

# QUANTITATIVE METHODS IN THE CLASSROOM:

## AN UPDATE

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Chad Gaffield, a member of the Department of History at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, is currently conducting research on the history of the family in Canada.

During the past fifteen years, the study of history in schools has changed dramatically. In contemporary classrooms, there is much less emphasis on the memorization of names, dates, and facts surrounding great events and much more attention to the "prose of life," the nature of everyday experience. While the narration of politics, wars and religious conflict remains important, today's student is increasingly led to consider topics such as the character of social organization, the structure of economic activity, and the quality of daily life. Similarly, the study of history has been expanding well beyond the conventional focus on famous and infamous individuals. Students are currently asked to learn about the experiences of the majority of past populations; about those who lived and died without leaving individual benchmarks on the historical record; about those who traditionally were historically anonymous.

In order to present an analysis of "anonymous" historical experiences, several major research projects were established in the late 1960's and early 1970's.<sup>1</sup> These projects recognized the need to go beyond conventional historical sources in order to achieve an accurate image of those who did not leave literary accounts of their own thoughts and activity. Diaries, memoirs, correspondence, newspapers, and political records were produced by a literate minority and cannot be relied upon for authentic information about the popular majority. For

this reason, project directors turned to routinely-generated sources such as the census which offered evidence about both well-known and unrecognized individuals. By systematically examining the information recorded on these sources, historians were able to provide the histories of those previously ignored as unimportant and insignificant.

In order to study the mass of evidence provided by sources such as the census, historians increasingly relied on quantitative methods for rapid encoding, data retrieval, and statistical analysis. The "new social history" was underway. The history of communities such as Hamilton, Ontario became the experiences of Irish immigrants as well as city fathers. Topics such as occupational structure, age at marriage, and school attendance were added to party politics, journalistic controversy, and administrative events. And historians focussed on the question, "Why?" Why did certain individuals have certain jobs? Why did young couples marry at a certain time? Why did some children and not others attend school?

At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education where the Canadian Social History Project originated, the question of how the new social history could be brought to secondary schools was a natural one. Established textbooks did not discuss the history of the anonymous and they focussed on description not explanation. It was in this context that Michael Katz and Ian Winchester directed attention to the need for curriculum

development. In collaboration with research assistants, they produced manuals for the introduction of quantitative methods into classrooms where neither teachers nor students had previous experience and where no modern teaching aids such as computers were available.<sup>2</sup> The basic strategy promoted by these manuals was the use of specially-designed index cards to record evidence from routinely-generated sources and to carry out basic statistical analysis. A summary of this strategy was offered to readers of *The History and Social Science Teacher* by Pene Davey in 1974.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who has attempted to bring quantitative methods to the classroom knows that numerous obstacles inevitably present themselves, and for this reason educators have continued to focus attention on improving teaching strategies. The following three articles reflect current thinking in this regard by suggesting specific examples of classroom activity. They are the result of recent work at O.I.S.E., at a high school in Nova Scotia, and at a major project in Minnesota. These articles emphasize that the obstacles to implementing a quantitative approach are generally of a technical nature. For example, class periods of forty-five or fifty minutes appear long enough for confusion to get well-established but often too short for any real historical investigation to take place. Similarly, teachers must rise beyond the call of duty to prepare for history classes of this type: identifying sources, getting access, making cards, preparing questions, and so on. In recent years, this extra demand has become more onerous as cutbacks in educational budgets put added strain on our teachers.

Fortunately, however, the Minnesota Social History Project has continued the development of practical teaching approaches for quantitative methods in history classrooms. Under the direction of William L. Crozier, the project has profited from the ongoing contribution of active teachers and, over the course of two years of intensive curriculum development, has made student analysis of routinely-generated sources much more feasible. A detailed guide is offered in the following article, "Introducing the New

Social History into the Classroom: The Minnesota Social History Project."

While most obstacles to implementation are of a technical nature, experience suggests that substantive concerns must also be addressed if awareness and participation in quantitative methods is to become commonplace in high schools. The first concern emerges from the variety of student interests inevitably represented in history classrooms. Frankly, we have found that not all students can be genuinely motivated to pursue an activity which is going to lead to the crosstabulation of age by gender. The ultimate value of such an activity may initially appear too remote or may not relate to the particular historical interests of certain students. For example, students wishing to pursue art history or the history of music could be frustrated by a curriculum unit which might appear to neglect these topics.

The existence of a wide variety of student interests emphasized the limitations of routinely-generated sources. Just as student interests could not always be channeled into completing index cards, fundamental questions which inevitably arose in classrooms could not always be directed to evidence such as the census. The problem thus became to accommodate the variety of student interests and to overcome the limitations of routinely-generated sources. This problem is truly enormous and ultimately goes to the root of the new social history.

Fortunately, recent research suggests the outline of a possible solution. This research suggests three basic ways in which the new social history has continued to mature: first, by broadening the use of routinely-generated sources to include all possible quantifiable records; second, by re-integrating quantitative history into the traditional mainstream through combined use of conventional and "new" sources; and third, by pursuing previously neglected evidence such as oral testimony and visual sources. By applying these three elements to classroom situations, a larger variety of student interests can be stimulated and a greater number of questions can be pursued. Any and every historical question is appropriate and worthy of

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investigation by students. Thus, quantitative history does not stand beside the regular history curriculum but rather becomes a fundamental aspect of an ongoing investigation. A fuller discussion and example of this approach is offered by Chad Gaffield and Ian Winchester in the following article, "The Concept of Total History in the Classroom."

Ultimately, of course, the only way to judge the success or failure of quantitative methods in individual classrooms is through evaluation. As the following contribution by John N. Grant suggests, evaluation in a quantitative history unit requires considerable attention. Grant's article, "Student Evaluation and Quantitative History," reflects substantial classroom experience and expertise in integrating analysis of routinely-generated sources with more traditional historical concerns. He offers an excellent example of how genuine research can be undertaken by high school students within the framework of conventional history programs.

The use of quantitative methods in the schools will undoubtedly continue to depend upon flexible principals and energetic and enthusiastic history teachers. Current classroom strategies still need improvement and we hope that interested educators will continue to pursue the development of practical approaches. The potential reward for introducing quantitative methods is truly significant and even if only a part of this potential is realized, the study of history will be meaningful and exciting for contemporary students.

#### Notes

1. The major Canadian research projects have included the Hamilton Project under Michael Katz, The Peel County History Project under David Gagan, The Groupe de recherche sur la société Montréalaise au XIXe siècle under P.-A. Linteau and J.-C. Robert, and The Saguenay Research Programme under Gérard Bouchard.
2. Mai-Liis Gering and Michael Katz, *A Guide to the Study of Family and Class in Ontario's Past*, Toronto: Canadian Social History Project, 1973; and Pene Davey and Ian Winchester, *Local Studies in the Classroom: A New Method for Historical Analysis*, Toronto: Canadian Social History Project, 1975.
3. Pene Davey, "Quantitative Methods in the Study of Local History," *The History and Social Science Teacher*, 10:2, Winter 1974, pp. 9-16.

## Obituary

It is with deep regret that we report the death of Dr. David Williams. David contributed many reviews and articles to *The History and Social Science Teacher*, and edited, with Don Cochrane, the special edition on Moral Education (Volume 13:1, Fall 1977).

David was born in Llanfairfechan, in North Wales. He was schooled in British Columbia, and after attending Vancouver Normal School he taught in Vancouver elementary and secondary schools. He joined the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, in 1967.

He was awarded the B.Ed. and M.Ed. degrees by U.B.C. and a Ph.D. by the University of Washington. During his thirteen years with the Social Studies Department, he taught elementary and secondary undergraduate and graduate courses in social studies, and courses in values education. He was on numerous committees, gave many workshops, and was on the research advisory committee for the National Council for the Social Studies. He wrote two school texts (*Early Days in Upper Canada* and *Montreal 1850-1870*) and was awarded the Canadian History Teacher Book Award. He will be remembered especially for his work with the Association for Values Education and Research (where he directed several major research projects), his contributions to the British Columbia Social Studies Assessment, his dedication to civil liberties, his coaching of the soccer team which won the Vancouver Cup, and his love of music.

(Ian Wright)