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Time Travel for Beginners ...or How Technology Can be used For Historical Research

Introduction

Using an educational historical research project about the life and work of Ada Byron, Countess of Lovelace (1815-1852) this paper explores the use of technology in educational historical research, and the tensions that arise when undertaking educational historical research.-Although communications technology offers new ways of connecting researchers both to each other and, in this context, to their sources this can often be a double-edged sword. It can negate the need to actively locate and read primary sources in their physical form for this type of research, replacing this with digital views and digital images that can be cut and pasted- While this is convenient, it can remove some of the learning steps that come from physically engaging with primary sources, such as making notes and discussing them with the experienced librarians who curate them, as well more subtle issues such as the physical quality of the media in which the sources are contained.

When we think about teaching and learning, the digital medium tends to be the one of choice for most of our students at some point in their learning career (S. Gorard & N., 1999). By examining both types of approach for educational historical research, it was possible to examine how technology can help or hinder this type of research.

Methods and Approach

This research uses a small-scale case study approach in which a mixture of traditional and technological methods were used to locate and analyse the primary sources for the historical aspects of the study. The case study approach was particularly suitable because of the specificity of the contexts (Hammerness & Matsko, 2013). It was also felt that the combination of methods added rigour to the research allowing a systematic approach to this type of enquiry (S. T. Gorard, C., 2004)

The sources were located either by physically finding and reading them, with the help of more experienced historical experts – custodians of the collections from which the sources were taken, or they were located digitally, read and used from online sources, without any

expert help in interpreting them or focussing the research enquiry lines. These methods were then compared and contrasted with respect to their efficacy (as it were) for this type of educational research.

Findings

Findings from a comparison of these methods indicate a significant difference in the processes between analysis of physical primary sources and digital primary sources. The research shows that although technology affords us much convenience through the digitisation of historical documents that can be easily accessed on line, having such convenience may not necessarily be the best way forward for all types of research. It was possible to compare and contrast the methods used for the research, and to determine how and why they are useful both in their own rights and collaboratively, when used in conjunction with each other.

There are clear messages here about the tensions in higher education related to the requirement for sudden impact that students of this type of research cannot always provide, despite studying in a world that is often driven by such requirements. The research also serves to indicate how we might use these tensions to demonstrate to our students that the old (traditional methods) and the new (the digital age they are familiar with) can be synergistic when used together.