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Enlivening secondary history: 40 classroom activities for teachers and pupils

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section 2

numerical data

adding interest

introduction

This section aims to provide teachers and tutors with ten distinct ways of provoking small-group discussion when numerical data is the focus of seminar attention. First though, we must clarify what we mean by the phrase 'numerical data'. Here we are talking, primarily, about *tabular* data; in the context of history this could mean tables of electoral figures, economic statistics or even opinion poll information. In short, any form of historical data presented in tabular mode.

The rationale behind this chapter is threefold: to make numerical data more accessible, to help teachers in their efforts to provoke constructive data-orientated discussion, and to enable students to comprehend and understand them better. Underlying these three aims is a fourth: to increase the confidence, and enhance the practical classroom options, of teachers who deal with numerical data on a regular basis.

The basic assumption at the heart of this section is that many students - and staff - do not feel totally comfortable with numerical data. While the former tend to view statistical information with serious suspicion, the latter, it might be suggested, do not, generally, look forward to teaching topics that include a heavy data element. There just seems to be something innately off-putting about statistical data for many students and teachers.

The irony of course is that tabular data can be a rich form of historical evidence; it can be useful, provocative and contain vital explanatory detail - whatever the topic under consideration. Numerical data can be priceless for historians in search of factual information or argument; hence the importance of stimulating discussion around statistical tables (whether they include electoral details, economic indices or opinion poll findings) and making them accessible and student-friendly. The reality is that in most history syllabi there will come a time when the focus shifts to some form of tabular data. Clearly, in this situation, it is important that teachers and tutors are armed with the necessary classroom ideas to provoke discussion and to make the subject matter accessible.

The ten following teaching methods were tested in specially-arranged focus-group sessions. Contemporary British politics was used as the subject matter for all the 'classes', mainly because it was a topic on which students were generally well informed, *even without* specific pre-session preparation. Even though the subject matter was not overtly 'history', it is obvious that techniques which work with data of a contemporary nature also have the potential to work, easily, with more historical topics. Obviously, students were not studying the subject as part of a taught module - and this brought some problems - but the sessions *were*, in general terms, extremely helpful and productive, in that they supplied valuable evidence, and thus aided the research process as a whole.

The pro-forma used to explain and analyse each of the teaching methods is, for the most part, self-explanatory. It should be noted though that the *Summary* is a quick general guide to the technique - and should

be viewed as an 'overview' of what has gone before.

The reader also needs to be aware that a questionnaire form was given to all students attending the focus-group sessions. A copy of this is reprinted below, as is a copy of the form given to staff 'observers' for completion (staff observers attended four of the ten focus-group sessions).

Peter Davies

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