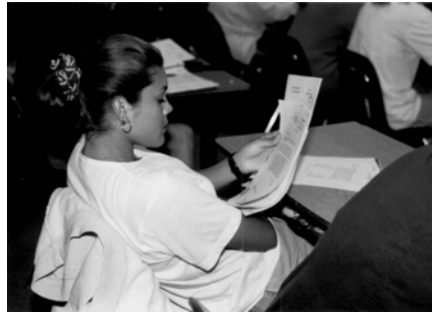


Primary Sources: A Connection to the Past

"I hate history!," many students groan. Indeed, you may have felt that way yourself when you were in school. Conversely, the students shown on the front of this flier are *enjoying* their history class. What are they experiencing in their classroom that may be missing in yours?

Prominent national studies, including the Bradley Commission Report on History and Schools, have noted the crucial need to improve the way history is presented and taught in America's schools. Many teachers have enjoyed enormous success and personal satisfaction by using primary sources to connect their students to past times in an exciting way. In fact, many state curriculum guidelines now mandate using primary sources in the classroom.

When students study history, they should not think of it as a sequence of remote happenings long ago or an assemblage of facts and dates. On the contrary, creative teachers can make history vibrantly relevant to understanding our world today - its people, its governments, its geo-political foundations and interrelationships. This flier introduces the concept of teaching with primary sources for teachers not familiar with the technique and gives suggestions to both experienced and novice practitioners on where to locate primary sources for use in your classroom.



The Historian's Laboratory

For many students the most exciting, vital exchange between them and the academic disciplines occurs in the laboratory. As the laboratory is to the biology or chemistry student, primary sources are to the history student. When students are given factual knowledge alone, as history is often delivered, their study is usually disjointed and detached from feeling. Using primary sources in the classroom provides two opportunities for students. First, they can identify with the characters of history. Documents or their facsimiles enable the teacher to personalize history and give the student a tactile and visual bridge to the past, an intellectual and emotional connection to the subject matter. Students become participants in historical drama as it unfolds. Instead of reading someone else's version of what happened and when, the student is thrust, for example, into the vortex of the Civil War, hurtled upward from pad 39A with the lunar pioneers, or shares the pain of a Japanese-American child who parts with his cherished bicycle because he is not able to take it to his internment camp.

Critical Skills

Second, students learn certain critical skills. In the presence of the past through primary sources, experiencing historical events as they were occurring, students are given opportunity to analyze and evaluate sources and to recognize viewpoint, bias, contradictions, and the limitations of sources. They become interpreters of history themselves, as much as those who prepared their history textbooks. Using primary sources, students can learn to synthesize each documentary thread into a tapestry of understanding. They are able to collect, organize, and weigh the significance of documentary evidence; evaluate and interpret sources; analyze sources to compare and contrast the complexities of the past and the reality of the present; identify factual evidence; identify points of view; and develop defensible inferences, conclusions, and generalizations from documentary sources. In short, they will *think* while working with documents.



[Insert information about your local institution on this panel. Include hours of operation, summary of holdings, programs and materials for teachers, exhibits, etc.]

Where to Find Primary Sources

You will find primary sources in archival repositories such as the National Archives, your state archives, special collections units of libraries, historical societies, etc. Many repositories have education outreach programs and materials for teachers. They often host school tours, but please be aware that they may have minimum age requirements for researchers.

You may also ask your students to bring personal primary sources to class such as a birth certificate, artifacts, family letters, photographs, etc. You may have items of your own you can share with your class.

If you would like additional information about teaching with primary sources and teacher resources available from the National Archives, please write: National Archives, Education Branch (NEEE), Washington, DC 20408, or call (202) 501-6172. For information available locally please contact the organization(s) named below.

Prepared by the MARAC Outreach Committee and written by Rick Blondo, 1995. Minor revisions made in 2007.

Teaching with Primary Documents



MARAC
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