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Using primary sources in teaching selected aspects of British Studies: Benefits and limitations

Abstract

Teaching practices in the field of British studies have become more innovative over recent decades. Advances in the field of digital technologies have prompted a need to use primary sources in order to motivate students and help them to deepen their knowledge of the content. This paper discusses the benefits but also limitations of using primary sources in teaching British Studies as an academic subject.

Keywords: British Studies, digitized collections, educational environment, primary sources

Introduction

British Studies is a rapidly developing field of study that covers a wide range of aspects relating to contemporary British culture and society. Bassnett (2003) associates the growing interest in British (Cultural) Studies in the 1990s with the two key patterns of transition which she perceives in British society during that period: the rise of regionalism and an

increased interest in the study of cultures. Durant (2003) notes that British (Cultural) Studies has replaced English literature as the most significant cultural component of English as a Foreign Language courses, and he also outlines two general perspectives on how British (Cultural) Studies should be understood. The first of these is the perspective of a “civilization” emphasis on history, social institutions and patterns of behaviour, an approach which is perhaps more typical for cultures outside of the Anglosphere. The second perspective, more typical within the Anglosphere itself, combines various approaches to study the formation of British society, with a tacit admission that British Studies can be understood as “cultural studies as practised by British scholars” (Durant, 2003: 22). However, our understanding of British Studies should not be limited to one or other of these perspectives, nor from a combination of the two; Durant stresses that “besides having a ‘content’ it serves broader social functions and interests” (2003: 23).

Defining primary sources

Due in no small measure to recent advances in the field of digital technologies, the teaching of British studies as an academic subject has undergone significant changes outside the Anglosphere in particular, prompting a need to use primary sources in order to motivate students and help them to deepen their knowledge of the content. Technological advances are not only responsible for the wider availability of primary sources online on either official institutional websites or less formal platforms such as YouTube, but they have also made it easier to manipulate or generate a variety of media. Given this fact, it is therefore crucial to identify reliable sources for source materials, as primary sources come in many forms, shapes and sizes.

Primary sources are generally understood to be original documents and other materials that provide firsthand accounts of the topics being studied. Primary sources are not categorised as such based on their format but by the fact that they are original, surviving records that were created either by the participants themselves or by direct witnesses who were present at the time of the events under discussion. Primary sources are an invaluable resource for students and researchers because they are free from any external interpretation. Interpretation and analysis are typically offered by secondary sources which are consulted for background information or possibly in order to obtain an overview of the current state of research in the field. Typical examples of secondary sources include textbooks, biographies, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, reviews, data compilations or any works of interpretation and criticism.

Primary sources enable the user to come as close as possible to what actually happened during an event or time period in history, and therefore educators are increasingly being encouraged to use materials of this nature with their students. However, prior to introducing primary sources into the teaching environment, both educators and students must be aware of what constitutes a primary source and where to find appropriate and usable primary sources. In the current media landscape, an almost limitless range of potential

primary sources is available, but each source has unique qualities that can influence the way in which it is studied. As Clabough et al. (2016: 5) explain:

They were created by and received by the great and famous but also by the little known, ignored and downtrodden. They are written by the makers and shapers of the history, as well as by participants and even contemporary observers. They are not even all written. Some are filmed, recorded, drawn, painted, etched, carved, sung, woven, molded, worn, and used.

Clabough et al. (2016: 5) elaborate further, stating that “[p]rimary sources are, in fact, the discovered, uncovered and recovered remnants surviving from the past. Some come with undeniable provenance while others have dubious origins, and some are absolute forgeries.” While it is important to bear in mind the potential risks involved in using primary sources, they are nonetheless a true record of what really happened in the past; primary sources remain a vital means of gaining a better understand of the political, social, and cultural values or climate of a given historical period (Vest, 2005).

Primary materials can encompass a wide array of formats including written records (for example, speeches, letters, journals or official records), audio and visual recordings, original works of art and literature, and also artifacts and research data. Newman (2014: 1) suggests that the vast and diverse array of types can be organized into two broad categories: human documents and physical remains. He subdivides the category of human documents into print, still vision, oral culture sources and media, while physical remains can be divided into material culture and the built and natural environments. Each of these subcategories can be subdivided further into more specific types which are listed in Figure 1, but this should not be considered as a fixed configuration because the range of formats of primary sources is likely to expand in the future.

PRIMARY SOURCES					
HUMAN DOCUMENTS			PHYSICAL REMAINS		
Media	Print	Visual	Material Culture	Natural Environment	Built Environment
Film	Publications	Maps	Tools	Waterways	Architecture
Audio	Personal Records	Photos Fine Arts	Clothing Machines	Land Forms Plants &	Land Use Place Names
Digital	Government Documents			Animals	
Oral Culture					
Storytelling					
Interviews					
Folklore					

Figure 1. Newman’s division of primary sources

Source: Newman 2014: 1.

There are many benefits of using primary sources in teaching and learning. Clabough et al. (2016: 6), among others, list the most significant advantages as follows:

- Primary sources can enliven the content material.
- The possibility of examining several perspectives through multiple sources offers a much fuller overview of a time period and its people.
- Primary sources are the equivalent of duct tape for social studies educators.
- Primary sources shift the emphasis from presentation teaching to inquiry, offering a deeper level of exploration and a more student-centric dynamic in the learning group.

However, the potential of primary materials is not always fully exploited in the teaching environment as educators may find it challenging to include the use of primary sources in already crowded syllabi or curriculum. Additionally, they might face technical challenges regarding access to primary sources or students might lack the necessary skills to perform a critical analysis of primary materials.

Primary sources in teaching British studies – benefits and limitations

In general, teaching practices in the fields of the humanities and social studies, including British studies, have shown a greater tendency towards incorporating innovative visions of teaching and learning over recent decades. Traditional forms of teaching and learning have been challenged by new approaches which place a stronger emphasis on the processes of both teaching and learning rather than the accumulation of knowledge. Colby (2008) describes these new teaching methodologies as allowing students to find answers to problems and questions which they themselves have formulated by following where the evidence leads them, thereby enabling them become independent learners. The questions which they pose might lead to other questions, some of which might not be easily answerable, and the confrontation with this kind of complexity makes them both independent but also more inclined towards life-long learning, a key goal of both teaching and learning. By involving themselves in this type of analysis, students can become the guardians of their own learning, with the teacher acting more as a guide than an authority figure.

The demands of the twenty-first century require a different kind of teaching in the fields of the humanities and social studies, and teachers are increasingly advised to instruct students in a way that allows them to explore the content in more detail rather than merely presenting them with the facts. The main aim here is to spark the curiosity of students and encourage them to be more active and engaged. Primary sources allow students to explore the thoughts, values, and biases of people across different time periods. These sources provide a less filtered version of the analysed event, and often lead to more questions than answers. Consulting primary sources makes us think more about why people wrote what they wrote, said what they said and did what they did. Only then is it possible to determine know if and how all of this information represents the political, cultural, and social values of a historical period (Bickford, 2012).

One of the most common misleading conceptions about using primary sources is that they are more reliable than secondary sources (Barton, 2005). It is important to bear in mind that while primary sources were invariably created during the period under study or by witnesses to the event, this does not necessarily grant them a greater sense of authenticity. Primary materials were created for a variety of reasons, and some of these might have led to the development of highly subjective perspective; in some cases, primary sources might even have been intentionally created to misrepresent the reality. In the case of British political institutions (and those of other states), speeches made by politicians are invaluable primary sources, but they represent only a limited perspective that is likely to reflect the dominant political ideology of the time. An academic work by a respected scholar published many years later typically reflects a much broader perspective since it does not focus on the justification of the dominant political ideology. Given these nuances, we can see that it is not wise to depend entirely on a single source, whether primary or secondary; there is a risk that either can provide students with a very narrow perspective, and the question of whether a source is primary or secondary has no bearing on its reliability (Barton, 2005).

Another common misconception arises in connection with the issue of bias in primary sources. It is crucial that students learn to identify bias by questioning the motivations of the creators of a source and identifying the interests that may affect their accuracy in depicting events. Although many primary sources are biased, every source offers a unique perspective that can help students understand the possible range of viewpoints held by the people at the time. In the specific case of investigating feelings, ideas or attitudes, bias can constitute valuable evidence of how individuals perceived the issues of their day, with a source's bias adding greatly to the picture of society (Barton, 2005).

It is also important to bear in mind that an understanding of the past obtained through primary sources alone is inadequate and insufficient. A solid knowledge of a subject requires more than an analysis of primary sources. Although they are a very useful source of information, primary sources are incapable of constructing an accurate picture of a society unless students possess some prior background information on the topic. Without a factual or theoretical grounding in the relevant historical period, primary sources are often incomprehensible, and any interpretation of the past derived from such an approach is likely to be misleading.

Teaching British Studies as an academic subject with the use of primary sources invites students to participate actively in the learning process. The act of examining primary sources gives students the chance to view the past through a direct lens; they can investigate the historical context in which it was created and therefore gain a better understanding of the given aspect of British history, society and culture. Furthermore, working with primary sources helps students build invaluable critical thinking skills and introduces them to the issues of selection and bias. Due to technological advances, the use of primary sources is no longer hindered by their physical inaccessibility as a wide array of materials has been made available online. In the digital age of the twenty-first century, educators and researchers who have realised the potential of digital tools and technologies have influenced not just the teaching environment but also the scholarly workflow in the field of the humanities, including British Studies.

The emergence of online available digitized collections of primary sources has revolutionised the ways in which educators and scholars can access primary materials. The main benefits include quick access, the possibility to browse digital collections, and more effective search techniques due to the ease of using digital formats. The primary aim of using primary sources in the teaching environment is to engage students, and the use of the Internet allows students outside the UK to apply learn-by-doing approach by exploring digital collections and archives related to British history, society, and culture. This opportunity allows them to engage actively with sources that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

However, the use of online primary materials in teaching, including courses in British Studies, is not without its challenges. The most obvious issue is the need for suitable technology to access and view online primary sources either at school, library or at home, with this infrastructure requiring considerable investment. Eamon has argued that institutions that provide digitized sources (either archives or other repositories) need to mediate their content so that it is “appealing to [an] educational audience” (2006: 308), a demand that he sees as another technical challenge. Eamon (2006) also identifies conceptual challenges such as the need to create supplementary educational material to accompany primary sources in order to ensure that their potential is fully exploited, the necessity of teaching students how to identify bias when working with primary sources and the requirement to teach them how to recognize reliable online providers of authoritative content in comparison to those providing less reputable content.

It is also clear that only primary materials obtained from reliable sources should be used in the teaching process, and online search tools should allow users to obtain detailed descriptions of the resources they offer. However, we should also recognise that not every document can be digitized due to constraints such as copyright or other limiting legislation, insufficient funding or even the lack of time and human resources to create digital versions of the holdings of archives and other institutions. Fortunately, multiple archives, libraries and other institutions of authority have already started the process of digitizing their collections of primary sources and making them available online, and teachers and scholars now have several options for obtaining appropriate primary source materials.

Teachers and educators of British Studies based in Central Europe may suffer from a more limited degree of access to online databases that require paid subscriptions due to a general lack of financial resources for such activities, but this issue can be partly resolved through access to several freely available digital collections that cover British history and culture. Major institutional collections include university libraries and national libraries and archives, many of which provide helpful and user-friendly research guides. One of the most frequently suggested research guides of primary sources covering British (and also Irish) history and culture is that created by Theresa Mudrock, a librarian at the University of Washington, which is available online (<https://guides.lib.uw.edu/research/history-british>). The research guide provides an extensive list of available online collections created by respectable major libraries and archives and features different types of material including government documents, newspapers, letters and diaries, maps, films, and images.

When it comes to teaching selected aspects of British history and culture within British Studies, there are relatively few obvious resources which offer primary sources with the potential to engage students. In terms of social aspects of topics such as the family and migration, statistics are typically used to provide evidence or illustrate various issues of the past, but the insight which they can offer is dependent on the approach taken by educators themselves. The website of the Office for National Statistics (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/>) is routinely used to access the UK's official statistical data on the population, economy, and society, both at a national and local level. The topic of migration could also be approached from a legislative point of view, as British laws on migration can be said to illustrate the changing attitudes of British society towards migration. The official online database of British legislation (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/>) provides access to all laws enacted in the UK and allows users to explore British history and politics through a different perspective. The website is managed by the National Archives (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>) and provides an extensive collection of digitized primary sources on various topics relating to Britain. It also offers multiple helpful research guides compiled by professionals on various topics including family and migration which enable users to access personal documents, government records, maps, photographs, and many other types of primary materials. In terms of British political institutions, some of the most commonly used primary sources are speeches made by British politicians which can be analysed both in terms of their content and rhetoric. The website <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/> provides an online archive of texts of speeches of British politicians from the three dominant political parties in the UK (the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat Parties). All of these collections of primary sources share the potential to offer insightful experiences in the teaching environment, directly challenging students to engage in critical thinking, especially when they are confronted with multiple documents.

Conclusion

The advances in digital technologies in the twenty-first century have greatly increased access to a wider range of primary sources, and educators and researchers in the humanities and social studies have been quick to take advantage of these new opportunities. In terms of the teaching of British Studies in educational institutions outside the UK, this availability of primary sources can be exploited to deepen the understanding of British history and culture, and it is therefore not surprising that educators in the field are generally encouraged to use primary sources in the teaching environment. However, primary sources also offer both benefits and limitations, and it is important to remain aware of the possible technical and conceptual challenges that their use entails.

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Streszczenie

Wykorzystanie źródeł pierwotnych w nauczaniu wybranych aspektów studiów brytyjskich: korzyści i ograniczenia

Praktyki dydaktyczne na kierunkach brytyjskich studiów wykazały w ostatnich dziesięcioleciach większą tendencję do włączania innowacyjnych wizji. Postępy w dziedzinie technologii cyfrowych spowodowały potrzebę korzystania ze źródeł pierwotnych w celu motywowania uczniów i w wspomagania ich w pogłębianiu wiedzy na temat treści. W artykule omówiono korzyści, ale także ograniczenia wynikające z wykorzystania źródeł pierwotnych w nauczaniu brytyjki jako przedmiotu akademickiego.

Słowa kluczowe: brytyjstka, zdigitalizowane zbiory, środowisko edukacyjne, źródła pierwotne