Supplementum

Outreach Workshops in Ottoman History

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Introduction

The Postgraduate Workshop scheme is run yearly by the Student Recruitment and Outreach Office, University of Birmingham. The programme is active across the whole University and recruits and trains PhD students who apply to the programme to conceive and facilitate interactive workshops with groups of secondary school children visiting the University on open-days and other events such as History Quest. The target audience for these types of events is usually the Year 9-10 classes (14-15 years old) and the challenge is to engage the students in the researchers own, often narrow, specialism within their field. Most groups for such events would consist of 15-30 schoolchildren.

The researchers all attended a training session in which advice was provided on how to tailor workshop activities to different ages and learning styles. Additionally information on the use of resources and managing a group of students and keeping them on task was offered as well as tricks for engaging the more reticent members of a group. After this session participants were asked to create their session and book a time to test it out upon a small audience consisting of members of the outreach and recruitment teams for feedback before restructuring and improving the sessions.

Workshop Content

Initial ideas for content on a workshop pertaining to Ottoman history took careful planning. This is a field unlikely to have been encountered within the school curriculum and, despite recent resurgence of BBC documentaries on the subject, is not yet part of the popular historical awareness. Thus in order to introduce an unfamiliar subject the researcher decided
to use a couple of ‘warm-up’ activities to get students thinking before using an exercise in primary and secondary source methodology using examples from Ottoman history.

Initially the plan was to use the idea of a mind-mapping exercise to get the ball rolling. It was proposed to ask students for anything they associated with the word ‘Turkey’ or ‘Ottomans’. Based on feedback from the outreach team at the first draft of the workshop, however, this was still starting out too deep. The researcher’s plan was to build around one larger, key exercise with several smaller exercises to initially engage the students and get them thinking in terms of the Ottoman world. The final workshop programme included four introductory activities before the main sources exercises.

Firstly a ‘jargon-busting’ activity was left on the desks for students to pick up and work on as soon as they arrived. This had the advantage of being a ‘settling’ exercise which meant that it got students thinking about the session and engaging with it while at the same time calming them down into a classroom type atmosphere ready to receive activity instructions. The terminology defined in this exercise was basic military history words such as ‘rebellion’ and ‘mutiny’ as well as several methodological terms i.e. ‘primary source’, and ‘secondary source’.

The second exercise was a time-line activity to help the students situate Ottoman history in their minds in relation to history they were already aware of. To achieve this a time-line of Ottoman history was drawn upon the whiteboard and the students were then invited to add their own favourite areas of history to the blank side of the time-line, thus allowing them to see what was occurring in the Ottoman empire, for example during the reign of Henry VIII of England. This, like the jargon-busting exercise was designed to provide students with an outline of where Ottoman history fits into the wider field of history in general, before filling in some more specific content with the following exercises.

Next was an activity which had been very popular with the outreach team from the preliminary designs of the workshop. Students were divided into groups and each group was given a certain scenario from Ottoman history and asked to guess what they would do in that situation or what they thought might happen next.
Example:

“It is 1444. You are 12 years old, your father has abdicated the Ottoman throne to you, you are in a state of warfare and many of your advisers do not trust you, considering you too young and inexperienced for rule. What do you do?”

Each group would consider their scenario before giving an answer to the whole group. The real answers of what had happened in history would then be shown on the Power-point. For the example scenario, a slide detailing the life and career of Fatih Sultan Mehmet II was shown.

The final introductory activity was a group mind-map aimed at getting students to think about the practice of history and led into the main methodological activity. The students were asked two questions: “What is history?” and “What is a historian?” and encouraged to add their answers to the mind-maps on the whiteboards at the front of the room. Following on from this and leading into the methodology activity the answers were given that history was about real people and their stories, and that a historian was, as per John H. Arnold’s analysis, a detective.¹

In order to frame the methodology activity in a way that would appeal to young people the idea of the historian as a detective was linked to popular BBC TV drama Sherlock and the main methodological activity framed as a criminal investigation in the Holmesian style. Sheets were provided with both primary and secondary source materials on them and the activity aimed to introduce the concept of critical thinking and using primary evidence to either support or refute what is thought to be established fact. Using the key question from the researcher’s project, namely the question of whether or not the janissary corps were as corrupt as they have been portrayed. The first resource made available was a ‘Fact’ sheet containing details from established secondary historiography. Students were then invited to consider what ideas and theories such information might suggest to them. The next step was proving such theories and to this end a selection of primary source materials pertaining to the question of janissary corruption was distributed. The students were encouraged to find correlation between the secondary and primary sources and discuss whether the primary sources supported or disagreed with any of the ‘known facts’.

The next stage in the key activity was to look at and analyse where the primary sources were coming from. Remembering that humans are biased and students considered the primary sources and whether their authors would have any specific prejudices on the question. Once these ideas were added to the mix then a final conclusion on the question could be reached.

**Future Directions and Development**

There were a great many ideas for activities conceived by the researcher which could not be included for reasons of time and resources. Each workshop delivered is tailored to the individual requirements of that specific event and as such the methodology workshop was the most suitable to History Quest. However the range of ideas does allow for the workshop to be tailored to any length of time and groups of any size and age group. Suggested activities include the use of props in the scenario activity as well as fancy dress games for younger children. The only drawback of those ideas is that it would require some extra funding for the resources which may need to be sourced independently. Other ideas included some teaching of the Ottoman and Turkish languages which could be utilised in older groups.

In terms of the logistics of delivering the workshop the resources could be reworked in order to make the activities clearer such as numbering the facts and primary sources to make matching them easier. Also the layout of the rooms in the Arts building could be reworked, from the traditional rows of desks all facing the front of the room, to groups by moving tables together so groups faced inwards to each other and that would facilitate easier discussion between group members on activities and also assist in helping them focus on the tasks.