

# Exploring the Black Death: The Medieval View and Response

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*Exploring the Black Death* is a lesson developed for my unit *I Love the Knightlife: Exploring European Life in the Middle Ages*. The unit is part of a yearlong ancient and medieval history course that I teach in the seventh grade House of Avalon at Hudson Middle School in Hudson, Wisconsin.

As a social studies teacher, I have always tried to incorporate inquiry and critical thinking into my lessons. This is a major objective of the C3 Framework, and the sidebar to this article shows how this lesson supports the goals of C3.

In the lesson, students explore primary sources in order to hypothesize about the compelling historical question *How did medieval people view and respond to the Black Death?*

## Phase One: Initiating the Inquiry

In the first portion of the lesson, the study of the Black Death is initiated with a strategy called **Discrepant Event Inquiry**, which I use to begin each unit.<sup>1</sup> Students are presented with a puzzling, paradoxical, or discrepant event or story, and ask questions in an attempt to draw tentative conclusions that enable them to solve the puzzle. This type of inquiry engages students and launches their inquiry. Students ask yes or no questions, pose hypotheses, analyze and synthesize information, and draw tentative conclusions while attempting to find an answer to the puzzle. The questions students ask must be answerable by a “yes” or a “no.” Open-ended questions are not allowed as students must do their own thinking and their own hypothesizing.

The story that is used for the inquiry that begins this lesson involves a man

named Boccaccio and his family. Boccaccio is the manager of a dock in a port city. One day when he is gone, his workers unload a ship that is later seen drifting aimlessly at sea. After being told about this ship, Boccaccio and his family mysteriously disappear and are never seen again. The students must figure out what happened to them, and they have five minutes to do so (I use an online bomb timer for this).

After they are told what they must figure out, the timer is set and the questioning begins. Typical questions for this inquiry are:

*Were Boccaccio and his family kidnapped?*

No.

*Did anyone on the dock know what happened to them?*

No.

*Were the people on the ship dead?*

Yes.

The questions and answers continue for a few minutes until I hit pause on the timer. Students in small groups process what they have learned from the questioning, and think of new questions to ask. The timer is again started and the question/answer cycle continues until the puzzle is solved.

The students know that my stories may include made up characters, but the

events fit in with the historical period. In this case Boccaccio was not a dock manager, but a writer (the real Boccaccio will make an appearance later in the lesson). A possible answer to the story was that as the manager of a dock he would have been acquainted with cases where a diseased ship came into a port. After learning that his men had unloaded a ship with the Black Death, on which everyone aboard died, he could surmise what was about to happen to his friends on the dock and the entire city. He took his family and fled.

This strategy begins the process of wondering and questioning.

## Phase Two: Developing Supporting Questions

The **Discrepant Event Inquiry** is followed by a **K-W-L/Media Hook** where students view and respond to the allegorical painting by Pieter Brueghel titled *The Triumph of Death*.

**K-W-L/Media Hook** is a strategy that utilizes images to elicit the student’s prior knowledge on the subject as well as to begin the process of developing questions.<sup>2</sup> Students discuss and list what they **Know** about the subject of study, what they **Want** to know, and at the completion of the inquiry, and, later, what they **Learned**.

In this strategy, following the inquiry, the students discuss what they know about the subject, in this case the Black Death, and respond to Brueghel’s incredible painting, *The Triumph of Death*. The painting is projected onto a SMART Board for discussion and for

the process of developing questions (an LCD, or even a transparency, could also be used for this purpose). The purpose of the media hook is to further engage students with the topic. The compelling question for the lesson I have developed is: *How did medieval people view and respond to the Black Death?* Supporting questions are developed by students in this phase. In using this lesson with my seventh graders, I have found that, at first, the types of questions tend to be very literal and include questions like:

*How many people died from the Black Death?*

*What were the diseases that spread during the Black Death?*

*Why didn't the Black Death kill everyone?*

And as students move into phase three and the engaging strategy called **Mystery**, they continue to develop questions. As they are working with primary source statements, the questions become less literal and focus more on the ideas that people held in the Middle Ages.

### **Phase Three: Evidence, Inferences More Questions, and Collaboration**

The lesson continues with a strategy called **Mystery**, which engages students in investigating a problem and using evidence to find a solution. In this portion of the lesson, students work together in small groups using primary source

statements to categorize and hypothesize on how medieval minds attempted to understand and cope with the Black Death.

In this strategy, the teacher provides groups with a set of “clues” or texts that will help them solve the mystery. The clues used in this lesson include primary source statements describing the Black Death from Giovanni Boccaccio, an Italian writer during the time of the Black Death, and Agnolo di Tura, another Italian chronicler who wrote some gripping accounts of the Black Death. A statement on the causes of the Death written in 1348 by the Paris Medical School is included in the primary sources as well as ordinances from the city of Pistoia (a medieval Italian city

## Links to the C3 Framework and Common Core Standards

The four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework engage students in (1) Developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) Applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) Evaluating sources and using evidence; (4) Communicating and critiquing conclusions.

This lesson plan supports each of the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc. It focuses on the compelling question, “How did medieval people view and respond to the Black Death?” Students research answers to many supporting questions about the Black Death.

As students examine and compare the sources, they apply disciplinary concepts and tools as they evaluate the credibility, corroborative value, authority, and individual perspectives of different sources and develop their skills of historical thinking, which “involves locating and assessing historical sources of many different types to understand the contexts of given historical eras and perspectives of different individuals and groups.” [C3, 45]

In evaluating sources and using evidence, the students employ “technologies and skills to find information and to express their responses to compelling and supporting questions through well-reasoned explanations and evidence-based arguments.” [C3, 53]

The students “collaborate with others as they communicate and critique their conclusions.” [C3, 59]

The lesson plan also helps to meet the following Common Core Standards that are referenced in the C3 Framework.

### *Anchor Reading Standards*

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

### *Anchor Writing Standard*

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

### *Anchor Speaking and Listening Standard*

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

The C3 references are to National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013): 45, 53, 59. Accessible online at [www.socialstudies.org/c3](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3)

All Common Core Standards are quoted directly from National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: NGA and CCSSO, 2010): 60 (Anchor Reading Standards); 63 (Anchor Writing Standard); and 48 (Anchor Speaking and Listening Standard). The C3 Framework includes explicit connections to these and other Common Core Standards. See *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*: 20–22, 26–27, 50–51, 56–57, and 63–64.

## Excerpts from Primary Sources

Everyone felt they were doomed to die and, as a result, left their property. And in this great affliction and misery of our city, the authority of the laws...had...almost completely disappeared... for, like other men, the ministers and the executors of the laws were either dead or sick or so short of help that it was impossible for them to fulfill their duties; as a result, everyone was free to do as he pleased...

Most stayed in their home or neighborhoods because of their hopes for remaining safe, and every day they fell sick by the thousands; and they almost always died. The city was full of corpses.

—Giovanni Boccaccio,  
*An Italian Chronicler, who wrote The Decameron*

It is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth.... The victim dies almost immediately. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to the ditch as best they could without a priest.... Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places ... great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown into ditches and covered with earth. And soon as these ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo di Tura, ... buried my five children with my own hands.... And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

—Agnolo di Tura, *an Italian Chronicler*

We, the Members of the College of Physicians of Paris, ... intend to make known the causes of this pestilence.... We, therefore, declare as follows: the stars ... exerted [a strange] power [on the] sea ... and the waters of the sea arose in the form of a [poisonous cloud], .... This vapor spread itself through the air in many places on earth....

—A Statement issued in 1348 by  
*the staff of the Paris Medical School*

In the year of the Lord 1348 there was a great pestilence in the city ... it was of such fury ... healthy servants who took care of the ill died of the same illness. Almost none survived past the fourth day. Neither physicians nor medicine were effective.... There was such fear no one seemed to know what to do.

—Baldassarre Bonaiuti writing about  
*the Black Death in Florence*

How will posterity believe that there has been such a time when without the [lightening] of heaven or the fires of earth,

without wars or visible slaughter,...when has any such thing been ever heard or seen ... that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead. —*Francesco Petrarca, a Renaissance author describing the Black Death from medieval sources.*

Alas! Our ships enter the port, but of a thousand sailors hardly ten are spared. We reach our homes; our [families] and neighbors come to visit us. Woe to us...we scattered the poison... [and going] back to their homes they in turn infected their whole families, who in three days [died] and were buried in one common grave.

—Gabriele de Nussii, *an Italian writer who wrote about the Black Death in The Great Dying in the Year of Our Lord 1348.*

### Ordinances of Pistoia

No citizen ... shall go into [cities in which the disease has broken out] and no one can or ought to come from [any of these cities].

No person of the city of Pistoia or foreigner shall bring ... to the city any used cloth from another city.

When anyone has died no person shall go to the place of the deceased ... before or after burial...or attend or go to a meal in that house or place on the said occasion.

### Other Suggestions

Repent, pray, do penance for your sins.

Prohibit swearing and work on the Sabbath.

Punish yourself by whipping.

Flee to the mountains, clean air, and isolated places.

Confine the sick to their homes.

Burn the clothes, bedding, and possessions of the diseased.

Break up the air inside your homes by ringing bells and by releasing birds, then chasing them so they fly around the room

Do not bath as this opens the pores to the air.

Spend time in smoky and stinking places.

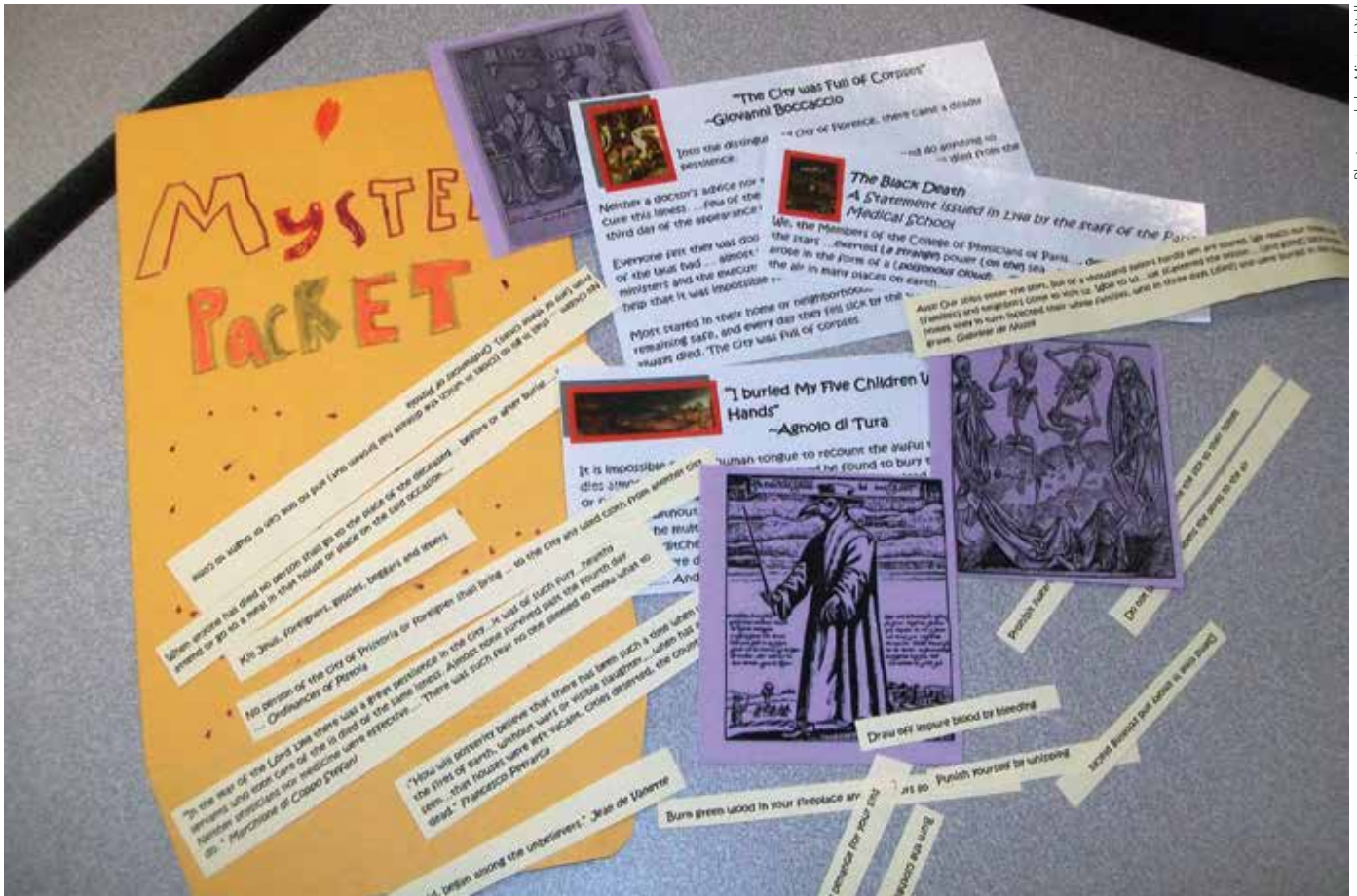
Burn green wood in your fireplace and outdoors so it will smoke.

Draw off impure blood by bleeding.

Kill Jews, foreigners, gypsies, beggars and lepers.

The plague, it is said, began among the unbelievers.

**Source:** Most of the above statements are quoted from *Coping with Catastrophe: The Black Death of the 14th Century*, a unit published by the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles.



of about 11,000). There are also general suggested courses of action to combat the Black Death that come from a variety of medieval sources. (See the Primary Sources sidebar)

**Mystery** is an inductive thinking teaching strategy which progresses through three steps: (1) discussion of data, (2) grouping and labeling data, and (3) interpreting, generalizing, and hypothesizing about the data. In this lesson the “data” is in the form of statements drawn from medieval sources.

Students work in small teams to group and label the data, and finally form their generalizations and inferences regarding the variety of responses medieval people had to the Black Death.

As we encourage students to BYOD (Bring Your Own Device), groups are also encouraged to find more information on the medieval responses to the Black Death.

The inquiry which began in phase 1 and 2 of this lesson continues with

students using historical evidence, and working together to form hypotheses about the historical question in phase 3. Typical group hypotheses often include statements on the importance of religion in the Middle Ages and how this affected much of their response to the Death, ideas about the vicious scapegoating that occurred, the breakdown of law and order that resulted, and the prevalence of a few far sighted and logical responses.

There are several group discussion strategies that I use to initiate a rich classroom discussion. Following the discussion, students individually review their notes from the primary sources as well as their inferences and hypotheses to write an essay discussing the question, *How did medieval people view and respond to the Black Death?*

Their research and discussion leads them to a greater understanding of the Black Death in particular, but also introduces them to broader historical issues such as the impact of disease, the causes

and effects of epidemics, and problems that arise from the breakdown of social institutions (e.g., the suspension of Church services and the absence of law and order that resulted from the Black Death). ●

**Notes**

1. More details about the Discrepant Event Inquiry Strategy can be found in Michael M. Yell and Geoffrey Scheurman (with Keith Reynolds), *A Link to the Past* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2004): 6-8.
2. More details about this strategy can be found in *A Link to the Past*, op. cit.: 9-11.

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