

The Battle of Agincourt: a classroom role play

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Foreword

As a participant in the Historical Association's Teaching Fellowship on late medieval history, I can attest that one of the main aspects of this CPD has been the dissemination of the wealth of knowledge put at our disposal via the wise words of Ian Dawson and the eminent Professor Anne Curry. They were assisted by Dan Spencer on Agincourt and Professor Michael Hicks on the later period known as the Wars of the Roses. I must make it clear from the start that it is from these individuals that I obtained much of the detail in my knowledge and the 20(!) pages of notes that I made from the residential in January 2016. As I was the only teacher out of our select band who was going to be teaching Agincourt at GCSE I felt that this was the most appropriate area for me to develop my resource for.

The school that I currently teach in was firmly based in the modern world at Key Stage 4 until the current reforms. It is to this similar band of ex-modern world-ers that I feel I am writing for: keen to grasp a new topic, but overwhelmed by the range of case studies across time in the thematic study Warfare Through Time. For this reason I have written a section on the context of the battle. Although significant parts may not be specifically required by the syllabus (such as the long-term causes and impact of the battle), this is such a fascinating topic that wider interest and colour has to play a part in allowing student (and teacher) engagement. I have written this task with the Edexcel specification in mind. It could, however, easily be adapted to use at A-level or KS3.

Key GCSE texts currently available

John Child and Paul Shuter, *Warfare Through Time, c.1250-present* (Pearson Education, 2016)
Sarah Webb and Ed Podesta, *Warfare Through Time, c.1250-present* (Hodder Education, 2016)

Advice for teachers new to a role-play style lesson

When I have done similar lessons like this in the past, when many students are up and involved in the battle, the historical element of events can get lost in the excitement of the lesson. You can maintain focus in several ways: the teacher takes the role of the king; those not involved sit on the carpet and stand up when it is their turn for action; you can do the whole thing in 'slow motion' and discussion first, then repeat without interjections at a speed where you can then have several things going on at once, or have a 'silent' battle. And of course, some need to die on the battlefield if necessary and then retire to their home location! The script should also be used as a *guide* to questioning. There are far more questions here than are possible to ask as part of the role-play and lesson pace could be lost. Many of them can be used in the follow-up lesson where the students are trying to recall and order the events.

For further guidance on this type of activity see <http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/UsingActivities/index.htm>

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Historical context

It is hoped that these notes will be useful to those who are new to the era and want to know a little more.

By invading France in the year 1415, Henry V was following in the footsteps of Edward III. The battle therefore fits into the wider context of the Hundred Years War. The war was started in 1337 by Edward III, who enjoyed significant victories at Crecy in 1346 and Poitiers in 1356. To be seen as effective, a king had to fulfil his people's expectations by, for example, being a good warrior and tactician and leading from the front in everything that he did. Moreover, his power and authority was reflected in how many men he could muster to fight and how much money parliament was willing to collect in taxes from the people to fund his battles. It was also important to gain lands which he could then redistribute to his loyal nobles as patronage.

Although success in the early battles made for popularity, the strain of raised taxes and the plague had burdened the population by the time of Henry V (1413-22). The war also utilised the system of indentures to raise men, paying them for their service rather than the general summons that had been used for Falkirk in the Scottish Wars. Using indentures meant that men could grow in skill and so a more professional soldier was developing. Extensive evidence exists for military development as names have been transcribed from the lists of men promised. The muster rolls (the attendance list) are quite detailed and exist in numbers.

Under Richard II (1377-99) of Peasants' Revolt fame the war did not go well with attacks on English coastal towns taking place. Richard took a more pacific attitude to war and towards the end of his reign was criticised as pro-French, one of several reasons why Henry Bolingbroke was able to usurp Richard and become Henry IV, the first Lancastrian king. During Henry IV's reign, however, rebellions and the king's illness meant that further English attacks on France were impossible. When Henry IV died of natural causes in 1413 his son inherited the throne along with the continuing issue of France.

Right from the beginning of his reign, Henry V was keen to deal firmly with France, unlike his father and Richard II. He began by demanding lost lands back and even the hand of the daughter of Charles VI of France. Henry was also aiming to take advantage of a country that was, conveniently for him, suffering from political divisions created by the mental incapacity of King Charles VI. Despite a planned rebellion against him at the very last minute before invading France (the Southampton Plot), Henry was determined to go ahead with the invasion.

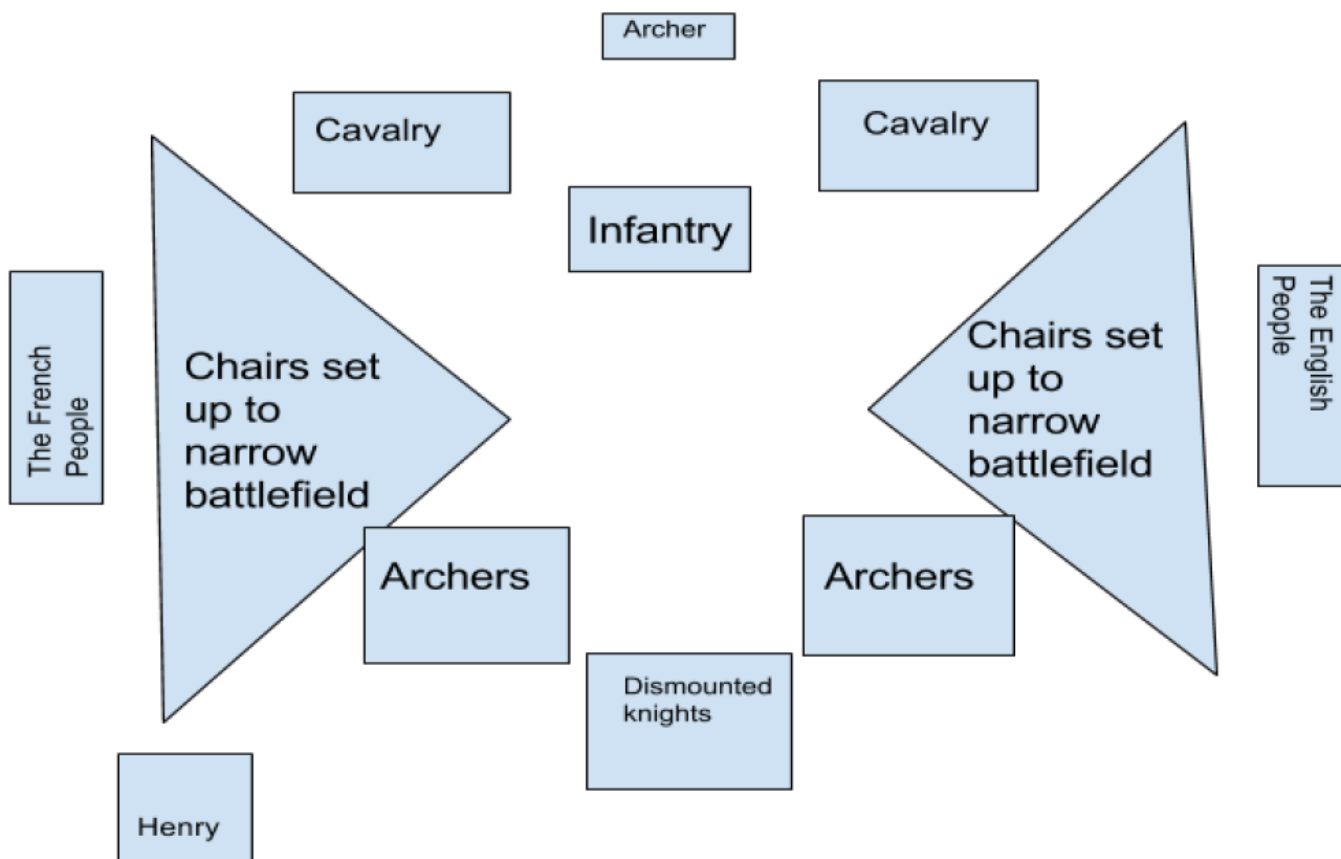
As the son of a usurper, Henry V had a very important point to prove, aiming to use success in war to establish his dynasty as the unquestioned rulers of England. Therefore, victory for Henry V in France was not simply a matter of showing himself as a good warrior by defeating the long-standing enemy. It really was a matter of very deep significance to the people and king.

The Task

Classroom set-up

You could set up your classroom as on the diagram if you are lucky enough to have a big enough room, otherwise a large space such as a drama studio or hall would work well. To help differentiate between the troops you could use a range of tactics such as sticky labels to identify them, props such as a hobby horse or toy weapons and a crown.

Room layout for the battle



The Main Task

The aim of this task is to get the students involved in the battle. They should gain a greater understanding of the narrative and decisions that were made and consider the significance of them. At GCSE it is essential that the students do a follow-up task to show that they have retained knowledge and understanding from the task and can apply it to exam questions and in subsequent lessons to identify change over time. **For Edexcel, students are required to know the reasons for the outcome of the battle and the role of Henry.** The key factors that students are also expected to explore are: governments and individuals; science, technology and communications and attitudes in society. (See Edexcel specification p.14). This lesson could also be used for the A-level Edexcel unit Option 30: Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII 1399-1405, or easily adapted to the ability of your students and the focus of your scheme of work at Key Stage 3.

Characters required (Role cards for students are provided at the *end* of this document)

Henry V Pick a charismatic student who will have to give a short rousing speech. You could get them to write this for homework but if not, I have provided one below. A plastic crown for him would also help as well.

English army You need seven archers, one or two knights (real numbers estimated by Anne Curry to be 8,000-8,500). In addition, you also need a couple to die at Harfleur.

French army You need three to be mounted knights and seven to be dismounted Knights. An archer if you have a spare body. (Real numbers estimated by Anne Curry to be about 12,000 in total).

(It is difficult to be exactly sure of the numbers as all of the contemporary sources can be questioned, but, at the end of the day it should be clear to your students that the English were outnumbered and the two sides had chosen to rely on different types of soldiers, so when adding others to try to keep the English proportions of 1 knight to 3 archers.)

People of England (any number)

People of France (any number)

If you have a large class then you may also include these groups. Otherwise you can simply just ask the relevant armies.
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Activity instructions

I began with a very brief summary of the key events of Falkirk so that at the end/throughout it was easier to compare the two battles e.g. use of General summons, mounted knights, schiltrons, positioning on the battlefield, Edward's leadership. If necessary you could have your classroom set up for battle at this stage. , Having said that I have found some students listen more effectively if they remain in their seats at this stage; but do let them know whose side they are on so the 'right' side can respond to the questions. A briefer version of this lesson can be achieved by summarising Stages 1,2 and 4 verbally and only acting out the battle itself (Stage 2).

Stage 1: preparing for battle

TEACHER: *It is 1415. Since 1337 the English and French have been involved in a constant battle for control of the various pockets of land that make up France.*

Here is your king: Henry V. He would like to wage war against the French and is confident of victory.

HENRY: 'I am Henry V of England and France. I intend to reclaim the lands that are owed to the English after the French have stolen what is rightly ours, and land that was won so victoriously by our ancestors. The French are weak: their leader has gone mad and their government is in chaos. I will use indentures to create a contract with my soldiers and agree payment for their wages before we set sail. Who will join me?'

Encourage the English to give a rousing cheer and possibly boos from the French in response.

TEACHER TO HENRY: What sort of soldiers would you like to take on this campaign?
If you have taught the students about the nature of medieval war before this lesson then they should be able to recall that in the later period there should be a large number of longbowmen and that knights are more likely to be dismounted. Henry is taking a typical English army of the era.

TEACHER TO PEOPLE OF ENGLAND: This is a war being fought many miles away. What possible impact could this have on your lives? What will you think about Henry if he wins/loses?
Here they should identify the taxation impact on the people, but might be happy it is not fought on English soil as their land and possessions will be safe from raids. Clearly Henry will be a huge hero if he wins!

TEACHER TO THE FRENCH ARMY: You have a much larger army: do you think you will win?
The French should be secure and they may also point out that they have a home advantage for supplies and possible reinforcements. Henry does not. It may also be worth pointing out that they do not have a strong leader. Will this matter?

TEACHER TO THE FRENCH PEOPLE: How do you feel about an English invasion force landing soon?

Clearly the French people should be worried. Who knows what the English will do when they land? Stealing, burning and looting are to be expected, although we have evidence that Henry issued orders to prevent his troops doing this and only to take essentials.

Stage 2: in France, August 1415

TEACHER: Henry sets sail from England and lands in France. He first decides to go to the town of Harfleur. He lays siege to it and eventually after five weeks, and the use of guns to knock down the

walls (note the use of new technology. This was the first time that the English used guns to do this in France), he is victorious. There is some disease among the soldiers, however, so some have to be sent home; some die.

TEACHER TO HENRY: You now have two choices: go straight home, as the army may prefer, or go back the long way across northern France, heading out via Calais (a town under English control). The people may prefer this, perhaps because it looks braver.

Being brave, Henry should plump for going back the long way, although with a bit of questioning of the English army, it should reveal that this is not universally popular as they have lost some men, fought hard, suffered from disease and are certainly not looking forward to a long march through enemy territory.

Stage 3: Agincourt, October 1415

At this stage I would set up the classroom. I made the students sit on the floor in their relevant locations to ensure better focus than if they are standing, especially if many are taller than the teacher! Ensure that the French are in rows so that you can send them in waves.

TEACHER: *After a brief chase along the River Somme, with the English on one side and the French on the other, Henry pushed his army hard to gain half a day's march over the French, allowing them to build a bridge across the river. A battle was now inevitable. The night before the battle, as it rained, supposedly, the French played dice whereas the English quietly prepared for battle. First thing, the French parade their soldiers in a show of strength.*

The battle

TEACHER TO THE FRENCH: (Possible questions to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the French) Why are you confident? What are the strengths of your army? What are the weaknesses of the situation you are in? What might happen if you wait and do not engage the English? What might your plan be?

The French will be happy with their home advantage, potentially more troops turning up the longer they wait and their numbers compared to Henry's. They should also see the power/speed advantage that cavalry bring, perhaps also that their plate armour is a defensive advantage compared to the unarmed archers, if they can get to them.

TEACHER TO THE ENGLISH ARMY AND HENRY: (Possible questions to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the English) Are you confident? What situation do you need to take advantage of? How will you do this, Henry? What advantages do your weapons bring? What might your plan be? How can you protect your archers?

Hopefully the students should have spotted that the rain, coupled with the freshly ploughed soil and the parading of horses, have made the battlefield very unstable. Also, as the English are not on home soil, they need to fight as soon as possible as supplies are running low. There is always the threat of the French gaining further support too. The archers should be able to identify the advantage of their skill and number but that if the French get too close, they are vulnerable, therefore stakes in the ground can provide valuable protection.

TEACHER TO HENRY: You need to get this battle started! Command the English archers to shoot a volley of arrows. (Depending on the class: either mime this or if you are **very** brave, use paper darts!)

TEACHER TO THE FRENCH ARMY: You need to send your greatest weapon! (cavalry).

The Cavalry should advance around the infantry and through the narrow part of the battlefield but need to pull up before the imaginary stakes and make their flanks more vulnerable. Some will die. You could discuss the importance of the stakes here. Research suggests (see Mark Hinsley's article in the Autumn 2015 issue of *The Historian*, 'Playing for high stakes: the archer's stake and the battle of Agincourt') that the cavalry took about 40 seconds to reach the archers. In that time they could each fire about six arrows and the archers felt protected by the stakes. This allowed the last two arrows to have about a 50% success rate as they were so close to the horses. (Post Agincourt, stakes become a standard issue for archers.)

Some French infantry should advance behind the cavalry across the muddy battlefield. (Remind them to go slowly in the mud and with their heavy armour.)

TEACHER TO HENRY: Send your next volley of arrows (they shoot as the French pass through the narrow part of the battlefield).

TEACHER TO FRENCH ARMY: Instruct several French to play dead on the floor blocking progress and instruct the next wave of French to advance.

TEACHER TO HENRY: Send your next volley of arrows (they shoot).

TEACHER TO FRENCH ARMY: Instruct several French to be taken prisoner and go behind the lines.

TEACHER TO HENRY: Command the English men at arms to advance.

(It is important that the English do not advance to where the battlefield narrows as the French need to get blocked in and confused).

Pause for a moment to assess the scene

TEACHER TO ENGLISH/FRENCH PEOPLE: (possible questions) How well are your soldiers doing? Who do you think is going to win? Has your side made any poor or good choices? Have you any advice for the soldiers?

By this point it should be clear that the French are being defeated by a side that is smaller due to good planning, excellent choice of battlefield and Henry's leadership. The French made some poor initial decisions and are now being overwhelmed. There is limited chance for victory now.

The battle recommences

TEACHER TO ARCHERS: Can you see clearly? What should they now do?
Henry should command the archers to fight with their daggers and join the men-at-arms.

TEACHER TO FRENCH ARMY: More Frenchmen will die/be taken prisoner. One knight needs to creep around the back of the English army.

Pause for a moment

TEACHER TO THE ENGLISH ARMY AND HENRY: Look at the attack on your baggage train! What might your prisoners do? What will you have to do?

They need to realise the threat. The English are tired and an attack from the rear could be dangerous and encourage the French prisoners to fight back. Reinforcements could turn up at any moment. All of the French have to die (despite the fact that ransom money could be lost here).

TEACHER TO THE REMAINING FRENCH ARMY: Still feel like carrying on?

(The French need to be encouraged to retreat to fight another day.)

Stage 4: the English reaction

TEACHER: *Henry sends news of the victory back to England. It arrives four days after the battle.*

TEACHER TO THE ENGLISH PEOPLE: (possible questions) Are you surprised? How do you feel about Henry? Do you think your taxes have been well used? Would you be willing to give more for another attack?

Clearly the English are very happy with this news and would feel that the taxes were, indeed, well spent. Open and widespread support for Henry would be strong and Henry has certainly sent a clear message that he can protect and defend his people. Further details can be found below regarding the use of the battle as propaganda by Henry.

Debrief/potential points of reflection

What do you think was the turning point for the English?

Was there an element of luck involved? Was it significant enough to alter the outcome of the battle?

Henry liked to portray himself as a great warrior and a key reason for the victory. Was he right?

How does this battle compare to Falkirk? What things are similar and different? What does this tell you about change and continuity in warfare in the medieval era?

Did Henry do anything that was unexpected for this era?

How significant are the key factors of governments and individuals, science, technology and communications and attitudes in society?

(Not on the syllabus) The impact of the victory

This can be clearly be seen in the reaction from England upon the news of the victory: parliament granted him further taxation for future invasions before he had even returned to England and there were parties across the capital when Henry officially returned to London. Much of this was excellent propaganda which benefited Henry. As a result it is one of the battles that has entered English folklore as a great symbol of victory with much surrounding myth and legend, despite his untypical decision to kill most of his prisoners. For example, the chronicler Thomas of Walsingham, a monk at St Albans abbey who was pro- Lancastrian, described the English as numbering 8,000, facing a French contingency of 140,000! It is with this background that you can decide if Agincourt really was a significant battle, or if there was anything different about it compared to similar battles at the time. What was crucial was that these victories and subsequent ones led to Henry becoming the heir to the French throne. Although this appeared to be a massive victory, the long-term impact of continued war actually contributed to the huge debt and unsustainable empire that partly led to the conflict known as The Wars of the Roses in the second half of the 1400s. The victory itself also became embedded in English history as a symbol of a great victory by a great leader.

Role cards

Henry V

You are recently crowned and there was a plot to overthrow you a few weeks before you set sail for France. A victory will silence your enemies and gather support from the entire nation. You wish to recover pockets of French land that used to belong to English kings. This will give you money too. The French are badly organised and poorly led (their king is suffering a mental illness and thinks he is made of glass!), which is an advantage. You are a proven warrior so it is quite clear that God has presented you with the opportunity to prove your worth and mettle by defeating the French in battle.

English archer

You are well trained and accurate in battle and make up the vast majority of the English army. Your weapon can be deadly: about 100,000 arrows per minute can be fired by the English archers. However, once the enemy gets too close your bows and arrows become redundant. If this happens you might be ordered to fight with the rest of the army.

English knights

You have horses, possibly more than one each and can fight on horseback or on the ground. At Agincourt you fight dismounted. You wear plate armour for protection. The archers are at your flanks.

French crossbowman

You are well trained and accurate in battle but are in the minority. Your weapon can be deadly and pierce plate armour. This accuracy is achieved by being able to move freely and not being limited by heavy armour, but you have a much slower rate of fire than English longbows.

French knights (dismounted)

You have horses, possibly more than one each and can fight on horseback or on the ground. At Agincourt you fight dismounted. You wear plate armour for protection and stand at the front of your army.

French knights (mounted)

You have horses, possibly more than one each and can fight on horseback or on the ground. At Agincourt you fight mounted. You wear plate armour for protection and stand at the rear of your army.

Speech and messages

Henry's call-to-arms speech:

'I am Henry V of England and France. I intend to reclaim the lands that are owed to the English after the French have stolen what is rightly ours, and land that was won so victoriously by our ancestors. The French are weak: their leader has gone mad and their government is in chaos. I will use an indenture to create a contract with my soldiers and agree a payment for their wages before we set sail. Who will join me?'

Appendices

1. Summary grid for follow-up lesson

A summary grid can be found at the end of these instructions which could be used. In my follow-up lesson I asked the students to fill it in using as much of their own knowledge as they could. They then used p.38 of Child and Shuter to assist them with the diagrams. A whole-class discussion/pair or group work would allow students to refine and or improve their summary sheet.

2. Comparison of Falkirk and Agincourt Venn diagram

Another follow-up task could include the comparison of Falkirk and Agincourt and their key features. With my class I initially asked the students to identify which part of the Venn diagram they should apply to. By identifying certain terms in capitals I have given the opportunity to develop the task from students looking at the smaller details e.g. longbow/crossbow, into being able to identify the key features of warfare of this period I.e. composition of the armies varies, but tends to have much the same elements and therefore tactics remain relatively similar etc. This could then be developed by highlighting in different colours the influence of factors (science and technology, governments and attitudes).

The Battle of Agincourt

	<u>English</u>	<u>French</u>
Composition of army, strengths and weaknesses including their position on the battlefield		
<u>Description of the battle: use diagrams, flow charts bullet points etc.</u>		

CAVALRY charge to start battle	Narrow battlefield	Siege before the battle
KING issues indentures	Spearmen in the majority	Wide battlefield
Schiltrons	CrossBOW	ARROW volley to start battle
15,000 in army	Untrained INFANTRY	ARCHERS on flanks
BroadSWORDS	Trained INFANTRY	Spears
ARCHERS form the majority of the army	Dismounted KNIGHTS	KING has a limited range of tactics to use
ARCHERS at rear	Approximately 2,000 KNIGHTS	8,000 in army
Hand-to -hand combat	LongBOW	Steel plate ARMOUR
Narrow steel SWORDS	KING issues general summons	KING makes bold and risky decisions in order to win
Raids before the battle for loot and supplies	Chainmail ARMOUR	Spiky defences against cavalry

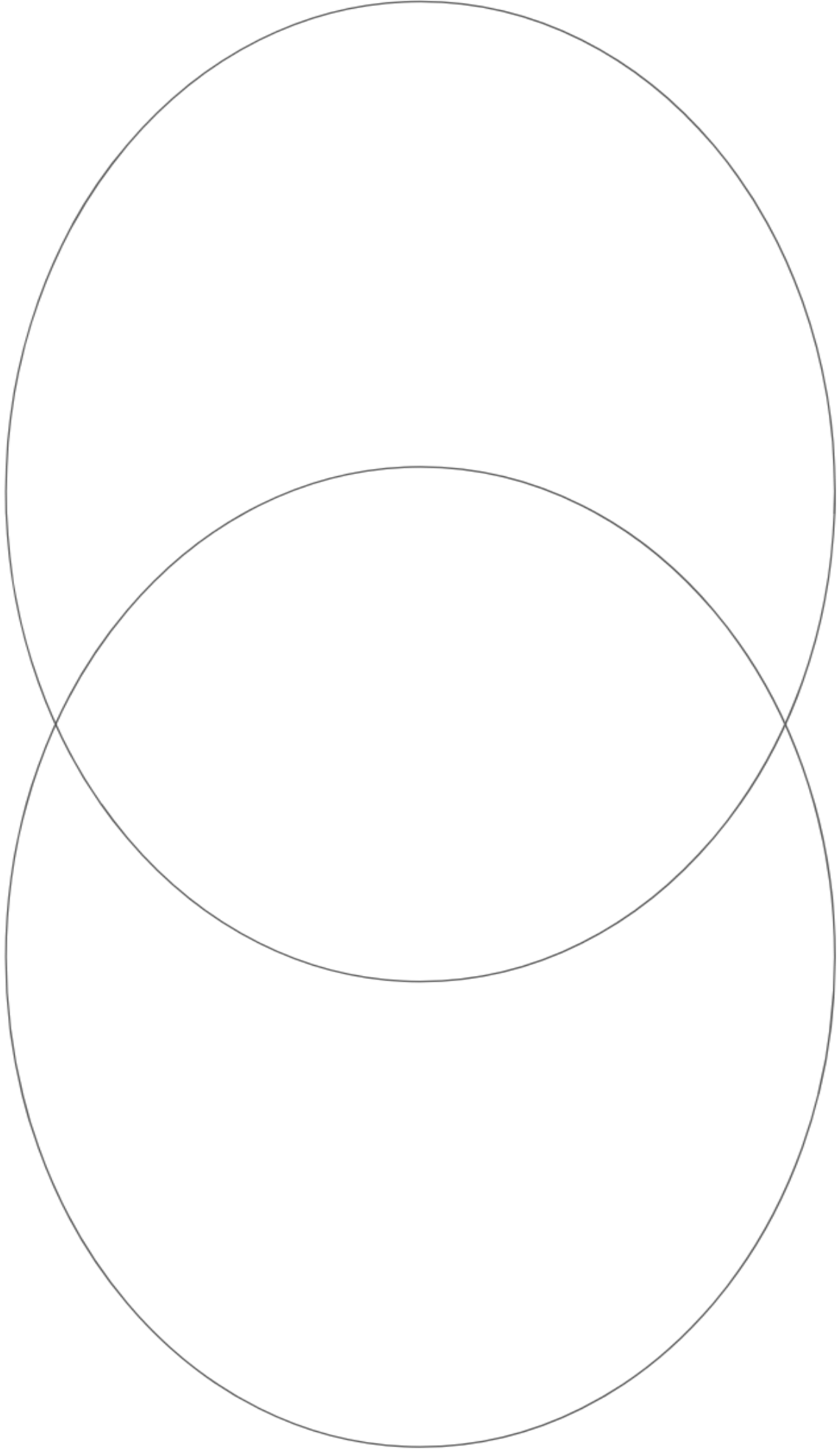
Answers

Agincourt, Falkirk, Both

CAVALRY charge to start battle	narrow battlefield	Siege before the battle
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Agincourt 1415

Falkirk 1298

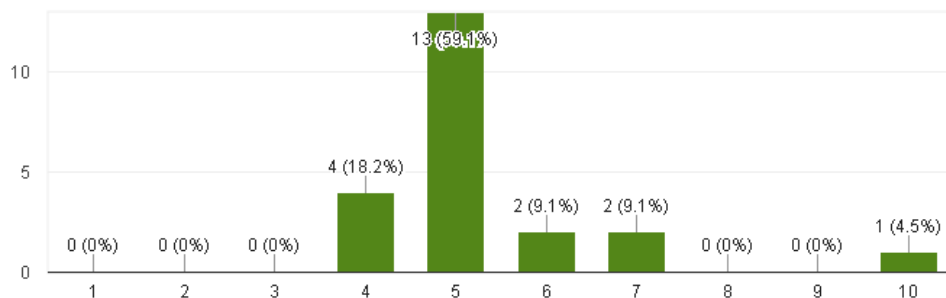


Student and teacher responses to the lesson

I asked my class (22 students) to fill in a Google form as a review of the lesson. It was not anonymous but I still think there are honest responses given here. I have added in teacher responses as appropriate.

What did you think about the length of the task?

22 responses



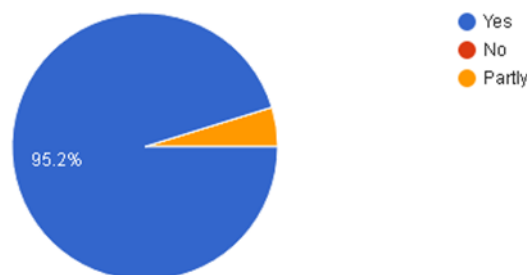
I based my questions around my own concerns and need to develop the lesson:

Responses included: Every one had equal time/ I think that it was fairly long, but it was all necessary for learning about the battle. It also didn't feel like hours as it was quite fun./Helped us fully understand the battle and its layout, making it worth the time.

Despite what the students generally said, I felt that the lesson was too long, so adjusted it: I have removed significant sections, made it clear that the questions are for guidance only and identified how a teacher could shrink the lesson down to just looking at the battle itself. I also did this based on feedback from colleagues who trialed parts of the lesson. One tried some of the questions out as part of a feedback lesson where they had taught the battle using a textbook. They said that they found the questions useful to make the students think about motives and actions. Another colleague shares my class and did the follow-up lesson. They found the questions useful to ensure the students filled in the follow-up grid and the students were very confident in relaying the details of the battle. Another colleague similarly commented that she could not complete the task in the time given, so had to shrink it down herself.

Was it easier to understand the battle and why England won doing a role play (rather than the power-point of Falkirk)?

21 responses

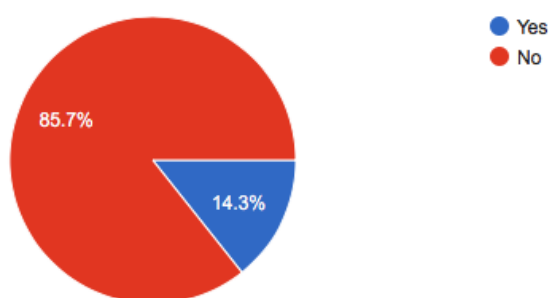


Responses included: Because you understand clearly and learn better when you do things rather than just sit and listen/We were being told what happened then we did what happened. It really hammered home what went on. Because by re-enacting the battle we were able to see where the French went wrong, how Henry's tactics were superior and why he won the battle.

I was pleased at such a positive response. Whenever I have done role-plays this is the sort of response that I have always had from students. It was also apparent in my debrief at the end of the lesson when I was going over the events: instead of the usual hands raised and individual response, there was spontaneous, accurate, whole-class response. One of the key features of the new 9-1 GCSE is perhaps the increase in content that students are apparently required to take on board, so I was pleased that GCSE students saw the value of a non-written task and how it contributed to their learning.

Were any parts of the lesson confusing?

21 responses

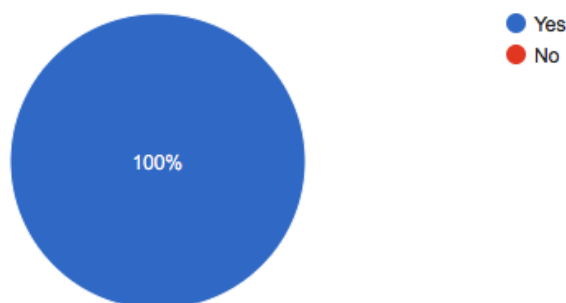


Only five students responded to this and the responses included: none of us was unfocused because we were all involved/I sometimes forgot who I was/Yes, because when people started talking I was getting a bit lost and it is harder to concentrate on what we have been doing.

Although the overwhelming majority were OK with the lesson, it is clear that those who disagreed could be inferred to have similar views as myself and my colleagues: it was important to keep pace so that it was clear what was going on and students kept focus on their role.

Do you think other students would benefit from learning about Agincourt as a role play (rather than as a power-point/textbook activity)?

21 responses



Responses included: It's great fun which helps people remember/It's different to just sitting down and copying notes which are very easy to forget whereas physically doing something was easier to remember as the lesson was different and memorable/really fun, you don't even realise you are learning / It's a lot more interesting than a textbook and when a student is interested in what they're being taught they learn a lot more.

Again, I was pleased with the responses. They fitted in well with what I hoped the students would feel about the lesson. This has also had a longer-lasting impact on the department: in the context of the new GCSEs, and the new A-levels being delivered at the same time teachers in our department have had to spend significantly more time preparing lessons than in previous years as we had to learn the content first and then plan lessons. This has been exacerbated as with limited sample papers the level of detail that would be required was unclear (especially as both textbooks were so different) so as a result, many of the GCSE (and A-level) lessons been much more didactic than we are used to in order to cover the content. This has also resulted in us being behind on our schedule. For example in the case of my lesson, despite the wider understanding and detail being provided, colleagues did not feel that they had the time available to engage in a lesson that was 'riskier' or 'slower' than sticking to the textbook. During our annual department review, which this year focused on the delivery of the new GCSE, the student panel (made up of students from all four classes) did indeed identify this as an issue. They said they would like more active lessons as they find them more effective and engaging. In response to this, our whole department target is to make an engaging and active lesson for each of the case studies across the Warfare unit. So far we have my Agincourt battle lesson and a mock trial of Haig for the Somme. I will take responsibility for creating another role-play of Falkirk so the medieval case studies can be more easily compared. I also hope that my colleagues will now be able to have the confidence to use the resource that I have created more fully and I can support them in their wider understanding of the battle.

I also asked if the students had any points for improvement. Only seven responded. There were requests for a small film clip to set the scene, a bigger space and no paper darts. I limited the input of the darts as I agree that it did distract many of the students. I was also surprised that many didn't know how to do this! I have mentioned the space that could be used at the start of the activity, especially as one of my colleagues has a small classroom and with her size class, it simply was impractical to act out the battle. Several also mentioned that it would be helpful to identify the type of soldier or the side that they were on by means of costumes. Clearly this isn't always possible, but could be addressed in several ways that I added into the instructions.