



Using Primary Sources in the Classroom

Adapted by BHH from

History in the Raw

In the NARA Digital Classroom

http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/history_in_the_raw.html

Primary sources: Diaries, letters, drawings, photographs, legal documents (government, business, personal) and memoirs created by those who participated in or witnessed events of the past.

Primary sources tell us something even the best-written article or book cannot convey. The use of primary sources exposes students to the essential nature of history as interpretation. As they study documents from the past, students encounter various concepts central to interpretive historical processes. become aware that all written history reflects an author or historian's interpretation of past events. Consequently, when students read a historical account, they can recognize its subjective nature. Second, through primary sources the students directly touch the lives of people in the past. And as students use primary sources, they develop important analytical skills.

Many students assume history is a series of facts, dates, and events packaged as a textbook. Using primary sources to learn history can change this view. As students use primary sources they begin to understand their textbook is only one historical interpretation and its author is an interpreter of evidence, not a purveyor of truth. For example, as students read personal letters from distressed farmers to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as they look at WPA administrators' reports on economic conditions in Pennsylvania and Oregon, or as they listen to recordings of government-produced radio dramas, they weigh the significance of these sources against such generalizations as that provided by Todd and Curti: "The most urgent task that Roosevelt faced when he took office was to provide food, clothing, and shelter for millions of jobless, hungry, cold, despairing Americans." Students begin to understand such generalizations represent an interpretation of past events, but not necessarily the only interpretation. They become aware the text has a point of view that does not make it incorrect but that does render it subject to question. Through studying primary sources, students realize any account of an event, no matter how impartially presented it appears to be, is essentially subjective.

As students read eyewitness accounts of events at Little Big Horn or letters to congressmen expressing concern about women's suffrage, or look at photographs from the Civil War and then attempt to summarize their findings, they become aware of the subjective nature of their conclusions. The disagreements among students



interpreting these documents are not unlike those among historians. **Through primary sources students confront two essential facts in studying history. First, the records of historical events reflect the personal, social, political, or economic perspectives of the participants in those events. Second, students bring to history sources their own biases, created by their own personal situations and the social environments in which they live.** As students use these sources, they realize that history is interpretation--and tentative interpretation at that.

Primary sources fascinate students because they are real and they are personal; history is humanized through them. Using original sources, students touch the lives of the people about whom history is written. They participate in human emotions and in the values and attitudes of the past. By reading a series of public opinion surveys from World War II, for example, students confront the language of the person interviewed and his or her fears about shortages, as well as the interviewer's reactions recorded after the interview. These human expressions provide history with color and excitement and link students directly to its cast of characters.

Interpreting historical sources helps students analyze and evaluate contemporary sources--newspaper reports, television and radio programs, and advertising. By using primary sources, students learn to recognize how point of view and bias affect evidence, what contradictions and other limitations exist within a given source, and to what extent sources are reliable. Essential among these skills is the ability to understand and make appropriate use of many sources of information. Development of these skills is important not only to historical research but also to a citizenship where people are able to evaluate the information needed to maintain a free society.

Perhaps best of all, by using primary sources, students will participate in the process of history. They will debate with teachers and classmates about the interpretation of the sources. They will challenge others' conclusions and seek out evidence to support their own. The classroom will become a lively arena in which students test and apply important analytical skills.

The above was adapted from the following web page:

http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/history_in_the_raw.html

Another site with excellent instructions for using primary sources in the classroom is History Matters:

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/makesense/>