TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY OF USE FOR EVIDENTIAL MATERIAL IN HISTORY TEACHING

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Challenged at an ASSESA Seminar by the Chairman, Mr Elito Viglieno, on this question I would respond by stating that a methodology is not only possible and practical but essential. No doubt this one is faulty in many more respects than I realize, but I would offer it in the hopes of stimulating the general interest in this type of teaching and examining.

The evidence we use in this regard devides broadly into five sections: the document (be it written or a form of sound or video recording); the map; the graph or other statistical information however presented; the picture (whether sketch, painting or photograph) and the political cartoon. There are certain common factors which must be borne in mind when one is analysing any of these as well as some specific methods of approach to each category so some repetition in outlining such a methodology is inevitable.

The first general rule of any evidential study in history is that the pupil must question the evidence. The British Schools Council 13-16 History Project stresses this in their introductory **What is History?** pack by starting with a purely detective exercise set in modern England and ending with a section called **Asking Questions.** This surely is the crux of any evidential study methodology and our task as teachers is to give our pupils the necessary questioning attitudes and framework to use the material in front of them.

1. **DOCUMENTS**

   The pupil must first ask if the document is genuine, that is, is it what it claims to be? If it claims to be a copy of a part of Van Riebeeck's diary he must ask: is it in Dutch?; do we know whether he kept a diary? What other evidence is there for Van Riebeeck's having kept a diary? If he can satisfy himself that it is genuine, then he can continue to the next step with more confidence.

   The next group of questions to ask is why it was written (or said in the case of a recording). If the purpose was private — such as a diary it is a good tool for understanding the writer's view (but not necessarily anyone else's). If the purpose was public what was the author trying to achieve? This will obviously affect the slant or bias of the author.

   The third question bank must look at the author — was she/he in a position to make the statement? This includes asking (whether of an eye-witness, or a later scholar) what type of witness she/he would be in terms of their education; their position relative to the incident both physical and mental and their personal interest or concern with the incident.

   After ascertaining what one might call the **bona fides** of the document one can expect to look at its content and here it is necessary to analyse it in terms of one's previous knowledge. This is a programme of cross-referencing old and new information and reassessing both in the light of each other in order to revise one's own views through a careful reasoning out of all possibilities.

   In short the pupil is taught to confront documentary material with these questions:

   1. ARE YOU GENUINE? (IF NOT, ARE YOU ANY USE?)
   2. WHY WERE YOU WRITTEN?
   3. CAN I RELY ON/BELIEVE YOU?
   4. DO YOU TELL ME ANYTHING NEW, REINFORCE OR CONTRADICT MY EXISTING KNOWLEDGE?

   The same basic principles apply to all other forms of evidential material but we must add specialised questions for the non-written forms. Thus for tapes, records, videos we must remind pupils to ask whether these facilities were available at the time; then to question their authenticity in other ways.

2. **MAPS**

   The extra questions the pupil must be taught to ask of maps are basically:

   (a) Why was the map drawn — what is it intended to show?

   (b) What time period does the map reflect?

   (c) When was it drawn? (How much information would have been available to the cartographer).

   (d) What is not shown and why is it omitted?

   (e) What can one infer from the map?

   (f) How can I relate this to my existing knowledge?

3. **GRAPHS**

   The first point here must be to ask whether or not the graph is mathematically valid or whether it is distorting the information. Pupils must be taught to look at scales and units on the axes. Once this has been done one can ask further:

   (a) Is the selection of information valid?

   (b) Is information being compared? If so why is this being done and is the comparison of any value or use?

   (c) What factors does the graph ignore?

   (d) Is the graph's representation valid in terms of my existing knowledge?

4. **STATISTICAL TABLES**

   (a) Do the statistics have any significance?

   (b) Are they apparently accurate?

   (c) Can I use them to further my understanding of the subject to which they refer?

   (d) How do they correlate to my existing knowledge?

5. **PICTURES**

   (a) Why is the picture reproduced? If this can be answered with conviction in terms of the information it carries and the background knowledge you have on the subject, most of the battle is over.

   (b) Is the picture authentic in terms of the truth of what it portrays?

(c) What does the picture highlight and what does it neglect about the situation it portrays?

(d) How does the picture add to or contradict my knowledge and understanding of the events it purports to record?

6. **CARTOONS**

The political cartoon is primarily an immediate comment on a given situation which makes no claim or effort to show all sides of the situation. It is after all political comment in which the familiar and respected figure is placed in an environment which illuminates and re-interprets it; it surprises us by bringing together the reconciling disparate elements. It is a continuous debate in which the cartoonist builds among his readers an expectation of his political prejudices and principles.

In British political cartoons we find three dominant traditions — classicist (in which large figures dominate the scene); grotesque and populist (in which the little people are emphasized often with a regular character). Many cartoonists use all three traditions although few South African cartoonists use the grotesque form.

The first problem is to relate the cartoon to the incident which inspired it and then to identify the characters, time and place. This involves teaching the pupils something of the cartoonists' range of common symbols — English lion, policeman, bulldog; Russian bear, etc. One can probably not cover all the possibilities but a basic list will at least give pupils the idea of looking imaginatively at the symbols and hopefully identifying them with at least a degree of accuracy.

The pupil must then look at the choice of characters, the exaggerations and distortions in the cartoon as well as the relative positioning of the figures. The title of the cartoon and the comments spoken in it (if any) must then be linked to the drawing as a whole. Once all this has been done the pupil can ask the specific questions about the cartoon along the following lines:

(a) What is the cartoon commenting on? (the event)

(b) What is the cartoonist's attitude towards:
  (i) the event?
  (ii) the characters involved?

(c) Is the cartoon a valid comment on the situation?

(d) Can the cartoonist's view be justified? How/why not?

(e) Does the cartoon open a new interpretation on the event at all?

Having outlined my basic approach to evidential material which I use in both teaching and testing, **I look forward to the reaction of your readers to it.**

(Your response — *Ed.*)