality. Stride (TH112) suggests a case study of black British woman Lilian Bader to question the typical experience of women in Britain during the Second World War, and Dennis (TH165) offers further case studies to bring nuance to the study of twentieth-century Britain and Germany.

3. Problematised and explore substantive concepts

Similarity and difference isn't just about individuals and groups of people. Compare and contrast other features of the past. Substantive concepts such as class, race, kingship, revolution or liberty meant different things to different people at different times, and have been applied by historians in different ways since. Olivey (TH176) asked his Year 9s, 'What did "class" mean to a Chartist?' Questions such as 'Were all Africans free before 1700?' and 'What made slaves slaves?' (Husbands and Kitson, TH107) address not only similarity and difference in human experience, but also the meaning of freedom and slavery in time and place.

Top tip: use stories to bring concepts to life. Kemp and Bickmore (TH116) used scripted drama to immerse pupils in the seventeenth-century Anglo-Scottish borders, illuminating concepts such as 'kingship' and 'nation' through comparisons with London and the south.

4. Go macro... or micro

Explore similarity and difference at different scales. Individual stories, such as those of Dido Elizabeth Belle (Card, TH160) or individual German women (Kitson, TH111), are perfect for building up a general picture or exploring typicality and exceptions. Try Counsell's suggestion (TH99) of a spectrum as a practical, constructive approach to building supported generalisations from a collection of individual sources or case studies.

Alternatively, use similarity and difference to help pupils engage with history on a larger scale, as Bradshaw (TH135) did to encompass the scope of the British Empire and two world wars in meaningful historical analysis. A good enquiry question, such as 'How similar were the experiences of Queen Victoria's colonial subjects?' (see the Move Me On in TH164) provides a tight conceptual focus for such a big topic. Bradshaw asked, 'Who suffered the most in WW2?' to compare the experience and consequences of war in different countries.

You can also use spreadsheets and databases to help pupils to handle large quantities of information and construct valid generalisations. Several databases are available online. For practical examples, see Laffin (TH175) using the England's Immigrants database, or Brown and Woodcock (TH134) and Phillips (TH160) using local databases of First World War dead. Phillips shows how to use the database to challenge pupils' assumptions about the war, for example by showing

the significance of the war at sea for coastal communities such as Hull or Liverpool.

5. Embrace the deceptively simple enquiry question

Some of the most powerful enquiry questions appear simple but reveal hidden layers as the lesson sequence unfolds. Try these:

Questions which ask 'who?'

Experiment with these apparently straightforward questions, which offer opportunities to construct and deconstruct categories, groups and labels.

- Who fought in the First World War?
- Who lived in medieval towns?
- Who whispered in Stalin's Russia?
- Who challenged the Church?⁸

Questions which problematise a label or concept

- How Roman was Roman Britain?
- How Victorian were the Victorians? (Carr, **TH146**)
- What did 'revolution' mean in the Age of Revolution? (Bailey-Watson)⁹
- Were all Africans free before 1700? (Husbands and Kitson, **TH107**)

Questions which problematise typicality of individual experience or an individual source

- Can songs truly represent black people's fight for freedom? (Bradshaw, **TH135**)
- How typical was Lilian Bader's experience of the Second World War in Britain? (Stride, **TH112**)
- Why was Dido portrayed differently from other black people in the eighteenth century? (Card, **TH160**)

6 Attend carefully to the kind of substantive knowledge that pupils need

Make sure you match the level of pupils' knowledge to the level of generalisation! Too much knowledge will risk overwhelming them with complexity. Too little will foster superficial generalisation. See Bradshaw (**TH135**) for examples of how he tried to get this balance right.

Use individual examples, real or fictionalised, to defy simple generalisations. Carr and Black (both in **TH146**) used characters lifted from the historical record, as did Kitson (**TH111**), McCrory (**TH152**) and Mohamud and Whitburn (**TH154**). FitzGerald (**TH169**) used recent scholarship to create detailed fictional composite characters which drew pupils' attention to particular dimensions of similarity and difference, including age, gender, education and location, in experiences of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He tailored the level of detail he provided to the distinctions he wanted pupils to make.

7. Consider alternative outcomes

When planning the outcome of a similarity/difference enquiry, consider alternatives to the traditional essay. Historical scholarship dealing with similarity and difference frequently takes the form of analytical description, or even the anthropologists' idea of 'thick description' now used in cultural history. Benger (**TH179**) shows how he drew on the idea of 'thick description'. This can provide a rigorous

analytical outcome. Bradshaw (**TH135**) discussed the language pupils may need in order to convey their more nuanced generalisations.

Diagrams and museums can also work well. Ask pupils to identify the oversimplifications and generalisations in a museum display about soldiers' experiences of First World War, for example, and then design their own improved version. Carr's pupils (**TH146**) used a diagram to communicate their analysis of the label 'Victorian'.

8. Look at other enquiries through a similarity and difference lens

Similarity and difference belongs everywhere! Don't save it for enquiries where this is the main conceptual focus. We can use this lens to foster our pupils' dispositions as historians across all their enquiries, constantly questioning and nuancing generalisations. Questions such as 'Why did so many Indians "volunteer" to fight for Britain in the Second World War?' ask pupils to consider similarities and differences among those Indian 'volunteers', even while the main focus is on their reasons for joining the army.

States of affairs are constantly in flux, so similarity and difference can help pupils to problematise change and continuity. With careful crafting, an enquiry can explore the past through both these lenses. These enquiry questions place change and continuity in the foreground as the focus for pupils' analysis:

- Was the Norman Conquest 'a truckload of trouble'?¹⁰
- Was the industrial revolution 'liberty's dawn'?

Try a small tweak to steer pupils to think about similar/different patterns and experiences of change:

- For whom was the Norman Conquest 'a truckload of trouble'?
- For whom was the industrial revolution 'liberty's dawn'?
- Was the Great Depression always depressing?¹¹

9. Distinguish between analysis of similarity and difference 'from the outside' and 'from the inside'

Do you want pupils to explore the meanings that historians attach to labels and groups such as working class or Victorian, or the way in which such terms were used by people at the time? The latter approach offers a way to bring cultural history into the classroom. When Olivey (**TH176**) asked his Year 8 pupils 'What did "class" mean to a Chartist?', he had them discern nuances in the meaning attached to the concept of 'class' by working class people themselves. Olivey used Husbands' distinction between 'history from the inside' and 'history from the outside' to distinguish exploration of perceptions of similarity and difference by people *in* the past from the analysis of generalisations made by historians.

Benger (**TH179**) makes a more radical argument: that analysing 'history from the inside' is a conceptual focus in its own right, because it is so different from other kinds of similarity and difference enquiries. Read his article and see if you agree.

Pitfalls to avoid

1. A mismatch between the amount of knowledge and the level of analysis

Ensure pupils have enough knowledge and enough fine-grained detail to make the distinctions and nuances you are looking for. Equally, if you want pupils to draw out large-scale patterns, don't overwhelm them with so many small stories that they can't see the wood for the trees.

2. Confusion between history 'from the outside' and history 'from the inside'

Make sure you always distinguish between contemporary meanings of 'working class', 'Victorian' or 'free', and the ways in which such labels and concepts are used by historians or in popular culture today. If pupils muddle these two things, they will be all over the place.

3. Confusing fact and fiction

Fictional characters can be practical and powerful for analysing similarity/difference, because they can be carefully crafted to highlight points of comparison. Hunting down individuals in the historical record might be impractical, or impossible. Be wary, however. Use the cards to draw out analytical patterns, but don't let pupils cite fictional characters as evidence!

4. Confusing similarity/difference analysis with similarities and differences over time

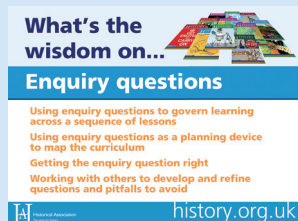
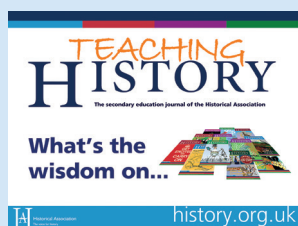
The two can work well *together* when carefully planned (see point 7 above) but to avoid confusing your pupils (and your

colleagues!) it is a good idea to save the term 'similarity/difference' for comparing contemporaneous states of affairs, such as the experience of different colonies or villagers living at the same time. Use the term change/continuity for those enquiries where you are making comparisons of states of affairs across time, such as the changing relationship between Britain and Jamaica in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which Davies explores in this edition of *Teaching History*.

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- ⁸ Worth, P. (2019) *op.cit.*
- ⁹ Bailey-Watson, W. (2018) Resources written for the Historical Association Teacher Fellowship Programme: Teaching the Age of Revolutions, available at www.history.org.uk/secondary/module/8669/teacher-fellowship-programme-teaching-the-age-of/9455/what-did-revolution-mean-in-the-age-of-revolution
- ¹⁰ See blog by Richard Kennett at <https://onebighistorydepartment.com/2020/02/11/why-this-why-now>
- ¹¹ Palek, D. (2013) 'Was the Great Depression always depressing? Examining diachronic diversity in students' historical learning' in *International Journal for Lesson and Learning Studies*, 2, no. 2, pp. 168–187.

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