Local history teaching in schools: supporting active learning approaches

INTRODUCTION

This lecture, given at the Family Tree Live! conference in May, 2019, begins by commenting on the notion of active learning and then considers three examples of how it can be applied in teaching local history. The examples make use of different types of primary source material - oral testimony, written records and the built environment - that are widely available and relate to themes dealing with family history. Further details of them, along with other exercises that children can undertake in studying local history, can be found in Geoff Timmins, *Exploring Local History: a Practical Guide for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools* (2018). The book's introduction and content list can be viewed on the website of the British Association for Local History at

<https://www.balh.org.uk/publications/general-publications/exploring-local-history>

ACTIVE LEARNING

Features of active learning

- Teachers guide children's learning rather than concentrating on transmitting knowledge.
- Emphasis is on children taking responsibility for the learning they undertake.
- Children take part in various ways - research, discussion, voting, set practical work, role play, giving formal presentations, etc.
- A key aim is to develop children's subject-specific and transferable skills, including those of evaluating and interpreting information.

Problems of implementation

- Large class sizes can be an issue, but group work may be possible
- Active approaches are not confined to the classroom.
- Some children may resist active learning in history, especially if quantification is involved.

Examples of the approach

Three examples are considered, drawing on different types of local source material relating to different time periods. They are:

  - Family life in the 1950s – oral testimony;
  - Naming Tudor children – documentary evidence;
  - The great chimney pot mystery – physical evidence.

EXAMPLE 1: FAMILY LIFE IN THE 1950s

- Lists are made of several items that would not have featured in family life during the 1950s and others that might have done, keeping a reasonable balance between them.
- Children ask people who were children in the 1950s whether or not the items were available to them.
- Children use their findings to compare aspects of their childhood with those of the older generation. So, they can discuss the nature of changes that have occurred over time, as well as the causes and impact of the changes.

With regard to entertainment, for instance, the influence of technological innovation can be considered, noting the new types of products that have become available and the greater range of choice they offer.

1. Home entertainment in the 1950s

Which did you have in your home in the 1950s?	Yes or no
colour television set	......
black and white television set	......
radio	......
computer games	......
tape recorder	......
record player	......
comics	......
compact disc player	......
board games	......
piano	......
card games	......
dominos	......

Please make any other comments

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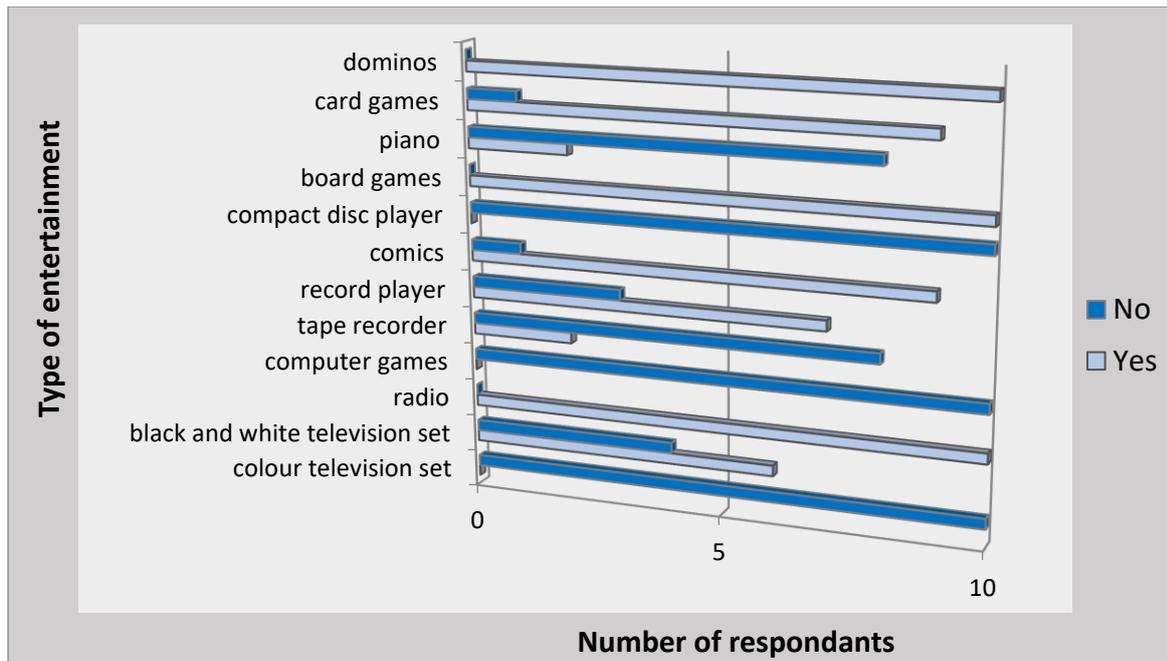
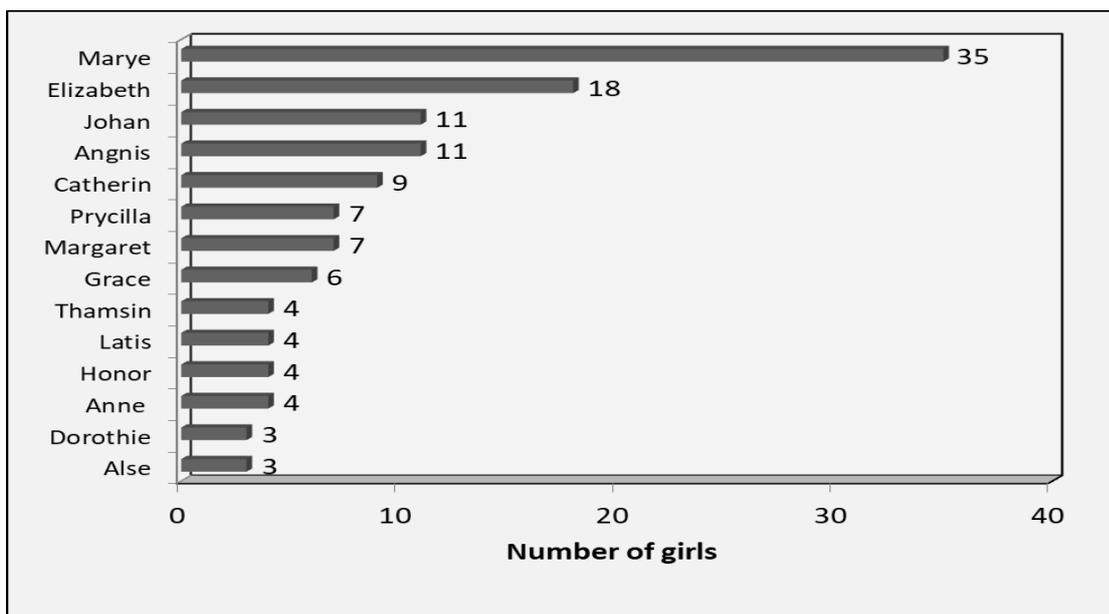..

Only a small number of responses are required. The results can be graphed and analysed. An example based on ten responses is given below. Other comments can be useful in extending or qualifying the responses given.

The chart shows the frequency distribution of types of entertainment (Type of entertainment vs Number of respondants) with Yes/No responses for: dominos, card games, piano, board games, compact disc player, comics, record player, tape recorder, computer games, radio, black and white television set, colour television set.

EXAMPLE 2: CHILDREN'S FORENAMES

- Use is made of parish register baptism data, so the exercise can go back to Tudor times in many localities.
- A frequency distribution of children's forenames for a locality can be compiled and displayed as a spreadsheet graph.
- Again the objective is to help children to examine and explain change over time, in this case beyond living memory.
- Context can arise through comparison between parishes at a point in time.

The bar chart shown below gives the frequency distribution of girls' names at Barnstaple in Devon between 1790 and 1793. Names that occur fewer than three times are not included.

Bar chart of girls' names (Number of girls): Marye 35, Elizabeth 18, Johan 11, Angnis 11, Catherin 9, Prycilla 7, Margaret 7, Grace 6, Thamsin 4, Latis 4, Honor 4, Anne 4, Dorothie 3, Alse 3.

What emerges from the investigation is that Mary was by far the most popular name for a girl, with Elizabeth the second most popular. For boys, John was the most popular name, occurring 46 times, with William, occurring 13 times, the next most popular.

Various exercises can follow, that enable children to extend and deepen their investigations, in part to place their findings in context.

- Considering why were some names were very popular, bearing in mind the influence of revered religious and secular figures, including Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ; John, one of his twelve apostles; and John the Baptist, the preacher who baptised him.
- The absolute figures can be computed as percentages. Those for the Barnstaple sample are shown below. As can be seen, the three most popular names for boys reached half the total, whilst the two most popular formed over a third and the most popular exceeded a quarter. The distribution was similar for girls' names, with slightly lower percentage returns in each category.

Girls' names	Percentage	Boys' names	Percentage
Most common (Mary)	22	Most common (John)	29
Two most common (Mary & Elizabeth)	33	Two most common (John & William)	37
Three most common (Mary, Elizabeth & Agnes/Joan)	48	Three most common (John, William & George)	50

- Comparisons can be made with forename popularity in other parishes at the time to see if more general patterns emerge or if there was any marked variation. Similarity and difference can be explored, therefore.
- Children can compare the most common forenames today with those in the past and consider why changes have occurred, especially the decline in the predominance of just a few names, a feature of the post World War II era. Discussion can include the movement of people in and out the country and the rise of a global media.
- Particularly helpful in this respect is the *Baby Names in England and Wales* website, provided by the Office of National Statistics. It provides up-to-date details of forename popularity, as well as historical data about forenames, showing the changes that have occurred over time. It can be viewed at

  <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/babynamesenglandandwales/previousReleases>

  Open the data for a particular year to gain access to the range of information provided.

EXAMPLE 3: THE GREAT CHIMNEY POT MYSTERY

- The houses shown on the left in the picture below date from the early 19th century and those on the right from the late 19th century. They differ in several respects, including the number of fireplaces they contained. As the numbers of chimney pots reveal, the earlier houses had two and the later ones four. In terms of the number of rooms that could be heated, the later houses had considerable advantage over the earlier ones, therefore.

- All the houses had four rooms originally. So, all the rooms in the later houses would have had fireplaces, but only two did in the earlier ones. The question is, which two rooms in the earlier houses had fireplaces and which did not?
- The usual response is that the two downstairs rooms would have had fireplaces, on the assumption that fires would be needed in the kitchen at the rear and the living room at the front. However, as the next illustration shows, it was the two front rooms in houses of this type that contained fireplaces. The front room operated as a combined living-room and kitchen. It was larger than the rear room, which contained the stairs and a slop-stone or sink.
- Using this type of approach, children can investigate local accommodation standards in the past, again with change and continuity over time in mind.
- Further details of house characteristics at can be found in a presentation entitled *Investigating local housing: physical evidence in context*, The third section deals with

small terraced houses. The presentation can be viewed on the British Association for Local History website at

<http://my.balh.org.uk/lhd2017/Investigating-Local-Housing-Geoff-Timmins.pdf>

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