

Using Primary Sources

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. The session is aimed at undergraduates who may have undertaken some primary source analysis before but have little experience in selecting relevant primary source materials to use for research projects. It is intended to open up a relaxed discussion on different ways of thinking about primary source materials. It could serve as a session on first- or second-year skills and methods modules, or as an introductory exercise on an independent research project module.

Context and aim

This seminar activity asks students to generate ideas for primary sources that could be used to write different sorts of histories. It is intended as an exploratory exercise that will help students to understand the variety of different potential source materials in a context decoupled from the immediate anxieties of selecting sources for a specific project or piece of assessment. Helping students to understand the range of potential source materials available should free their imaginations in ways productive for generating initial ideas for research projects, or simply for understanding how and why historians might make decisions to use specific sorts of sources (depending on the overall aims of the module).

Preparation

No preparation is required for this session.

Description of activity

Introduction: Large group discussion [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with a brief introduction to the aims of the session and how it fits into the wider module. To set the scene for subsequent discussion, ask students to define 'primary source' and 'secondary source'. These are quite basic questions, but the discussion should help to establish the overall level of knowledge within the group and provide an opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings.

Part 1: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

Ask students:

- If a historian was writing the story of your life, what primary sources could they use?

Encourage them to list as many sources as possible. If they are struggling, kickstart the discussion with questions such as 'Have you ever kept a diary?' and 'Is there any evidence of your childhood in your home?' Emphasize that no potential source is too silly. Write all their suggestions up on the whiteboard.

Part 2: Small group discussion [10 minutes]

Divide students into small groups. They have five minutes to discuss:

- What kinds of primary sources could you use to write about the life of the Prime Minister?
- Try to list as many primary sources as possible.
- Justify the use of each source (e.g. why is this a relevant source for investigating the life of a Prime Minister?).

The groups should report back for the remaining five minutes. Write their suggestions on the whiteboard. Ask them to nominate whether these are sources that are publicly available (such as newspapers) or sources that are privately generated and may or may not be archived (such as diaries). Note which sources do and do not appear on the list for the previous exercise and use this to illustrate some of the differences between researching the lives of 'ordinary' people and those in the public eye.

Part 3: Large group discussion [5 minutes]

Ask students to consider what kinds of primary sources could be used for writing about the life of a seventeenth-century politician. How many of the sources already listed are available for an earlier era? What other sources might be available? This exercise is intended to generate discussion on the potential differences and similarities between the sources available to study different periods.

Part 4: Small group discussion [10 minutes]

So far, the discussion has focused on sources that could be used to investigate individual lives. The next part of the session encourages students to think about potential approaches for investigating wider histories. Divide students into groups and ask them to generate a list of the kinds of evidence that might be used to investigate one of the following areas, paying attention to the different source types that might be available for different periods and/or regions.

Group 1: Military strategy.

Group 2: Political campaigns.

Group 3: Popular protest.

Group 4: Sexual behaviour.

Group 5: Religious change.

Group 6: Scientific discovery.

Students are likely to find this exercise difficult, but the aim is partly to encourage them to ask questions and to try to narrow down what they are discussing – this act of narrowing down the focus is an essential part of formulating a research project, and you can emphasize this in the wrap-up.

Report back and wrap-up [10 minutes]

The reporting back on this task is combined with the wrap-up. Encourage students to explain any difficulties they had with this exercise. Invite them to expand on the differences between thinking about sources for investigating individual lives and those for investigating wider social changes. Draw out what this might mean for formulating questions and potential sources for research projects. Finally, ask them if they now have a different sense of what potential sources could be used to understand different historical topics.