

Introduction

The bubonic plague spread across Europe in the years 1346-53 CE. The plague eventually became known as the Black Death several centuries later. Chronicles and letters from the time describe the horror visited on society by the illness. The Florentine poet Petrarch was certain nobody in the future would believe how terrible things were. One chronicler from Florence observed:

All the citizens did little else except to carry dead bodies to be buried...at every church they dug deep pits down to the water-table; and thus those who were poor who died during the night were bundled up quickly and thrown into the pit. In the morning when a large number of bodies were found in the pit, they took some earth and shovelled it down on top of them; and later others were placed on top of them and then another layer of earth, just as one makes lasagne with layers of pasta and cheese.

The tragedy was extraordinary. In the course of just a few months, 60% of Florence's population died from the plague, and probably the same proportion in the neighboring city of Siena. The story of Florence and Siena was repeated all over Europe for the better part of eight years. Eventually the plague burned itself out and life returned to normal; yet, European society emerged from the crisis transformed. Since so many people died (mostly serfs) there were fewer people to work the land; land values declined rapidly and land lords became impoverished. The serfs that survived the plague were in a stronger position: since there were fewer of them to work on farms and in towns their wages and value increased. Also, a new middle-class of merchants—people who sold finished products instead of owned land—emerged challenging the old feudal order.¹

Objectives:

1. Practice the skills of an effective listener by consciously listening to what is said in order to understand the complete message. Active listening is a skill acquired and developed through practice, i.e. students focus on *identifying* the speaker's intended overall meaning instead of just *hearing* a message made up of a bunch of small parts.
2. Practice conceptual development skills, e.g. creative thinking (using imagination and intuition to create a picture of the past) and analysis (evaluating the significance of how two ideas or concepts interrelate).
3. The questions and tasks you must complete are directly related to the concepts of change, continuity, causation and perspective/bias, etc. studied over the course of the semester.

Procedure

1. Watch the video *Disease! Crash Course World History*² and while watching the video complete all the tasks below. A link to the video is located on the course website.
2. Complete and submit the assignment by the deadline set by the classroom teacher.

¹ <https://www.historytoday.com/ole-j-benedictow/black-death-greatest-catastrophe-ever>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PLBmUJYYeg>

Listening & Responding Activities

- 1). Okay, so long time viewers of Crash Course will remember the sixteenth century _____ in the Americas not only as an example of historian’s total inability to name things, but also as perhaps the most important and wide-ranging effect that disease has had on human culture in _____.
- 2). Traditionally the study of history hasn’t focused much on diseases, partly because they’re mysterious and terrifying and partly because they don’t fit in very well with our ideas about history being the result of _____. We like to think that things happen because we did good things or because we did bad things or at least because we did some kind of thing. But, in fact, history often happens because lots of people got smallpox.

Change: Pause the video and answer the following question: what does John Green mean exactly when he says “we like to think that things happen because we did good things or because we did bad things or at least because we did some kind of thing”?

- 3). Humans first appeared in tropical regions in Africa which are home to a wide variety of micro-parasites so it’s probably a good bet those _____ played a role in keeping human populations really low for a long, long time. It’s only after we see migration out of Africa and into regions less amenable to disease about _____ that we start to see the growth of human populations necessary to create what we problematically call **civilizations**.

Pause the video and use *Google* to define the word **civilization** in the space provided below:

- 4). So humans migrated in to river valleys that became the _____ with agriculture and surpluses, etc. This allowed us to escape those population-limiting tropical diseases but it created all kinds of new disease problems.

Pause the video and use *Google* to answer the following question: what were the five cradles of civilization?

5). But from a _____, it's not like disease is all downside. I mean, sometimes it has helped populations shield themselves from conquest. That was the case in Africa until the 19th century.

For the next question you are going to have to be creative in coming up with an answer. This question possibly covers a topic you have likely never read or talked about. The great thing, though, is students can use a combination of their imagination and the Internet to answer it. The key is finding and using the right search phrase.

Why did disease shield African populations from being conquered or invaded until as recently as the 19th century?

6). But nothing spreads disease quite like trade. _____ is so good for economies and so bad at keeping individual human beings not dead. Like Ancient Rome's immigration into trans-continental trade networks like the _____ may explain why the historian Livy reported at least level pestilential disasters and it is very likely that disease and the accompanying decline in population contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire.

Causation: Why does trade increase our vulnerability to epidemics?

7). The plague, which struck Europe in the mid-14th century, originated in fleas that came from rats, and Bubonic plague can be found throughout the world—even in the West US today (although it is more treatable now, thankfully). But anyway the Black Death started in _____ and spread westward over the caravan routes, really picking up steam when _____ jumped onto Mediterranean ships. So the death rate from this plague was incredibly high, perhaps a _____ of people living in Europe died.

8). Okay, let's go to the thought bubble. There was some debate about whether the Black Death kick-started Europe's _____, and ended the _____. It probably did create some opportunity, like

_____ were forced to admit new members to replace the many workers who had died in persistent European _____ until the end of the 14th century suggests both a shortage of products and higher wages.

9). Thanks thought bubble, so the Black Death looms larger in our _____, but in terms of devastation and human suffering it pales in comparison to the Great Dying that accompanied the _____ exchange. The pre-Columbian Americas were certainly no paradise but the records we have suggest that Amerindian cultures were largely free of disease until the arrival of Europeans. They did have syphilis, but that's preventable.

Perspective: What does John Green mean when he says we tend possess "Eurocentric imaginations"?

10). Not to be redundant but the most obvious, and often most overlooked aspect of the Great Dying, is the dying. I mean, perhaps _____ of native populations of the Americas may have perished destroying communities, and families, and entire cultures. And at the same time that diseases were destroying indigenous orders, _____, thus creating more pressure to _____ the Americas, Asia, Africa, and eventually Australia. And so it's fair to say, as historian Jared Diamond has, that disease was, if not the decisive factor, a crucial determinant of Europe's dominance in the modern era.

Continuity: can you find an instance where a lot of people died from a pandemic during the 20th century?

11). We like to think that the human story is both told by and made by humans, but in fact it's a lot more complicated than that because we _____. I know we all like to think of ourselves as individuals but _____, not only from other people, but also from the larger biosphere; that _____.

In what sense is the history of humankind really a history of all life on the planet earth?

12). In *Disease! Crash Course World History* John Green explains how disease has affected humanity over the course of history. He makes reference to different examples of various regions and peoples being negatively impacted by plague and sickness. He also makes a series of conclusions—like the Black Death destroyed ended the Middle Ages—through the course of the video.

For the last task students must place themselves into the role and mindset of a teacher, e.g. student-teachers must create a question designed to get their students to focus on something important or significant from the video. In order to do this, student-teachers will create one high-level listening comprehension question (along with the answer). High level questions are:

- Questions usually, but not always, begin with the word *why*
- Questions students cannot answer by simply regurgitating what they just read
- Questions that encourage students to think beyond what they've read

There are several different types of high-level questions, e.g. hypothetical, reversal, analogy, and prediction.³

Hypothetical questions are designed to create new information: students must *create* an answer by applying principles learned through reading into an entirely new context or framework. These types of questions follow general forms like *What if X happened this way instead of that way? How would history have been different if X hadn't happened?*

Reversal questions require students to change their perspective by turning an idea on its head. These types of questions follow the form *What would change if I went backward? Why did X have to happen before Y?*

Analogy questions gets students to think about the similarities between different ideas, people or situations. These questions follow the form like *How is X like Y? If X led to Y then what led to Z?*

Prediction questions requires students to develop an answer based on the available evidence. These questions take the form *Why would X affect Y? What would likely happen if Y never happened?*

Student-Teacher Question:

³ <https://dataworks-ed.com/blog/2014/10/higher-order-questions/>

Student Exemplar Answer: