The programme

The video falls into five separate short sections. As indicated by the titles, each of the first four sections deals with a particular aspect of Enlightenment: (1) ‘The Encyclopédie’, (2) ‘Advances in medicine’, (3) ‘The classics’ and (4) ‘Humanity and the noble savage’. The fifth section, ‘Frederick the Great and enlightened absolutism’, rounds off the themes of the video by focusing briefly on Frederick II (the Great), King of Prussia, as a monarch who to some degree united the four preceding aspects of Enlightenment.

Section 1: The Encyclopédie

Unit 1 explains that the aim of the Encyclopedists (the philosophs who contributed to the Encyclopédie) was to provide a compendium of every branch of knowledge and every kind of relevant fact in the belief that the more we know, not only are we better informed but also ‘more virtuous and happier’ (Diderot, quoted on p.10).

The video emphasizes the central place of the Encyclopédie as an instrument of the Enlightenment, ‘a huge collaborative enterprise compiled by Diderot and d’Alembert’, with the participation of Voltaire, Rousseau and many other philosophs. The Encyclopédie was published between 1751 and 1772 in 28 volumes, plus 11 volumes of plates (see Figure V1.1). It contained 72,000 articles. Supplementary volumes appeared up to 1789.

Many of the articles questioned, explicitly or implicitly, existing values, beliefs and practices. Since the Encyclopédie, like all other books published in France, required royal permission or privilège and had to undergo scrutiny by a panel of censors, the contributors resorted to indirect means of getting across their message, commonly by the use of irony. (The article ‘Adore’, by Diderot, exemplifies one use of irony in its tone and the juxtaposition of the word ‘adore’ in the unexpected context of so-called ‘secular worship’ (the expression itself may be intended to be ironic):

ADORÉ (theology). This term, in its literal and etymological sense, means to carry to one’s mouth, to kiss one’s hand, or to kiss something, but with a feeling of reverence and awe. The three words adore, honôr, revêr are used for both religious and secular worship. In religious worship one adores God, one honôrs the Saints, one revêres relics and images. In the secular form of worship one adores a mistress ... (Diderot, 1751, p.144; trans. Lentin)

Such devices to evade the censors did not always succeed, and in 1759 the Encyclopédie was temporarily banned.
Subterfuge was another device for evading censorship. From 1765, with the tacit consent of the government, the last ten volumes of the Encyclopédie continued to be published in Paris, but carried the imprint of a publisher in Neuchâtel, a Prussian enclave in Switzerland.

The Encyclopédie was extremely expensive as well as large and bulky. It had a restricted readership of around 4,000 subscribers for the first edition, though by the time of the French Revolution the number of subscribers to later editions was between 15,000 and 20,000. Voltaire expressed scepticism as to whether it could really change people’s ways of thinking, as Diderot intended. Voltaire himself produced works that were shorter, snappier and wittier, and enjoyed a far larger readership, notably his Philosophical Dictionary (1764) and his best-known book, the ‘philosophical tale’ Candide (1759), full of irony and black comedy.

Reference on video to Voltaire’s English Letters, 1734: its full title was Philosophical Letters or Letters on the English. Voltaire’s enthusiastic
account of British values and institutions, written up after a visit to England, and his implicit contrasts with France, made this book an early critique of the beliefs and practices of the Old Regime.

EXERCISE

1 How would you briefly describe the Encyclopédie to someone who had never heard of it?

2 Why was the Encyclopédie so controversial in its time?

DISCUSSION

1 The Encyclopédie was a multi-volume collection, published in France in the second half of the eighteenth century under the editorship of Diderot and d’Alembert, of articles contributed by many of the philosophes, containing factual information on most branches of knowledge and on a large variety of subjects.

2 The Encyclopédie was considered controversial because it criticized, explicitly or implicitly, many of the established values, beliefs, institutions and practices of the Old Regime in France.

Section 2: Advances in medicine

Unit 1 explains that a cardinal aspect of the philosophes’ belief in reason was their veneration for the scientific method of observation and experiment as the key to the truth about nature (humankind and the universe). The scientific method means the acquisition of empirical knowledge: that is, knowledge or opinion grounded in experience’ (Unit 1, p.17). Advances in medicine were a classic example of this. New discoveries and techniques in medicine and surgery not only demonstrated the success of the scientific method, but also made human beings happier, through the relief of pain and suffering (as in lithotomy, the operation for the removal of bladder stones) or by the prevention of disease (as in inoculation against smallpox).

Inoculation against smallpox was one of the greatest advances of the age in preventive medicine, as Christopher Lawrence explains. The article ‘Inoculation’ in the Encyclopédie, written by the Swiss physician Théodor Tronchin (whose patients included Voltaire), was extremely long, but the procedure itself was simple and effective. In France, however, inoculation was considered controversial, and it was prohibited by the Roman Catholic Church. (King Louis XV was to die of smallpox in 1774.) Hence the immense appeal of inoculation to the philosophes: it was proof that, whatever the Church might say, the scientific method worked and was a boon to humanity.