

Teaching History in the Secondary Classroom Through the Analysis of Engaging Primary Sources

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Most students have had little exposure to primary sources by the time they come out of high school. While textbooks often include primary sources, they often provide simplistic descriptions of the sources, do not provide the context needed to analyze the source, and do not add additional primary sources to understand the context of the event. If teachers want their students to really engage with history, develop analytical reading and writing skills, and possess a comprehensive body of subject knowledge, then they need to incorporate engaging primary sources into their daily instruction. To help students learn how to analyze primary sources, teachers can initially select texts that are completely unrelated to the curriculum. As students use SOAPSEtone (speaker, occasion, audience, purpose, subject, evidence, and tone), a variation on the original SOAPSTone technique, to become adept at analyzing primary sources, teachers can incorporate sources that are more relevant to the curriculum. This article discusses the characteristics of engaging primary examples and discusses how to move students towards being able to analyze multiple primary sources to answer historical questions using the SOAPSEtone technique.

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When I first started teaching social studies courses in a public high school nineteen years ago, my students often came into my classes with little to no experience working with primary sources. Unfortunately, that is also the case today, even as more standardized tests (such as the American history end-of-course exam in Florida, AP history exams, AICE history exams, IB history exams, and New York Regents exam) include multiple-choice and/or free-response questions based on primary sources. In fact, students have had so little exposure to primary source material prior to enrolling in my courses that many were unable to recognize them, let alone analyze them or use them to answer a historical question.

At least part of the reason for this, I believe, is that textbooks often play an outsized role in lesson planning and instruction. While textbooks (which are secondary sources) can be useful for organizing content into units, providing students with basic information about important concepts, and documenting coverage of state-adopted standards, they are merely a tool in the teacher's toolbox--not the curriculum itself. Nevertheless, because textbooks are provided by school districts, because they are often aligned with state standards, and because districts sometimes do not purchase supplemental materials rich with primary sources for teachers to use, textbooks can be the driver of social studies instruction (Tyson-Berstein, 1988; Ouakrim-Soivio & Kuusela, 2012 as cited by Hanse and Puustinen, 2021).

The problem with this approach to instruction is that textbooks are often dry; they contain a lot of extraneous information, and they provide simplistic descriptions of or do not address important topics and events (Loewen, 2007). If teachers want their students to authentically engage with history, develop analytical reading and writing skills, and possess a comprehensive body of subject knowledge, then teachers can use primary sources to motivate historical inquiry, supply evidence for historical accounts, convey information about the past, and provide insights into the thoughts and experiences of people in the past (Barton, 2005). Primary sources are not just a means of

studying history--they *are* history. They are the closest students can get to entering into all but recent history first-hand.

Addressing Teachers' Concerns

One of the objections I hear teachers make to using primary sources in their classrooms is that primary sources, like textbooks, can be complex and/or dull. Admittedly, this is sometimes the case. However, this simply means that teachers must search for texts that are grade-level appropriate and then select primary sources that will attract the interest of their students (Barton, 2005). For example, a world history teacher might use the photograph of a deformed foot to teach his or her students about foot-binding in China. An American history teacher might use Philip Dawe's political cartoon "Tarring and Feathering A British Official" (1774) to teach his or her students about the causes of the American Revolution. A government or civics teacher might use strongly-worded excerpts from the *Federalist Papers* (Hamilton, Jay, & Madison, 1788) to help students understand the debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over ratification of the Constitution.

In fact, at least initially, students can work with sources that are about topics *completely unrelated* to anything they will spend time studying in class. For example, I use a fictional comment transcribed of a Pepsi truck driver speaking to a customer to begin the process of teaching my students how to analyze primary sources. The text says, "In my opinion, ma'am, Pepsi is a wonderful product. It tastes great, is absolutely refreshing, and gives you a little pick-me-up whenever you need it—without giving you no headaches." This text is a great one to start with because it is not about "history." Rather, it is about a product that is familiar to students (as opposed to a topic or event with which students are not familiar), it is about ordinary people (who seem much more real to students than the figures they read about in their textbooks), and it is written in the vernacular (as opposed to, say, eighteenth-century documents, which are often characterized by sophisticated vocabulary

and compound-complex sentences). That being the case, students can easily use SOAPSETone² (speaker, occasion, audience, purpose, subject, evidence, and tone), a variation on the original SOAPSTone technique, to analyze the text without getting lost in it or otherwise being intimidated by its complexity (Smith, 2018). The speaker is a truck driver who works for Pepsi; the occasion, or year in which this conversation was held, is 2010; the audience, or person to whom the truck driver is speaking, is a female customer; the purpose of the truck driver's comments is to sell Pepsi; the subject, or argument, is that Pepsi is a wonderful product; and evidence the driver uses to support his argument includes phrases such as "tastes great", "is absolutely refreshing", "gives you a little pick-me-up" and "doesn't give you headaches". Words to describe the author's tone include "friendly", "casual", "warm", and "personable".

Here is an example of a transcript from a television special:

And I hate standing behind people at McDonald's. People act like they ain't never been to McDonald's. They got the same menu, and the menu on the left side is the same as the menu on the right. And you've got people in there going 'Uh.... Give me, uh.... Do you have, uh ...?' Man, you know what they got! Get a double cheeseburger! And I hate going through the drive-thru. I mean, who made up the rule that whoever drives has to order for everybody else? They're sittin' there screaming at the man behind the speaker, 'Give me a cheeseburger and a coke, and a cheeseburger and a coke, and a cheeseburger and a coke, and a cheeseburger and a coke...' And the man behind the speaker is like, 'They be trippin' out there in that car.' (Adkins, 1991)

In this case, the speaker is Sinbad, a comedian; the occasion is 1991; the audience consists of students at Morehouse College; the purpose of Sinbad's

² At the end of the reference section is an adapted SOAPSETone worksheet to use in a classroom as well as a link to additional resources related to the SOAPSTone technique.

tirade is to make the students laugh; the subject, or argument, is that McDonald's customers make the simple process of ordering complicated; and evidence Sinbad uses to support his argument includes phrases such as "people act like they ain't never been to McDonald's", "you've got people in there going 'Give me....uh....Do you have, uh?'" and "they're sittin' there screaming at the man behind the speaker". Words to describe Sinbad's tone include "frustrated", "angry", "annoyed", and "incredulous".

As students become more adept at analyzing texts like these and pulling evidence from them to support the author's (or artist's or photographer's) argument, teachers can begin exposing students to primary sources more relevant to the curriculum. For example, one of the first texts I use for this purpose in my European history course is an excerpt from Martin Luther's essay *That Jesus Christ Was Born A Jew* (1523):

If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian. They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings; they have done little else than deride them and seize their property ... If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles When we are inclined to boast of our position as Christians we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord. Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are ... If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them not by papal law but by the law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us so that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching, and witness our

Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it?
After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either. (Luther, 1523)

By the time I project this document onto the screen at the front of my classroom (we start school in early August, so usually by mid-September), my students are able to tell me that the speaker, or author, of the document is Martin Luther, a Catholic monk and leader of the Protestant Reformation; that the occasion, or year, in which the document was written is 1523 (a few years after the Protestant Reformation began); that the audience, or people to whom Luther is speaking, includes members of the German nobility and other members of the clergy; that Luther's purpose is to convince other Christians of the need to set a better example for Jews to follow; and that Luther's argument is that the Jews would be more likely to convert to Christianity if Christians themselves were more pious. Evidence students use to support the author's argument include phrases such as "if I had been a Jew and seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian"; "they have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs"; "they have derided the Jews and seized their property"; "we must be guided in our dealings with them by the law of Christian love"; and "the Jews must witness our Christian life". Finally, students use words such as "scolding" or "frustrated" to describe Luther's tone. They say he is frustrated with unreformed Christians and scolding them for their behavior.

As students become more adept at analyzing individual primary sources, they can begin to work with multiple primary sources. This is what the College Board requires students to do on its AP history exams: Students are given five-to-seven primary sources and then asked to use those sources to answer a historical question. To do this, students must not only be able to analyze each document individually but understand how each document relates to the others. Then, students must organize the documents into groups (or "conversate" them, as I once overheard a former chief reader of the AP World

History exam put it) and pull evidence from each document in order to support a thesis.

A Skill All Students Need

Of course, this is not a skill needed only by AP students. It is a skill all students need, and it is not a skill students will acquire simply by reading their history textbooks. Students need regular access to primary sources--to history itself--to acquire this skill. If teachers are worried about student engagement, then they should actively search for the most engaging primary sources. Personally, I have found that the more shock value a document has, the more engaging it is for students. Studies conducted by Zhu (2010); Pietarinen, Soini, and Pyhältö (2014); King (2015); and Lei, Cui, and Zhou (2018)—just to name a few—have shown that there is a direct positive correlation between student engagement and academic achievement. That being the case, I recommend selecting texts that are as gruesome, risqué, witty, or controversial as students' maturity and district policy will allow. Students are drawn to these types of texts, and these types of texts will facilitate the most meaningful discussions. Of course, teachers should use good professional judgement when selecting texts for student use, but they should also select texts that students will want to read and ask questions about. In my own classroom, I expose students to as many of these types of documents as I can. In addition to the specific documents I have already named, I use humorous advertisements or political cartoons, detailed descriptions of Mayan or Aztec sacrifices, eye-witness accounts from the Holocaust, detailed descriptions of the Black Death in Europe, or depictions of *sati* in India to engross my students.

At first, it may be best for students to practice analyzing primary sources in a whole-group setting. However, as they begin to feel more comfortable, they can analyze documents on their own. Students can work with multiple documents in a small-group setting, where all of the documents are in a folder and students have to physically manipulate the documents into as many

groups as possible in order to answer a historical question (Smith, 2018). Then, students can practice writing short-answer responses or full-length essays. In my own classroom, I implement this technique by organizing students into groups and giving each group a folder full of documents related to a particular topic—say, the collapse of the Roman Empire. In this case, the prompt, which appears on the front of the folder, asks them to analyze the factors that led to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire circa 476 CE. By reading the documents and working together, the students are able to recognize that some of the documents specifically discuss the spread of disease, some of the documents specifically discuss government corruption, and some documents specifically discuss the role of nomadic invasions. Then, using evidence from the documents, students are able to write an essay in which they argue that the Roman Empire fell, in part, due to the spread of disease, government corruption, and nomadic invasions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teachers must incorporate primary sources into their daily instruction if they want their students to authentically engage with history, develop strong analytical reading and writing skills, and possess a comprehensive body of subject knowledge. While a textbook can be used in conjunction with primary sources to teach content, it should not be the driver of social studies instruction. Teachers can use SOAPSETone, a variation on the original SOAPSTone technique, to teach their students how to analyze primary sources. When students are ready, teachers can ask students to synthesize information from multiple primary sources (or even a combination of primary and secondary sources) in order to answer a historical question. Primary sources should always be engaging; selecting texts that students want to read and ask questions about will facilitate the most meaningful discussions.

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Suggested Resources

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As you read, look for these details ...			How do you know? Cite specific evidence from the text.
S	Who is the Speaker ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What can you tell or what do you know about the speaker (author) that helps you understand the point of view expressed? 	
O	What is the Occasion ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the time and place of the text? What caused this text to be written? Identify the context of the text. 	
A	Who is the Audience ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To whom is this text addressed? Does the speaker specify an audience? What does the author assume about the intended audience? 	
P	What is the Purpose ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What did the author want the audience to think or do as a result of reading this text? Why did the author write it? What is the message? How does the speaker convey this message? 	
S	What is the Subject ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What topic, content, and ideas are included in the text? How does the author present the subject? Does he introduce it immediately or do you, the reader, have to make an inference? 	
E	What Evidence do you have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What evidence does the author use to support their argument? 	
Tone	What is the Tone ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the author's attitude about the subject? Is the author emotional? Objective? Angry? How would you read the passage aloud if you were the author? What details "tell" the author's feelings about the topic? What words, phrases, imagery, examples, etc. reveal the tone? 	

This SOAPSETone handout was adapted from the Louisiana Department of Education (n.d.). Additional resources can be found [here](#).