

Seeing the point:

using visual sources to understand the arguments for women's suffrage

Visual sources, Jane Card argues, are a powerful resource for historical learning but using them in the classroom requires careful thought and planning. Card here shares how she has used visual source material in order to teach her students about the women's suffrage movement. In particular, Card shows how a chain of questions that moves from the closed and specific to the more open, is a necessary part of helping students to access the complex messages that can be elicited from such sources.

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Introduction

Pictures are powerful conveyors of messages, designed to attract and maintain attention. They can provide access to complex ideas, sometimes supported by an immediate emotional punch. This can be seen in examples as diverse as the Bayeux Tapestry, where Harold II is portrayed as an habitual oath-breaker and usurper who needed to be deposed, and Stalin's doctored photographs where he is shown as Lenin's right-hand man as a means of legitimising his policies. Where images were designed to secure contemporary popular support for new policies and reforms, history teachers can exploit their clarity to help our pupils understand the often complicated socio-political arguments behind the desire for change. This article is based on an example of this which occurred in my own practice, using pictures to explore with pupils the arguments made to support the enfranchisement of women in the early twentieth century.

The teaching context

Teaching in a girls' comprehensive school, our department decided many years ago to focus on suffragette campaigns as a means of engaging our Year 9 pupils and luring them into an interest in the political process. The enquiry questions and materials we used evolved over time according to our developing ideas of good practice, the availability of resources and the individual interests of teachers. Throughout this evolution, a constant feature was our use of visual historical sources. In some cases visuals were used to explore Victorian and Edwardian stereotypes of the ideal woman or to scrutinise the views of the popular press and anti-suffrage groups. In other cases, we used propaganda to analyse the ways in which suffrage groups tried to convey their message and, crucially, to understand the arguments used by women's suffrage campaigners to promote their cause. In each case we were using visual sources as tools to help the teaching of history.

Visuals as teaching tools

Visual sources constitute a valuable teaching tool. Images are designed to engage and hold attention, appealing to emotion and intellect alike; they have an immediate impact on those who see them, but can also be scrutinised and revisited so that one's inferences can be revised. In the classroom they excite curiosity and stimulate fruitful pupil discussions.¹ Images are accessible on different levels of sophistication to a wide range of pupils and, although their interpretation requires a good knowledge of symbolism and visual conventions on the part of the teacher, they do not present pupils with the same kind of barriers as text. Our pupils are media-savvy: they bring considerable experience of visuals to the classroom which they are eager to deploy, and teachers have been keen to call upon this knowledge in their practice. Recent studies by White and Schnakenberg, for example, provide valuable examples of how images of different types can be used to develop pupil thinking about multiperspectivity.² White, in aiming to enhance pupil understanding of intellectual history, designed an investigation into the contemporary Victorian debate on the nature of progress. As part of their work, pupils analysed drawings by Pugin and Ford Madox Brown's painting *Work*; these visuals made *concrete and accessible* the circumstances behind the diversity of Victorian opinion. Schnakenberg provided a model for the study of political cartoons that demonstrated different viewpoints, again reflecting the diversity of contemporary opinion: cartoons in this case *summarise pictorially* controversial political interpretations of events. These two examples demonstrate the variety of ways in which visuals have been used in the history classroom.

Suffrage campaigners and visual propaganda

Teaching about women's suffrage campaigns provides particular opportunities for the use of visuals. Both the constitutional Suffragists and the militant Suffragettes deliberately, consistently and effectively deployed visual propaganda to advance their cause in an increasingly visual society. New technology had made colour printing clearer and cheaper; posters were popular as art and for advertising; processions

Figure 1: "The Dignity of the Franchise" by Bernard Partridge from *Punch* 1905



with banners had been popularised by the Labour Movement; imperial pageantry had not yet faded away.³ There was, at the time, a craze for sending and collecting coloured postcards: 900 million were sent between 1902 and 1913.⁴ In 1907 the Artists' Suffrage League was founded; it was closely linked to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS – the Suffragists) and produced banners, posters and postcards. The Suffrage Atelier, founded in 1909, produced posters, postcards, pageant costumes, and art tuition for members.

It was the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union – the Suffragettes) which most enthusiastically produced postcards, as well as posters. A 'Suffragette look' was also developed which included a dress code for processions. Its members patronised shops which sold clothes and other items in the group's colours of white (purity), green (hope) and purple (loyalty). The WSPU deliberately established what has been called a 'corporate identity' based around their colours.⁵ This was the work of Emmeline and Frederick Pethwick-Lawrence, backed up by the design skills of Sylvia Pankhurst.⁶

In focusing on visuals, suffrage campaigners were striving to correct the often negative images of them put across in the media, such as in political cartoons and anti-suffrage posters. In these, suffrage campaigners were typically portrayed as mannish and unfeminine, notably with big feet and scraggly or corrugated hair. They were characterised as irrational and incompetent, hysterical and stupid, violent and aggressive.⁷ It is hardly surprising that suffrage campaigners countered with postcards of key figures looking elegant and refined, with attention drawn to their educational qualifications. Postcards of mass meetings and processions countered the notion that they had little support, while the dress code ensured the marchers wore elegant clothes. Medals for, and pictures of, those who had been imprisoned highlighted their determination.

All of this provides the history teacher with a wealth of visual sources which can be used to illustrate complex and abstract contemporary values. In our lessons, these images helped to reveal the deep-seated cultural assumptions made about the nature and role of women, as well as how these assumptions were being challenged by the impact of education and new employment opportunities. Moreover, the range of tactics and arguments which the different groups of suffrage campaigners thought potentially effective could likewise be discerned through interrogating visual sources. What we found particularly useful in our lessons was the translation of the legal, constitutional and financial arguments for and

Figure 2: Sample string of questions on *The Dignity of the Franchise* (Figure 1)

Before starting, we read out the caption in the intended accent

We can see a man and a woman. What can you work out about the woman?

(Prompts: How is she dressed? What does her body language show? Do you think she might have money?) She is refined, well mannered, probably comfortably off.

What can you work out about the man?

(Prompts: Is he well or poorly dressed? How is he behaving/what kind of body language does he have?) He is a working man but an aggressive and drunken one.

What does the woman pay?

Rates and taxes. I usually clarify this by talking about council tax and income tax.

Which one of them has the vote? How do you know?

The man can enter the polling booth. He says he has the vote.

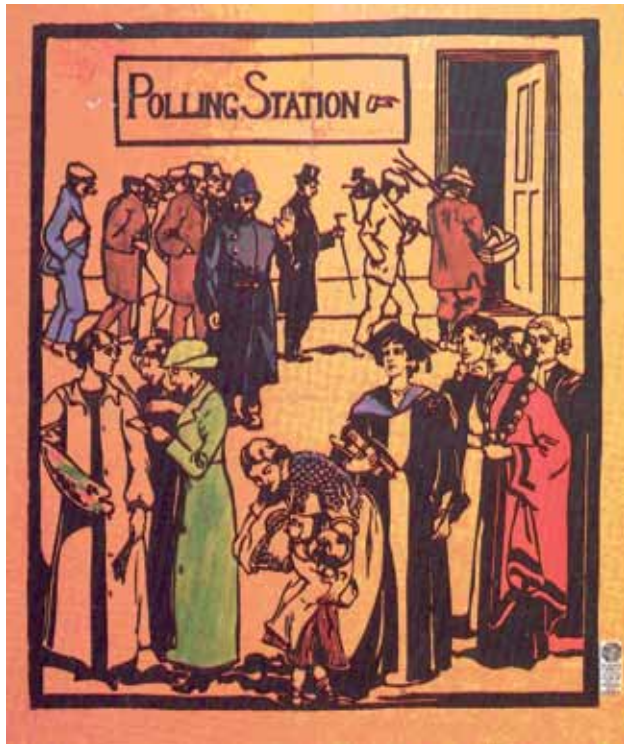
Does the artist think women like this should have the vote or not? How do you know?

This appears repetitious but it makes pupils articulate their conclusions so far.

So what reasons does the cartoonist give for why people should support votes for women?

While women paid taxes and rates, men with fewer resources and responsibilities could vote.

Figure 3: "Polling Station" 1908



against women's suffrage into more readily apprehended visual form, whether by supporters or opponents. Since images were thought to be a powerful weapon in the armoury of suffrage campaigners and their opponents, they are an invaluable resource in helping pupils understand the movement and its time.

There were, of course, difficulties in using these sources. Images related to suffrage can use single figures to represent diverse groups and they frequently produce stereotypes of

gender and class. They imply, for example, that the manual work of most Edwardian men, however skilled, is inferior to professional jobs. Worse, they portray criminals and the mentally unwell according to contemporary facial conventions; as a result the refined and educated suffrage campaigner can, to the modern eye, appear to be claiming the vote owing to superior eugenics.⁸ As with all sources, pupils needed to take care to place each source in the context of its time.

Looking, questioning and making

The enquiry question used in our scheme was 'How did women get the vote?' As part of this enquiry, the three images in Figures 1, 3 and 5 were used to explore the question 'What arguments were used to support women's suffrage?' Prior to this, pupils had addressed questions such as 'How did the right to vote change in the nineteenth century?' and 'What were women's lives like in the late nineteenth century?' Pupils were, therefore, aware of educational and legal changes in the status of women, particularly the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. They also knew that the majority of women did not earn enough money to pay taxes.

There were three reasons for this activity. First, we had found that Year 9 pupils too easily assumed a superficial response – women should obviously have been enfranchised as a matter of course – without considering that many men were also voteless at the time. We wanted them to think more deeply about the arguments put forward for women's suffrage. Second, we wanted to help pupils analyse what the message of the images was, and how these messages were conveyed. Finally, we wanted pupils to try their hands at putting a contemporary argument for female enfranchisement

Figure 4: Sample string of questions to go with *Polling Station* (see cartoon in Figure 3)

What are the occupations of the women in the front row?
Artist, musician, journalist, mother, teacher, nurse, mayor, barrister/lawyer.
What qualities did women need to do these jobs ?
Students might suggest: intelligence, education, talent, reasoning powers, compassion, commitment, sense of responsibility.
How do you know, <i>from the picture</i>, that they cannot vote?
The policeman is stopping them going near the polling station.
The men can vote. Are there any clues as to their occupations?
Pupils easily spot the pitchfork and toolbag, suggesting a range of jobs. For the man in the top hat, they suggest 'rich jobs' but I usually have to prompt them into the idea that he may not need to work as such.
What point do you think the artist is making about the men's occupations compared with the women's?
(Prompts: which occupations were harder/required more education or training/ were deemed more useful to society?) The artist is making the point that it is silly that educated women doing professional jobs or mothers bringing up the next generation cannot vote when men doing manual work or no work can do so.
So, sum up: what reasons for supporting votes for women did this artist present?

Figure 5: They have a cheek I've never been asked c. 1912



into a visual form, just as the suffrage campaigners did; we wanted the pupils to design a carefully thought-out piece of propaganda with a precisely focused message. A graphic design task with a precise brief presents pupils with an intellectual challenge, requiring the deployment of their historical knowledge and understanding as well as pictorial and verbal skills. This not only gave less confident writers and those visually skilled a chance to shine, but also enhanced pupils' understanding of the techniques used by artists to persuade. We wanted them to work from knowledge of the arguments considered in depth. To this end, we banned the slogan 'Votes for Women' on the artwork – pupils would have to come up with a message-laden slogan of their own!

With each of the sources in Figures 1, 3 and 5, pupils were given time in silence to scrutinise the image, and encouraged to look at it up and down, left to right, and corner to corner.⁹ Coloured photocopies were used, but the same technique is well suited to computers. Teachers then used what I think of as 'chain of reasoning' questions. By this I mean a string of related questions, designed to help pupils follow a sequence of inferences, targeted at a particular historical enquiry. These questions were worded very simply – in fact, they were virtually impossible *not* to answer in some way – but they nudged pupils step by step towards an understanding of the message and a grasp of how it was put across.¹⁰

Such questioning with images often (though not always) involves four stages. The first is to ask what it is pupils can see: this encourages scrutiny, invites participation, and also

Figure 6: Sample string of questions to go with *They have a cheek ...* (Figure 5)

- What can you see and read on the picture?

'Factory, girl in clogs, apron, shawl, sign on the door, caption.

- So what is the girl's job? Is she rich or poor?

(This checks that pupils have got the basic information to decode the picture. Clogs and shawl are standard conventions for showing a working-class woman.)

- What is she angry about?

Some pupils with a better grasp of how laws are made may go straight to the point. Others will grasp that the sign is making her angry but not why, so subsidiary questions will be useful:

- An act is a law. Who makes our laws?
- How do people get to be MPs?
- Could this woman/any woman vote in 1912?
- Do you think there were any female MPs in 1912?
- The Factory Acts said women could not work too many hours – more than ten – a day. Why might this be a good thing? Why might the women think it a bad thing?
- So what is this girl angry about?

- Is the artist on the side of the girl? How do you know?

There may be some debate about this because the Factory Acts were trying to protect women, so the argument is not straightforward. Draw attention to the tricks the artist has used:

- Our eye is focused on her by the red shawl against the grey background.
- She is pretty.
- She is not well off.
- The caption makes her appeal personal.
- The sign on the door seems to be barring her way.

- So what argument is being used to support votes for women?

It is unfair that laws control women when women have no direct say in how they are made.

gives the teacher a chance to identify any misconceptions which pupils have about the content of the image. If, however, the image content is straightforward, one can start at the second stage: inviting pupils themselves to draw inferences from what they can see, with plenty of time and praise for contrasting and conflicting inferences to be aired. The third stage occurs when pupils are invited to deploy and combine their inferences to reach a conclusion about the message being put over by the artist. The final stage occurs when the teacher asks pupils to link what they have discovered to the wider historical investigation being pursued.¹¹

Closed questions form part of chain-of-reasoning questioning. Asking closed questions is often criticised for leading to simplistic answers that do not stretch pupils' historical understanding. Here, however, closed questions were not asked to test pupils' accurate recall for its own sake. They had two functions. The first was to see if anyone in the class possessed a piece of information which would enable all the pupils puzzle out the meaning of the image. The students were asked to use contextual information to help them ask better questions with which to interrogate the source. This helped them to see the range of mental resources – in the form of other knowledge about the period – that one has to bring to the process of interpreting meaning.¹²

The second function of my closed questions was to narrow the range of possible answers between which pupils had to choose, particularly when suggesting or signposting reasonable inferences. This helped to make clear the line of contemporary reasoning that each picture embodied, reflected or conveyed – a line of reasoning readily apparent to people in the past, but not obvious now. The questions attached to Figure 5 offer an example of how this worked. To be understood, Figure 5 (*What a cheek!*) requires basic knowledge of how laws were made. The poster also deploys a counter-intuitive argument – laws made to protect women might not be popular with them – which can be hard to grasp. My narrower questioning initially acted as scaffolding – making the focus of each step very tight and thus minimising the chance of failure to understand. This was a first stage, building a foundation of basic understanding needed to help pupils form more open and searching questions that ultimately lead them to use the picture as evidence in an enquiry.

In my experience, questioning allows the teacher to be very responsive to pupils. I have found that it is important to show appreciation of ideas which, while they may be wrong in fact, are intelligent inferences given the pupil's current state of knowledge. I am not suggesting that misconceptions are allowed to remain uncorrected; this can be done by asking the pupil if she would want to modify her idea in the light of further contextual information or exploration of reasoning provided by the teacher. Higher attainers will reason quickly, sometimes instantly, but lower attainers can take their time. Recent research by Rojas-Drummond and Mercer into the effectiveness of dialogue as a form of scaffolding is of interest here.¹³ They looked at how pupils' comprehension and reasoning was developed in classroom talk led by the teacher in a collaborative atmosphere. A carefully planned questioning strategy can be used in this way to help pupils access the complex messages visual sources can contain.

It is hard to reproduce chain-of-reasoning questions because the teacher's questions react and relate to pupil responses and are thus unique to each session, but a sample is given in Figures 2, 4 and 6. Laying it out like this makes the process rather prescriptive but, in practice, I have found that pupils can share relevant knowledge, consider each other's inferences and reach a consensus – a whole-class collaboration.

The culminating activity in our enquiry was for pupils to design a poster supporting or opposing women's suffrage, which had to include an image and an original slogan putting over the argument. Interestingly, many pupils opted for the idea that if a woman paid tax, she should have a vote. While some based work on the model images they had seen or found on the internet, most tried to use their contextual knowledge to generate new images, resulting in thoughtful original work.

Conclusion

Historical sources which are visual can provide a valuable means for gaining some understanding of what those we are studying thought, felt, believed, admired and disliked – in short, their attitudes and values. By their nature ambiguous and capable of multiple interpretations, images need careful scrutiny and analysis – sometimes de-coding before they can be used. Just as a house needs solid foundations to support the walls, so pupils' use of visual sources for historical enquiry needs to be based on an understanding of the conventions and possible (and probably multiple) messages of the source. This understanding will be more grounded if pupils are helped to reason and puzzle their way to it through a carefully constructed line of questioning, sharing their existing knowledge, disentangling misconceptions and drawing inferences; they can then deploy the source as evidence in a rigorous and confident way. Good questions lead to good history.

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- 6 McQuiston, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27.
- 7 To get the flavour of some of these, type 'anti-suffragette' into Google Image or look at the political cartoons on www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/visuals.htm
- 8 A famous example of this can be seen at www.archive.com Type 'Emily J. Harding Andrews' into the search engine.
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- 12 See the upper levels of the research-based model of progression shown in Lee, P. and Shemilt, D. (2003) 'A scaffold not a cage: progression and progression models in history', *Teaching History* 113, *Creating Progress Edition* pp.13-23.
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