

# THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF PRIMARY SOURCES

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*This article describes how infusing primary sources into instruction helps students develop critical literacy skills as well as more complex understandings of the world.*

Primary sources are original textual (e.g., letters, diaries, speeches) and nontextual sources (e.g., photographs, drawings) of information that are available to learn more about a time period, person, or particular event. They are the “raw materials of history” providing “unfiltered access” into the past (Library of Congress, n.d.). These differ from secondary sources, which highlight “accounts or interpretations of events created by someone without firsthand experience” (Library of Congress, n.d.).

Although used regularly in middle and high school classrooms (Britt & Aglinskis, 2002; Grant & Gradwell, 2005; Swan & Locascio, 2008; Wooden, 2008), primary source documents are often overlooked at the elementary grades. Yet even students in first grade have demonstrated facility with using primary sources (VanSledright, 2004). There are untapped possibilities for using primary sources in elementary grades. In this article we explore the role, benefits, and possibilities for using primary sources in classrooms, highlighting how using primary sources meets the new Common Core

Standards and discussing their role in developing students’ world knowledge and fostering students’ critical literacy skills.

## Understanding the Role of Primary Sources

It is important for students to know that as people live their lives, they leave a trail of items they create or use as they go about their days that represents who they are and what they did. They leave evidence. The primary sources left behind are numerous, including, but not limited to, news articles, speeches, letters, diaries and journals, interview transcripts, poetry, song lyrics, photographs, informational fliers, commercial products, and scripts. These pieces all provide insight into a certain time period.

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Primary sources can also be actual artifacts. For example, sharing long-playing albums or 45 and 78 rpm records help take students back in time to when the norm for listening to and sharing music was much different than in today's world. Primary sources help students develop immediacy to the time period or event and allow for a natural compare–contrast that deepens understanding of the past as well as the present. Primary sources provide students with a sense of what it was like to be alive during a certain time. They allow students to “read the words written by living, breathing humans like themselves” (Barton, 2005, p. 751) and serve as important forms of evidence of a particular time period or event.

### The Benefits of Using Primary Sources

Primary sources allow a student to get as close to a moment in time as possible, to have more of the firsthand, lived-through experience that is so crucial for deep understanding. Primary sources

certainly provide students with factual information; however, they also allow for an aesthetic or emotional response that comes from being part of an event in life (Rosenblatt, 1978). These materials can help connect students to a person, event, or time period.

Studying one source often leads to the need to examine additional sources for corroboration or disconfirming evidence, leading students on a hunt to find an answer they can share with others. Teaching students to work with source material is one step in helping them begin “thinking historically” (VanSledright, 2004). James and McVay (2009) described historical thinking as involving “critical thought about the past, asking good questions about sources of knowledge, about context and meaning of historical accounts” (pp. 347–348). Reliving and investigating history with students, rather than “telling” students history, provides students with an idea that history is “always incomplete,” and engaging in this kind of work with students

helps position history and the past as a “mystery to be continuously unraveled and interpreted” (p. 347).

### The Role of Primary Sources and the Common Core State Standards

The new Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) were designed to foster students’ opportunities to read closely and critically, seeking “wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement” with informational and literary texts that “builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews” (p. 3). The Common Core Standards document calls for more thoughtful work with informational texts and for teachers, especially in grades K–5, to balance the reading of literature with the reading of informational texts.

Mastery of informational texts is considered “essential for college and career readiness in a twenty-first century, globally competitive society” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3). Working with primary sources serves as

### Pause and Ponder

- How are you currently using primary sources in your classroom? To what extent are your students able to critically analyze and question information?
- In what ways might you be able to incorporate more primary sources into your teaching? What materials or artifacts would best help your students become more involved with the concepts presented in that particular unit?



to different groups of people and how language was used to explore those issues during that time.

With speeches and other forms of primary sources, it is important that students not only know what was said, but also experience and hear *how* it was said. By reading parts or all of important documents, students can gain an understanding for the language and the tone of the document. Often, because the language is different from what is used today, students will need to infer the meaning of what is being said, encouraging them to use their higher level thinking skills to make meaning from those experiences. They are developing a worldview that cuts across time as well as place.

Primary sources allow students opportunities to explore more deeply events in history. Rather than simply acquiring the large-scale facts about a particular time period or event in history, students can read how such events touched the lives of individuals and groups of individuals who lived through that episode of history. This, in turn, helps students come to understand more deeply other perspectives and cultures, a necessary quality as outlined by the new Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

## Supporting Critical Thinking

Primary sources can support student inquiry about historical events and allow them to develop their critical and analytical thinking skills. Students must learn to ask questions about the past and seek evidence to help answer those questions (Barton, 2005). They come to realize that individuals create these sources and they can hold “very different perspectives on the same event

*“As critical thinkers, they must learn that it can be problematic to rely on a single source for information.”*

or incident,” and therefore, students must learn how to consider and assess perspective (VanSledright, 2004, p. 231). Because primary sources are mere snippets of history, these incomplete texts may encourage students to search for additional information. Students then have to consider what information would be helpful and where they might obtain such sources. They should have exposure to multiple sources when studying a particular time or event.

When exposed to multiple sources, students must learn through observation and analysis how to integrate this information to develop a more complex understanding of this time. They must grapple with the complexity of synthesizing information. As critical thinkers, they must learn that it can be problematic to rely on a single source for information. Specifically, providing students with opposing views of a particular event might also help them better understand why investigating multiple sources is necessary. Students can examine these documents for bias and point of view, deepening their critical examinations of these sources. Primary sources, especially photographs, artwork, or advertisements, can be especially helpful for students who do not respond well to written texts (Barton, 2005). These visual artifacts often offer an “in” to students who sometimes respond less positively to historical investigations.

An increasing number of state standards, including the upcoming

Common Core State Standards, as well as the professional organization the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS, n.d.), support historical investigation with primary documents. The council believes that curriculum should be challenging. In their document entitled “NCSS Position Statement Powerful and Purposeful Teaching and Learning in Elementary School Social Studies” they state,

Students should be provided with opportunities for in-depth investigation of a few concepts that challenge and engage them rather than superficial treatment of many topics that can create student apathy.... Instead of simply reading and answering questions, elementary students should be taught to question, evaluate, and challenge informational sources. Teachers should ask children the kinds of questions that stimulate decision making, problem solving, and issue analysis (n.p.).

With this investigation, students have opportunities to engage in the kind of complex thinking that encourages them to question information, helping them realize the need to view history as an ever-evolving subject. See the Table for a starting point when searching for primary sources.

## Analyzing Primary Sources

In order to help expand students’ worldview and develop their critical thinking skills with using primary sources, students need a thoughtful way to analyze the sources they investigate. We offer two ways to guide students as they question and think about the sources: first, a circular approach from



**Table Helpful Websites for Locating and Using Primary Sources**

Library of Congress for Teachers: Contains primary source sets; themed resources; lesson plans for using objects, images, audio, statistics, text, and the community; and Collection Connections. You can also search for primary sources according to individual states. There is also an Ask a Librarian section, where you can send a question to a Library of Congress reference librarian.  
www.loc.gov/teachers/

Library of Congress Guide to Using Primary Sources: Includes information on using, citing, finding, and analyzing primary sources.  
www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/

National Archives: Contains teacher resources with information about getting started with primary sources. Includes links to multiple places to obtain documents.  
www.archives.gov

IRA & NCTE ReadWriteThink.org Web Resource Gallery: This site offers links such as American Master's Database of Visual Artist, American Museum of the Moving Image (film and television), and American Notes: Travels in America, 1750–1920 (offers more than 250 narratives describing travels in the colonies and United States).  
www.readwritethink.org/resources/index.asp

University of Berkeley: Includes tips for finding primary historical sources.  
www.lib.berkeley.edu/instruct/guides/primarysources.html

Repository of Primary Sources: A listing of 500 websites for primary sources.  
uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html

Primary Sources on the Web: Divided into U.S. and World History.  
www.eduplace.com/ss/hmss/primary.html

Primary Sources at Yale: A collection of various primary sources.  
www.yale.edu/collections\_collaborative/primarysources/index.html

Speeches and Oratory: A collection of the most important speeches from American history. Original recordings of some speeches are also available.  
americanrhetoric.com/

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS): This is a professional organization for K–12 social studies teachers. The website includes a Teaching With Document section that offers a primary source document with teaching activities, and lessons focus on history, civics, and many other social studies disciplines. You do have to be a member to access these records.  
www.socialstudies.org/resources/twd

In addition, you can look to commercial publishers, search the Internet, and have the students search for primary sources.

the Library of Congress, and second, an approach to help students “think historically” from a social studies perspective.

***A Circular Approach to Analyzing Primary Sources***

The Library of Congress’s (n.d.) guide to analyzing primary sources recommends taking a circular approach to analyzing these documents. There is no correct order to follow, but students should do the following three things when working with sources:

1. Observe—Students should identify and note details in the source.
2. Reflect—Students should generate and test hypotheses about the source.
3. Question—Students should ask questions that lead to more observations and reflections.

When observing, students should note things such as what they noticed and what they noticed but did not expect or cannot explain. When reflecting, students should think about the origins

of the document, why this item might be important, and what can be learned from examining that item or text. When questioning, students should wonder about who, what, when, where, why, and how in relation to their source.

This interplay among the three tasks supports using and investigating primary sources in a meaningful way. The Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/ for additional information) offers specific questions to consider for analyzing specific types of primary sources such as printed text, maps, photographs, prints, sheet music, songs, and sound recordings.

***Thinking Historically***

Another way of thinking about primary sources draws on what historians do and provides a way to help students begin to “think historically” and further investigate and engage in source work. VanSledright (2004) identified four acts that help students assess sources:

1. Identification—This helps students determine what kind or type of source or artifact they are viewing. Knowing the kind of source aids in understanding what can be expected from the source and what questions can be asked. Identifying an excerpt as a diary entry helps students anticipate that there might be dated entries that focus on one’s person life. What the diarist focused on will probably be of immediate concern and be influenced by what is occurring in that person’s life. Students should also expect that how events are described represent one person’s opinion, and sweeping statements about how all people of that age or time felt cannot be made.
2. Attribution—This helps students identify the author and consider the context in which the text was created.



A diary entry from a young boy during wartime might sound and feel quite different from that of a boy of the same age during a period of economic success in the country.

3. Judging perspective—This helps students think critically, because they have to consider the author or creator of the artifact, who is not present. Students must think about why a text was created, trying to determine the author’s intended purpose. An editorial has a different purpose than a letter to a relative, even if both authors discuss similar topics.
4. Reliability assessment—This helps students think about corroboration of evidence and information. Students must learn to seek out additional sources to support tentative conclusions about what they think they know. In a unit on goods and services, students could try and verify the cost of a dozen eggs read about in a diary entry or from a weekly shopping list by examining a flier for eggs in a local newspaper.

Although the end goal is to have students engage in these four acts of thinking, teachers of younger students may focus on a few of these acts at first, such as developing students’

identification and reliability assessment (or corroboration) skills, as a first step. Eventually students would incorporate all four acts, but the youngest students can begin to question information.

Both the circular and thinking historically approaches offer students a thoughtful,

detailed, and systematic method for analyzing primary source documents. These specific approaches provide students with a way to evaluate and question sources, a way to guide their critical thinking about the texts and artifacts they are viewing. Both approaches provide students with a way to investigate multiple features of a single document, a critical skill in world with ever-increasing access to information.

### Primary Sources Woven Around a Particular Theme

Primary sources seem to work best when they are collected around a particular theme. We call such collections *jackdaws*; other teachers call them *mini-museums*. Jackdaws are simply collections of artifacts, textual or nontextual in nature, real or facsimile, that share a particular theme. In other words, jackdaws are collections of primary source material.

Teachers use jackdaws for a number of reasons. Jackdaws are wonderful for building background and interest around a particular topic or theme. There is something inherently fascinating about being present at the location of a historical event, to view actual documents related to a historical

event, or even to hold an object of historical significance. Jackdaws allow this to happen within the classroom.

The lively questions and discussion that occur, for example, when students pass around the artifacts (e.g., letters to and from home, magazine articles and newspaper clippings, photographs, military gear) that a World War II or Vietnam veteran brings with him or her to a classroom is evidence that students have an interest and are deepening their background and understanding about the topic. This is especially true when a knowledgeable expert is available to field students’ questions and offer their own personal insights about the topic. When students read a text or informational trade book about the topic, they now have a schema that allows them to make better sense of that they read.

Touching those artifacts and reading the ones that contain language also allow students to re-create the firsthand experience of the owner or creator of the artifacts. This personal contact with history is a much different experience than what occurs when reading an impersonal text written in third person, as most textbooks are today. In the next section, we share how three teachers used primary sources with their students.

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### Understanding the Past

Primary students often have difficulty understanding that the life experiences and conveniences they enjoy today were not always this way. The past is often an elusive concept for young students. Teachers and students can gather primary sources to make this idea more concrete and understandable. Gathering information from a firsthand source, someone who lived in the “past,” provides an opportunity for students to gather primary source material through oral histories.

In an investigation of family and community, Jess Kobe had her first graders interview grandparents or older relatives to learn more about what life was like when they were first graders. Collectively the class developed several questions they wanted to know more about. Students wanted to know what their relatives did for fun, what school was like, the kinds of clothing they wore, the places they visited, and how they traveled. Jess felt this would help her students develop a sense of the past compared with the life they now lead.

Jess felt that when her students interviewed their grandparents, they discovered that their “normal” was very different from their grandparent’s sense of normal. The students discovered that certain ubiquitous items in their lives today have not always existed. The students had a difficult time imagining life without video games,

televisions, iPods, DVDs, and many other electronic devices. They came to realize that new inventions have made life different and more convenient. The students discovered that although their grandparents did not have similar electronic devices, they still had fun and got entertainment from other sources.

In addition, some students discovered that their grandparents walked to school. Many students were shocked to discover that, for some, school buses did not exist. Many grandparents shared that they went home for lunch because the school didn’t provide lunch, so they would go home and eat lunch with their families. Through these conversations, students discovered that most of their grandparents’ mothers didn’t work outside of the house. This meant that their grandparents did not go to daycare or to a babysitter’s house before or after school, as many of students currently do.

This interviewing process, hearing these firsthand accounts, helped students envision how a different reality could exist because it was the “real-life” story about their grandparents’ childhood. Jess reflected on her students’ learning about the experience:

First graders are very attached to what is real and not real. It is hard for them to imagine something foreign to them because they haven’t lived it themselves. This intimate experience provided the kids with a different perspective and insight into life during a different time period. This experience also helped the kids understand that life in the past wasn’t “bad” or “no fun” it was just different.

People still had what they needed and wanted but they just fulfilled their needs and through a different means.

This experience made the past come alive to the students. It provided them with a perspective that life did happen before they were born. It also helped them see how life could be different and was different for their own parents and grandparents. It helped them appreciate the past and visualize what it would be like to live then.

### Investigating the Local Community

Even though students live in a community, they often fail to notice or are unaware of unique aspects of their community. They may not fully understand how geography can influence community life, as do the cultural groups who settle in a particular area. The local resources can play a factor in the kinds of jobs found in the area. There is much to help students explore in their community beyond how they live their life. Helping students understand their community is one step in helping them understand the past.

In a third-grade study of the local community, teacher Katy Fogarty and her students worked with their local historical preservation society to gather important documents that detail growth and change in their area. Students were able to gather and study maps to compare the growth and change of their community. They were able to view photos of particular spots or certain streets so that students could see how economics and time have shaped the spaces they live today. They studied photos that showed that the land now housing school buildings in the district was once farmland.

Maps and photos also helped students understand the kinds of transportation

used in the community. They were able to examine photos of long-established businesses in their area, studying the exterior of a store when it opened compared with how it appears today. They were able to determine the oldest building in the community.

Students examined census records to find the kinds of occupations found in the community, along with the largest employer for the area. Examining old newspapers provided students with a sense of the cost of items, along with topics of importance at the time. Because the students lived in an area with four distinct seasons, they were able to examine past records of annual snow to compare with their current averages. Students also learned about the community's early settlers and founding families. They were able to get a sense of the crafts that were needed to provide basic living necessities.

As Katy explains, these visits to and materials from the local historical society offer students opportunities to work with:

real stuff they can put their hands and eyes on. The past becomes more present this way. Often the volunteers are from the historical society are long-time members of the community and they can offer nuggets of information to the students as they have lived the community history.

As Tommy (all student names are pseudonyms) shared,

It's important to learn about your city's history. There are a lot of artifacts about our history that show us what people did in the past like old pianos (the instruments in the past were a little different than our instruments today) and some of the old school stuff. It's neat to see how stuff was different in the past.

*“The past becomes more present this way.”*

*“As students enter the upper elementary and middle grades, the kind of primary sources available for examination, analyses, and response expands.”*

Andrew felt similarly when he reflected,

It shows a lot of our history. The volunteers can really teach you a lot about what happened when our city first existed. You can see a lot of things from the past there like old school desks and pictures of the old school house. It's interesting because we get to see the artifacts and the whole place shows us how our city has changed (like there used to be not as many buildings and a few small schools). It shows us the changes and helps us not just have to use our imaginations. We get to see how it really was.

Natalie commented on the amount of work that people had to do in the past compared with today. The old two-person saw used in the past intrigued her because she couldn't imagine having to work that hard to cut down a tree and compared that with our use of the electric saw today. She considered her experience of seeing artifacts in helping her get a sense of the past when she said:

Without going there [the historical society] it might be kind of hard to learn, there we got to see the actual stuff. Seeing these things on the computer would be OK but really going there we got to see it in person is better than just seeing it online.

As Katy reflected on her students' learning experiences, she feels that working with primary sources:

offers students something unparalleled by the curriculum. It is an irreplaceable experience, rather than thinking about what they might see or what something might be like, students actually see

things firsthand and sometimes, touch. They have a richer experience. These experiences result in a different level of conversation.

Primary sources provide a vehicle for investigation that allows students to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their immediate world.

### **Exploring the American Civil War More Deeply**

As students enter the upper elementary and middle grades, the kind of primary sources available for examination, analyses, and response expands. The American Civil War was one of the greatest and most complex events in American history and is currently in its sesquicentennial commemoration. Although most history textbooks devote at least a chapter to the Civil War, in most textbook chapters, the Civil War is essentially presented as a sequential series of major events presented in third person.

Students reading such texts may learn facts and figures about the Civil War, but may not develop a sense for how the war and the events preceding it shaped the hearts and minds of Americans in different ways. Students may wish to read and respond to the oral history of African American slaves. The firsthand accounts of the realities of slavery offer students opportunities to respond in emotional ways through personal journals and small-group discussions.



*“These primary sources offer a richness and depth of understanding that few, if any, textbooks can capture.”*

Students can transform their readings into Readers Theatre scripts, poems, fictional letters, and other literary forms.

The Civil War produced a wide range of rhythmical texts reflecting various stances on the war. In listening to Civil War songs and lyrics as well as reading and performing Civil War poetry, students can explore how music and poetry was used to unify, rally, and inspire people living in various parts of the country.

The Civil War also produced a plethora of letters, diaries, oratory, and political documents. Abraham Lincoln, for example was considered one of the most literary of all presidents. Students could examine his speeches against the newspaper headlines of that day, looking at the ways in which Lincoln addressed pressing issues of the time and used language to help the country work together. Students can explore how President Lincoln was able to use his gift of language to inspire a nation.

Speeches, letters, diary entries, and other such documents contain a strong voice. Such materials lend themselves to authentic fluency instruction, as students need to rehearse such materials in order to read them aloud for an audience. That rehearsal (repeated reading [Samuels, 1979]) that students engage in is aimed at capturing the voice and meaning of the original author. In order to read something well, students need to fully understand the text being read or performed.

These primary sources offer a richness and depth of understanding that few, if any, textbooks can capture. Primary sources provide insights not offered by informational texts alone. They allow readers to hear the personal and heartfelt voices of the original authors, rather than the disembodied voices of textbook authors, to experience the aesthetic response that the original readers of such texts may have experienced, and to experience and debate various points of view offered by the original readers of such texts. The sources offer a broader glimpse of the world, taking students back to a time and place that is hard for them to fathom. In addition, especially with an issue such as the Civil War, students must apply critical thinking skills as they encounter polar opposite opinions on important topics.

Fifth-grade teacher Lorraine Griffith studied this monumental event in American history with her class. The students read and learned from textbooks, trade books, and primary sources. They read and reread documents such as the *Emancipation Proclamation* and Lincoln’s first and second inaugural speeches; they studied maps and tracked the routes of various armies. They also explored the letters of individual soldiers; they sang and examined the words in Civil War songs such as the *Battle Cry of Freedom*, popular among Union soldiers (then they compared and contrasted its lyrics with the Confederate version of the

same melody); and they recited poetry that reflects various Civil War themes.

Lorraine transformed some of the primary sources into texts for Readers Theater. Included in this article is her Readers Theater script based on Frederick Douglas’s famous speech *What to the American Slave Is Your Fourth of July* that was a precursor to the Civil War (see Figure). When reading this document, many students discovered that not all Americans considered July 4th a day of independence and celebration.

She decided to conclude the study with a recitation of a primary source document, *The Gettysburg Address*. She shared her thinking for this decision:

I decided that the class should recite the whole address one sentence at a time. One of the benefits I found in this individual, deep, close reading of this text was how well the students digested the complex ideas in the piece. They were able to pull deep, rich meaning from the internalized texts as they heard it read to them and then read it themselves slowly, repeatedly, and reverently—much deeper than what they would have gotten from reading the description of the speech from the textbook.

Lorraine’s students themselves noted the particular sentences from the speech that had the greatest impact on them individually. Joshua, for example, was struck by the sentence, “The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.” Although a challenging sentence with unusual vocabulary, he was able to take meaning from Lincoln’s words:

I think this sentence means that the men who fought there did what they thought was right and we cannot take any of their righteousness away or give more to what they did.

Anthony was particularly moved by, “The world will little note, nor long

**Figure “What to the American Slave Is Your Fourth of July?” by Lorraine Griffith**

A Readers Theatre script for four voices: Narrator, Readers 1, 2, 3

Narrator: You are going to hear a speech given by Frederick Douglass at an Independence Day Celebration in 1852 in Rochester, NY. At that period in history, most Black Americans did not observe Independence Day on July 4th. They had not yet found the freedom most White Americans enjoyed. In this speech, Douglass fought with words for the freedom of fellow Blacks still enslaved. Three speakers will share the powerful words of one articulate man, Frederick Douglass.

All: “What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?”

R1: Fellow citizens,

R2: pardon me,

R3: allow me to ask,

R 1, 2, 3: Why am I called upon to speak here today?

R3: What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?

R2: Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?

R1: And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from our independence to us?...

R 1, 2, 3: What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?

R1: I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.

R2: To him, your celebration is a sham; ...

R3: your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless;

R1: ... your shouts of liberty and equality [are] hollow mockery;

R2: your prayers and hymns are to him mere fraud and hypocrisy—

R3: a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

R 1, 2, 3: There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

R1: Go where you may,

R2: search where you will,

R3: roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the Old World,

R2: travel through South America,

R1: search out every abuse,

R3: and when you have found the last,

R 1, 2, 3: lay your facts by the side of the everyday practices of this nation,

R1: and you will say with me that,

R2: for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy,

R3: America reigns without a rival.

R 1, 2, 3: And I ask again...

All: What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?

remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” His interpretation of this line shows a deep understanding of Lincoln’s text:

I think this sentence means that you know actions speak louder than words and Lincoln thought that nobody would remember what he said at Gettysburg, but everyone would remember what the soldiers did there. And now everyone remembers both.

Jana’s reflections on “That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain” demonstrates an understanding that transcends the Civil War itself:

It means that we must make sure that these people did not die for nothing. I like this sentence because it shows that so many people sacrificed themselves for us and our freedom. It shows that there are so many heroes in the world and some aren’t ever noticed.

Although the learning that occurred from the use of primary sources in Lorraine’s classroom may not be measurable in terms of test scores, it seems clear that the use of these materials as historical and literacy experiences in her class had a profound impact on her students: how they understood the content, from differing and personal perspectives, and how they responded to it. The discussions and written responses that ensued from her students’ reading of primary sources went much deeper than memorization of facts; they reflected deep, critical thinking.

### Engaged Learning

Using primary sources with elementary students has untapped potential. The Common Core State Standards identifies a clear need for increased opportunities for students to read and interact with informational texts in the K–5 grades. Thoughtful use of primary sources helps students develop their critical thinking skills as they investigate

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Select a topic you study in social studies or science.
2. Think about sources and artifacts that would be meaningful to students and help them better understand and connect with the selected topic. Ponder what would help students better understand the time period or make them feel connected to the events being studied.
3. Begin searching for primary sources that would enhance students' understanding of the selected topic using the websites provided in the Table. Also, contact local historical societies to see if they have artifacts or documents of interest.
4. Gather two or three primary sources. Using either the methods described in "Circular Approach to Analyzing Primary Sources" or the guiding questions presented in "Thinking Historically," begin a whole-group discussion on how to question and analyze these sources.
5. Provide opportunities for students to try this on their own in small groups.

## MORE TO EXPLORE

### IRA Book

- *Reading Photographs to Write With Meaning and Purpose, Grades 4–12* by Leigh Van Horn

### IRA Journal Articles

- "Building Literacy Skills Across the Curriculum: Forging Connections With the Past Through Artifacts" by Carol J. Fuhler, Pamela J. Farris, Pamela A. Nelson, *The Reading Teacher*, April 2006
- "Models for Using Nonfiction in the Primary Grades" by Rosemary G. Palmer and Roger A. Stewart, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2005

these documents (Wooden, 2008) while providing students with a deeper and more complex understanding of the world. It provides them with a way to view and evaluate future information by questioning and thinking deeply about the topic.

Primary sources have the ability to stimulate curiosity, provoke questions, and supply evidence for historical accounts (Barton, 2005). Presenting students with opportunities to use primary sources supports students in pursuing meaningful questions, making informed choices, and drawing conclusions from evidence gained from investigating these artifacts (Barton). Primary sources are fragments of history that can support students' active learning and intellectual curiosity.

It can be challenging for students to connect with past events when those experiences feel far removed from their current lives. The past we explore with our students is not about neutral events; rather it is about people living in a particular time with particular issues and challenges. By including more primary sources in classroom instruction, students have the opportunity to connect on both a factual and emotional level with people and events in our history. These sources help students recognize the complexity of our history (Wooden, 2008) by providing multiple points of view. Primary sources can build a bridge between two time periods, often providing the human link between students today and the people of the past (Otten, 1998).

Primary sources should be a "centerpiece" in instruction because they are a "foundation of historical knowledge" (Barton, 2005, p. 753). By including more opportunities for students to investigate primary sources,

we offer them a unique opportunity to view past people and events in ways only firsthand accounts can offer, and in turn, students experience learning about such events in intimate and personal ways.

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