

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS THROUGH HISTORICAL SOURCE WORK

By
Professor Michael Hicks

1 Introduction

The project assesses the contribution of historical source-work to the delivery of generic and specialist historical skills.

2 The Range of Skills

Historical source work is used for three principal purposes:

1. to familiarise students with the past;
2. to illustrate facets of the past;
3. to develop critical/ technical historical skills.

Objectives (1) and (2) give priority to aspects of the sources relevant to interpreting history. Often they involve selective use of large numbers of sources. (3) calls for detailed in-depth engagement with a limited number of sources prior to their interpretation.

The whole range of benchmark skills and key skills *can* be developed through source work, but the normal range offered is much narrower. Departments deliver skills through learning, teaching, and assessment within which source work is only a part.

The core skills from the *History Benchmarks* required for and developed by source-work occur on all academic courses. They are:

Generic Skills

- 6 Ability to analyse and solve quite complex problems.

Specialist Skills

- 2 Read critically [but not necessarily with sympathy]
- 4 Understanding problems of the historical record. There are some problems that all students encounter, others that particular types of work additionally reveal.
- 5 Basic critical skills – the application of the skills needed to overcome the problems.
- 6 Skills in collecting, sifting and substantiating.
- 7 Marshal argument oral or written.

Other skills are developed from particular activities in specific departments, e.g.

Generic Skills

- 5 Ability to gather and sort evidence and knowledge of how to find it.
- 10 Empathy and imaginative insight.

Specialist Skills

- 1 Understand past structures and belief systems.
- 2 Read sympathetically.
- 3 Appreciate complexity of past situations, events, and mentalities.
- 4 Understand further problems of the historical record.

Keyskills

- 3 & 4 Career development and transferability.
- 7 Working effectively as a team member.

- 8, 10 Communicating in non-written forms [eg oral presentations, visual displays, oral history, use of visual evidence].
- 14 Applying Numeracy [eg work on census].
- 15 Applying Technology [eg spreadsheets, access databases].

3 The Use and Development of Skills through Source-work

It is easy to collect examples of gobbet work and documents used in class, but these were seldom accompanied by the questions or objectives from which skills could be deduced.

Students learn by tutors' example and correction. There are different cultures, by department, period, or tutor expectation, within which students operate. It is because source-work is now very extensive and is frequently encountered that students detect inconsistency and are confused. Different expectations are appropriate to different data and approaches, but students need to know what is required for each module and task. Hence tutors need to define their own practice and expectations, locate it within the range of what is possible, and be explicit about what is required.

The gobbet is a short documentary extract. Students have to contextualise it and bring out its wider significance. It is widely practised, often via examinations, is normal in the older universities, and is popular with those studying earlier periods, for whom perhaps the sources are better suited and for which the character of the source is often the key to understanding it. The *Benchmark* generic skills 6, 10, and specialist skills 1-7 are usually developed and tested. Where maps, plans, graphs, and pictures serve as gobbets, they imply training in the use of non-written communication and numeracy (keyskills 8, 10, 14).

Modern historians are often less preoccupied by the technicalities of their sources and are more concerned to locate extracts between antecedents (causes) and consequences. The whole documents they present to students emphasise comprehension (often literal) and propagandist usage. Such approaches are preferred in many new universities, where strong objections are registered to gobbets and/ or examinations. Whole-document analysis appears to develop similar skills to a less rigorous format, perhaps less intensively, and develops instead students' capacities for application and wider interpretation. Interviews of tutors might enable this hypothesis to be tested.

Several institutions make source-work the vehicle for developing oracy and team-work. At both Levels 2 and 3, presentations develop some of the *Benchmark* skills, though no more effectively than standard written assignments; group and oral skills are developed, but no more effectively than other topics for oral presentations.

Modules making extensive use of the censuses, industrial archaeology, or modern electronic media may require the application of numeracy, technology. Northampton's Witchcraft module requires students to compose documents, thus emphasising empathy and imaginative insight, generic skill 10 and specialist skills 1-4. At Brighton students undertake intensive archival work on the Garnet Wolseley archive as part of a study of feminism. Whilst viewing past cultures and belief systems critically, such projects do not do so sympathetically or empathetically; they do reveal how source-work is susceptible to different pedagogical applications.

Assessment via gobbets determines the pedagogical approach (training in gobbets) that may not be equally desirable for all types of history. Sources have to be deployed in particular ways if teamwork, oracy, or historiographical perspectives are to be developed. No task develops all skills. Gobbets are not self-evidently conducive to bibliographic or technological skills. Some critical analysis may be sacrificed where other keyskills are prioritised.

Conclusions

- History Benchmark generic skills 5, 6, 10, specialist skills 1-7, and keyskills 3-4, 7, 8, 10, 14, 15 can be developed via historical source-work.
- Generic skill 6 and specialist skills 2-7 are the core skills that are developed in all History departments .
- Particular topics, delivery and assessment are conducive to the development of further skills, eg teamwork, oracy, applying numeracy, applying technology, but these may dilute other core skills.
- There are differences in the types of source-work and expectations of departments. This may arise from differences on period specialisation, types of sources, and varieties of history. All fall within the extremely broad *Benchmark* skills descriptors.
- It is not clear that source-work is the best way to develop additional skills, so examples of best practice have not been identified.
- Departments and tutors need to be self-conscious and deliberate about where their practice is located.

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