

Using online databases to teach history

What is a database?

A database is a method and a tool for organising data. They are designed to enable the efficient storage, management and retrieval of information. Databases can come in a variety of formats: electronic, printed, graphic, audio, statistical. The level of potential complexity in a database varies greatly, for example in the method of organization, or the amount and breadth of information being stored. A collation of information that has a uniform system of categorization and access is known as a database – from the alphabetical arrangement of names in an address book to a record of census data for an entire country.

Using databases in teaching

The use of databases in teaching is now widely-established at all levels of education (e.g. 'Using Computer Databases In The Classroom': <http://www.teach-nology.com/tutorials/databases/>) and has been shown to enable students to engage with large datasets, to develop their ability to search for information and to conduct their own independent research. Activities range across a spectrum from passive to active use, including:

- Directing students to specific resources that a lecturer has found via a database;
- Encouraging students to search online databases for information and resources to support their learning;
- Introducing students to the use of specific databases in their research (= 'how to' use a specific database or databases);
- Training students in making databases as a part of ICT training (= 'how to' build a generic database);
- Training students in using databases for their own research (= 'how to' building a database to support your own research).

Using databases in History teaching

Desktop computer-based databases have been used in History teaching in higher education since at least the 1980s when their potential to engage students with primary sources, and to develop their technological, quantitative research and higher order thinking skills were first already being commented on (P. Knight and G. Timmins, 1986, 'Using Databases in History Teaching', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 2.2, 93-101; V. Burton, R. Bloemeyer, A. Fukada and S. J. White, 1987, 'Historical Research Techniques: Teaching with Database Exercises on the Microcomputer', 11.4, 433-448). Since the late 1990s online databases have played an increasingly important role in History curricula: students use databases to find information relevant to their learning and construct their own databases to support their research projects, especially at postgraduate levels (Hanover College hosts this excellent website on the use of databases for historical research: <http://history.hanover.edu/data.html>). In what follows we offer a number of brief examples and links to further resources on this topic.

Decontextualisation and database research

An archivist from Yale University experimented with 'decontextualising' primary sources to provide students with a trigger for independent inquiries. Rather than providing students with information about the context of primary sources or links to specific primary sources, they were given a written guide to 'finding aids' which they then used to access databases, to find resources that would enable them to create a meaningful context for their sources by finding extra primary and secondary sources. Rather than telling students what to look for and where to look for it, this approach enabled them to understand where to look for information and how to look for it.

- N. Kogan, 'How best to make teaching the use of research databases interesting?': <http://nkogan.wordpress.com/2011/06/29/how-best-to-make-teaching-the-use-of-research-databases-interesting/>

Lessons from the archives:

Online database projects can engage students in the same kinds of inquiries that academics engage with when conducting primary research in the archives. These kinds of activities have the benefit of accessibility (students do not have to visit the physical space of the archive and larger numbers of students are able to access the materials than would be possible in the archive itself) and develop a wide range of research skills (searching and finding resources, collating information, deciding what is important/ relevant to their research).

- G. Spraggs (2008), *Using Archives in Higher Education History Teaching* (Taunton: Society of Archivists): http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Using%20Archives%20in%20Higher%20Education%20History%20Teaching.pdf [includes six case studies on archival teaching and learning projects and several pages of links to online resources at the end of the guide]
- S. L. Whittington, K. E. Bryner, B. H. Hancock and T. H. Smith (2010), *A Museum's Online Artifact Database as a Tool to Support Teaching and Research* (Archaeological Institute of America): <http://www.archaeological.org/news/hca/1983> [reports the use of an online artefact database to provide students with access to a museum archive]

Lessons from schools:

This book offers a series of exercises designed to improve school student's literacy and historical knowledge through the use of databases to engage them in active inquiries:

- C. Bernadowski, R. Del Greco and P. L. Kolencik (2013), *Beyond the Textbook: Using Trade Books and Databases to Teach Our Nation's History, Grades 7–12* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC): http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=i48cRK49FiUC&dq=teaching+history+using+databases&source=gb_s_navlinks_s

Support resources and lists of databases

Many databases (both commercially- and publicly-hosted) provide users with access to a wide range of support resources to enable teachers and students to learn how to use their products. These range from online tutorials, lesson plans, Frequently Asked Questions and help guides (EBSCO Support is a particularly good example: <http://support.epnet.com/index.php>). If you're not sure about how to use a particular database or would like to see how other people have made use of them, always check out the 'Help' or 'Support' pages of the website. Likewise, if you've created lesson plans and/or curricula that have been successful, think about sharing them online so that others can learn from your work.

Here are a few examples of lists of online databases and searching-support tools that are relevant to History:

- EBSCOhost (EBSCO): <http://search.ebscohost.com/> [login required]
- Great Britain Historical Database Online Documentation (University of Essex): http://hds.essex.ac.uk/gbhd/docs/db_index.asp
- History – Databases (Queen Mary University of London): <http://www.library.qmul.ac.uk/subject/history/databases>
- History Online (Institute of Historical Research): <http://www.history.ac.uk/history-online/>
- History Periodicals (ProQuest): http://www.proquest.com/en-US/products/feature10_subject.shtml
- History Research (EdTechTeacher): <http://www.besthistorysites.net/index.php/research>
- Using Databases for Historical Research (Hanover College): <http://history.hanover.edu/data.html>