Picking my way through Key Stage 3

‘Stage not age’

There seems to be a trend in schools at present for remodelling the amount of time students spend in Key Stages 3 and 4. It’s in line with the ‘stage, not age’ philosophy, which sees students start their GCSE studies (or their preparation for GCSE) much earlier than ever before. It means that students in Year 10 either have a ‘head start’ on their GCSEs (by starting them early) or have spent several months (in Year 9) working on the skills needed at GCSE level.

Traditionally, KS3 has run from Years 7 to 9, whilst GCSE has been a two year venture. This changed at my school (Castle High School, Dudley) in 2008/9. It was decided that KS3 should run in Years 7 and 8, with students opting for a “GCSE preparation course” in Year 9. Obviously the core subjects carried on as before, but other subjects (History, Geography, Food Technology, etc) became ones that students could opt for. It meant that the students sitting in a History classroom in Year 9 (which, I think, has always been seen as one of the toughest year groups in terms of discipline) became a year group who had taken ownership of their learning and were studying some subjects they wanted to study - rather than the ones they had no intention of taking at GCSE.

It meant, of course, that we had a lot more content to get into Years 7 and 8, so we needed to remodel our schemes – and we had to create a new one for Year 9. I thought it would be useful to other teachers to illustrate how we did this at my school in the hope that this might give some of you out there a little food for thought!
Year 7

In Year 7 we do the following:

- Baseline testing: Our department feels that this is an absolute must, as a means to show that you have a History level as a baseline rather than one based on a KS2 English, Maths and Science average!
- Local Study: For us, it’s the history of Dudley, its castle and its Priory
- Normans to Stuarts: With particular emphasis on all the ‘greatest hits’ such as 1066, Black Death, Tudor Kings and Queens, Civil War etc. Essentially, Year 7 is spent studying invasions, plagues, murders, revolutions, the Renaissance and the Reformation… so it’s no surprise we use Invasion, Plague and Murder and Renaissance, Revolution and Reformation as our core books.

We assess with an exam (although the students don’t get as anxious if you call it a quiz) twice a term and have three extended learning (e.g. homework) projects that run over several weeks on a particular theme we’ve been looking at (e.g. we set a Knight Project in the Easter term… and they love it). This means we can get nine levelled pieces of work from the students in Year 7 – which we feel is plenty to track their progress (from the baseline test).

Year 8

In Year 8 we start with Native Americans (which is really popular) then go with Black Peoples of the Americas, before returning to British History with the Industrial Revolution (big focus on Crime and Punishment and Jack The Ripper) and the age of Empire – we dip into The Rise and Fall of the British Empire Depth Study textbook here. We then visit the twentieth century for around 10 weeks (world wars, rise of Hitler, Anne Frank etc) and then the students opt to either continue with History in Year 9 or not. We use Industry, Reform and Empire as well as the 20th Century textbook, Technology, War and Identities here.

Year 9 – GCSE Preparation

In Year 9 our student option numbers have been excellent – this year, for example, we are the most opted for subject in the option choices – something that is mirrored in Year 10 for the full GCSE.

We see Year 9 as a GCSE preparation year, not only in terms of skills practiced, but in terms of topics covered. At GCSE we follow OCR Modern World (International Relations 1919 – 1939 plus USA, controlled Assessment on Germany 1918-1941) so use Year 9 as a “training ground” for that! We cover:

- What was Britain like 100 years ago?
- What can the Titanic teach us?
- How did Britain get involved in World War I?
- What was World War I like for a frontline soldier?
- Why is Adolf Hitler so famous?
- Why was there a Second World War?
- How does war affect civilians?

A journey back in time...

As you can see, this basically covers the GCSE syllabus so any student choosing History a year later (as a GCSE) in Year 10 will have had a solid grounding in the topics they’ll cover. And the fact that we cover these topics in Year 9 means that we are not under the same sort of pressure to press on with topics at GCSE pace. So, for example, if a teaching group really seem to “bite” when teaching about the WWII Home Front (in the ‘How does war affect civilians?’ section) we can perhaps watch the “Blitz Street” series over a week’s lessons, or “Supersizers go Wartime” – very funny or they can work in groups to write an evacuation role play or similar. We feel that our New Year 9 scheme gives us a lot more flexibility than ever before.

We also work hard to finish our studies of WWII with about 12 weeks of Year 9 to go… which allows us to take the students right up to the modern day. We do this by spending a week’s lessons on the 1950s, then another week in the 1960s, a week in the 1970s and so on. We have encouraged/begged colleagues and students to bring in iconic items from different decades – and now my stock room is packed with vinyl, rubix cubes, corgi cars, a first generation mobile phone (with a huge battery), a record player, original Game Boys, Twister, hula hoops, Meccano and so on. History lessons each week are a journey back in time to a past decade that will see students listening to music, playing games, reading news stories, looking at fashion, films and ordinary life from one of the post-war decades. In the weeks we study the ‘noughties’ we use the Terrorism Depth Study book, and we also dip into this when looking at world events in the 1970s and 1980s. We assess with our usual sprinkling of tests/quizzes, as well as with our “Decades” project!

The way we work our way through Key Stage 3 is certainly making an impact on our numbers. Uptake at GCSE is very good - this year, for example, we have five GCSE groups of 24 to 29 students.

Best wishes,