

USING LOCAL MATERIALS*

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Using local materials should be a consideration for teaching history for a number of reasons. It should be clear from the start that using local materials is "more than a method." The use of local materials in the history classroom, or as adjunct to the classroom, is a two-edged sword. First, the exposure of students to the "stuff" that makes history; courthouse records, microfilm of census data, photographs, displays, oral history, etc. is a practical alternative to the text and lecture approach. Trips beyond the classroom may well build credibility for what goes on in the classroom. Getting outside the walls and into the sources (i.e., local materials whatever form they may take) provides another vital opportunity - one about which Virginia Shadron reminded her audience in another GAH session in Savannah - the opportunity for students to let the sources give direction rather than look for the sources to confirm the presupposed thesis. Thus getting out of the classroom and into the sources confirms accepted themes and at the same time creates new questions; both are valuable consequences of the effort. The other edge of the sword is important to consider. Inside the classroom, or seminar room, or research library, the ivy is sometimes a strangler. There is much history going on outside the ivy and much of it is unattended by the "historians." The willingness of the "professional" to get among "the people" might well serve to give entry to some important guidance from the trained professional in an area where history is going to be "done" anyway. For the professional to leave the local to the "locals" may well lead to a most unfortunate situation where in fact the people's history will have no historians and professional history will have no people.

The venture into "local materials" may be helpful not only in stimulating students and leading both students and teachers to new questions, but also healing what appears to be a growing and serious gap between what the historians say and what the people do about their history.

* Synopsis provided by Professor Gurr.