

TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

For some, it was the picture of a loved one in a military uniform, a diploma hanging on the wall, the box of dusty and dated clothing in the attic, or a discussion with an elder that opened up the past as an exciting, humbling, and intriguing field of study. Each of these items or events shares an evidentiary connection to ideas, events, and people in the past. These sources and others tell us about challenges overcome, goals achieved, and duties fulfilled as well as hobbies and trends that dominated the past. In addition, if studied carefully, these same items can inform us about fears, failures, and missed opportunities that came to define the history of a person, family, or a nation. Within the classroom, primary sources such as these can provide the texture, emotion, and complexity of the past that is often lost in textbooks. The pedagogical challenge for the classroom teacher is to find ways to incorporate historical sources into instruction in a manner that provides the texture while simultaneously meeting the demands of today's culture of assessment and accountability.

Source work—making use of historical sources to explain a historical question—has been the hallmark of professional historians since the turn of the twentieth century, and calls have been made for teachers to engage their students ever since that time. The last twenty years, however, have witnessed a resurgence of emphasis on the use of historical sources, especially primary sources, in the classroom. Tied to an explosion of research related to the ways in which history is learned and should be taught, there is new pedagogical emphasis on investigating the past through the same sources used by professionally trained historians. Simply providing students with a letter from Thomas Jefferson or a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., however, does not ensure a successful experience with historical sources in the classroom. In order for students to effectively make use of historical sources, they must understand that these documents are more than simply a text on a page. Students must come to see historical sources as multidimensional, in that they not only are sources of “information” but also provide insight into the time period in which the source was created and the source's author. Gaining the most from historical sources in the classroom requires students to take several approaches.

First, the student must approach the study of history as a series of contextual questions that historians pose about the past and then set out to answer. Questions should be provocative and encourage investigation and discussion, be central to the curriculum needs of the teacher, and help deepen students' understanding of history as an interpretive discipline. Examples include these:

- How effective were the New Deal programs?
- What caused the Civil War?
- What impact did the Gulf of Tonkin incident have on America's involvement in Vietnam?

Central to the exploration of these questions is an analysis of the primary and secondary sources that provide information concerning the question. Once students see the past as a series of questions to be answered, the need for information—historical sources—becomes paramount to the debate over the answers.

Second, the student must gather a variety of historical sources and analyze them by asking the types of questions posed by historians:

- Who developed the source?
- What was the audience for the source?
- What was the purpose for creating the source?
- When, relative to the event/idea/individual under study, was the source created?
- What was the relationship between the source and the event/idea/individual being studied?

Thorough analysis of the information provided by the sources and the motivations of their creators, the context of the time being studied, and the consistency and inconsistencies within the historical record will allow students to develop a possible answer to the historical question being examined. The greater facility students have with approaching historical sources in a methodical and analytical manner, the more successful they will be in utilizing the information to address causality, multifaceted interpretations, and the complexity of deciphering the past. To gain facility with analyzing historical sources, students must practice applying and answering questions with every historical source they encounter.

Third, the student should apply the information derived from various sources to the historical question under discussion. To engage in the application of information to developing interpretations, they must be challenged to delve deeply into the source's background and to look for possible problems or contradictions:

- Areas where sources provide consistency of information
- Areas where sources are inconsistent
- Gaps in information
- Information about the source's author, the purpose for its creation, the intended audience, and other aspects that might affect the information's reliability

Once these questions are asked and answered, students can formulate an interpretation of the past—focused on answering the historical question being posed—and support their interpretation with information from the sources.

The use of historical sources, interpretive questions, and debate based on evidence has the potential to transform the history classroom from a didactic delivery of volumes of information to a conversation energized by the application

of skills particular to the study of history, infused with the content that gives the discipline richness unlike any other. The documents contained within this collection provide students and teachers with the opportunity to explore questions about the past with the aid of treaties, maps, letters, contracts, legislative acts, public speeches, and other traces of the past. Careful use of these sources will allow students to delve into documents that provide a window on the causes and effects of major events and ideas—and the motivations of key individuals—in the American experience.

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