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Research-Based Curriculum

Exploring History through Primary Sources

Introduction

Traditionally, the teaching of social studies has focused primarily on the rote memorization of important facts and dates. This approach to social studies instruction relies heavily on textbooks. However, developments in the past several years have led to major changes in the methodology used to teach these subjects. These changes came as the result of the assimilation of research on effective teaching practices and the development of comprehensive standards for social studies. This document describes the research base of Teacher Created Materials's *Exploring History through Primary Sources* (*Primary Sources*) series and explains the program components that were developed from this research.

Teacher Created Materials has created this series to support effective instruction and close the achievement gap evidenced in schools around the country. The research evidence compiled from numerous studies shows that students who are not achieving to their potential require different teaching strategies. In addition to teaching strategies, curriculum programs must be designed to include both content and process standards. Teacher Created Materials has followed national and state content standards, including College and Career Readiness standards (CCR), when creating the *Primary Sources* series. The CCR standards include the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as well as other state-adopted standards such as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs). Research has also shown effective programs include assessment that drives instruction. A variety of assessments were included in the program to assess students' content knowledge and process skills.

Primary Sources

The term *primary source* covers a wide range of materials linked by their connections to the past. Have your students ever held a handwritten letter from Abigail Adams or Benjamin Franklin? How about a presidential ballot? By their nature, primary sources increase students' content knowledge while allowing them to practice critical-thinking skills. Primary sources are engaging; they catch students' attention with special characteristics that stand out against a backdrop of textbooks and worksheets. Colors, textures, handwriting, graphics, and other features make primary sources inherently interesting (Potter 2005). Holding a letter written by a historical figure, examining a map that was carried into battle, or touching a document created centuries ago helps students connect with their subject matter in a unique way.

Primary Sources *(cont.)*

According to Lee Ann Potter, the three main reasons to teach with primary sources are that "…they are a part of the past; they are with us today; and touching them allows us, quite literally, to touch and connect with the past" (2003, 372). Primary sources are materials created by participants in or witnesses to important events. They give firsthand accounts or direct evidence of a subject being studied. Primary sources can be printed texts such as pamphlets, newspapers, and reports. They can be manuscripts and archival materials such as diaries, letters, clothing, and tools. Visual materials include photographs, maps, and sketches that serve as primary sources. Audio and visual recordings are also important primary sources. And more recently, internet materials have become a category of their own (Lucy Scribner Library 2016).

Primary Sources provide opportunities for students to participate in what one scholar has described as this "communion with the primary materials" (Eamon 2006, 299). While some materials or reading textbooks are beyond the struggling reader's conceptual abilities, or simply too brief, these lessons encourage the use of scenarios and stories that give depth and breadth to the work being taught that is appropriate for the age level and the level of reading. The primary sources included in each *Primary Sources* kit illustrate differing viewpoints and encourage students to interpret the social, political, and economic institutions of the time period they are studying. The Teacher's Guide contains a historical background information page for each primary source that situates the source in its historical context, as well as explains any broader historical significance that the source carries.

Students around the world have benefited from *Primary Sources* kits. The series has been awarded the Association of American Publishers' Distinguished Achievement Award as well as critical acclaim from educators.

Active, Engaged Learning

New federal and state standards are placing greater emphasis on critical thinking and deeper reading than previous assessment-driven approaches allowed. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills calls for teachers in the United States to shape students who are able to solve problems, think creatively, and work effectively with others. Furthermore, CCR standards emphasize active, engaged reading that leads to a deeper understanding of complex texts in preparation for college and careers (Jaeger 2012).

Active, Engaged Learning *(cont.)*

The *Primary Sources* series involves students in role-playing and research to solve a problem. The lessons in *Primary Sources* were designed based on specific recommendations in recent research. Because the strategies for active learning described in these programs are innovative, calling for change in classroom techniques, many of the strategies work better than traditional, teacher-centered approaches. The *Primary Sources* series is designed to go well beyond the standard procedures: copying notes from the board, passively listening to a teacher's lecture, or answering multiple choice questions from a text. These lessons are designed to make students active learners, good decision makers, and competent problem solvers. The strategies promote a high level of student participation. Every lesson challenges students to develop speaking skills and the intellectual dexterity to debate, make speeches, lobby wisely and shrewdly, and take part in hearings, discussions, and simulations.

Multiple Intelligences and Multimodal Learning

In 1983, Howard Gardner proposed his theory of multiple intelligences, explaining in a coherent system what many cognitive psychologists, biologists, and cultural researchers had recently been discovering. In his landmark book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Gardner suggests "a new theory of human intellectual competencies…[that] challenges the classical view of intelligence that most of us have absorbed explicitly (from psychology and education texts) or implicitly (by living in a culture with a strong but possibly circumscribed view of intelligence)" (Gardner 1983, 5). He identifies these different intelligences as linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and intra- and interpersonal. Perhaps surprisingly, Gardner suggests that these intelligences are "relatively autonomous" in their development and function (Gardner 1983, 8). In other words, a child who displays difficulties learning certain mathematical concepts or solving equations does not necessarily indicate someone lacking intelligence. Instead, this child might have a stronger intelligence in a different cognitive category or might simply be viewing the concepts or equations in a different, or even deeper, way due to their unique intellectual strengths and weaknesses.

Multiple Intelligences and Multimodal Learning *(cont.)*

Not at all surprisingly, educators have responded to the concept of multiple intelligences with great interest and enthusiasm. Gardner's theory seemed to put into words what teachers have observed in their students for many years—that students can display weakness in one particular area while simultaneously exhibiting profound intellectual strength in other areas. Responding to debate over how educators should apply the concept of multiple intelligences to their pedagogy, Gardner suggested that a multiple intelligences approach "entails multiple entry points to important concepts so that learning opportunities are maximized for every child" (1995). With regard to curriculum, he recommends "materials that draw on a range of intelligences, including both disciplinary and interdisciplinary areas of study" (Gardner 1995). While some scholars have challenged Gardner's claim that these intelligences are largely autonomous, few dispute that individuals have unique intellectual strengths and profiles. Indeed, the multiple intelligence theory continues to inform educational research and theory (Clarke and Cripps 2012; Kaufman 2012; Narli, Özgen, and Alkan 2011; Tracey and Richey 2007).

The lessons in the *Primary Sources* series challenge the range of intelligences inherent in all individuals: logical mathematical, visual spatial, verbal linguistic, rhythmic musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Students apply math skills when compiling statistics and doing surveys. They utilize spatial skills in building three-dimensional models. Linguistic skills are utilized when giving speeches and taking part in discussions and debates. The musical element is used when students are called upon to create songs, perform dances, or play musical instruments. The interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are tapped daily as students reflect on how the work affects them personally, and they are engaged in the everyday activity of cooperative learning and evaluations of all they do as individuals and groups.

These programs are also intended to assist teachers in developing in students a unique understanding of essential material taught through an integrated approach. The method of instruction is multimodal—connecting the visual, spoken, auditory, literary, and linguistic modes of instruction. This compilation of activities responds to the need to respect the diverse ways in which students integrate information; it also recognizes the importance of addressing the multiplicity of personal learning styles that exist among individuals. In this way, the strategies used can help students move information from short-term to long-term memory.

Writing from Sources

Creative and reflective writing assignments are important activities in building writing and thinking skills. Recent studies have demonstrated, however, the imperative role of writing from sources in the process of college and career readiness. These studies identify unique skills that students acquire in source-based writing assignments. One of the fundamental skills students learn through these writing activities is the ability to distinguish between and analyze primary and secondary sources (Fitzhugh 2011–12; Pecorari and Shaw 2012). By requiring students to use sources, especially primary sources, to formulate and support their arguments, teachers help students develop the skills utilized in analyzing and challenging sources, as well as situating sources in their historical contexts. Source-based writing also pushes students to interact with texts and images in a deeper and more thoughtful manner. For example, in thesis-driven writing assignments that require source-based evidence, students are forced to reevaluate their thesis and supporting arguments by examining whether the source provides evidence to support their claims.

Research has also revealed the benefits of source-based writing assignments for English language learners' writing development. Writing activities that require students to write from the source help English language learners generate ideas about the topic as well as provide an important language repository (Plakans and Gebril 2012). These writing assignments also encourage students' attributional complexity (Li and Casanave 2012).

The *Primary Sources* lessons require students to engage in a variety of writing assignments. Students are asked to write speeches, poems, and songs, as well as keep journals, compose diaries, and generate polemics. Many of the writing assignments also challenge students to base what they write on the primary source they are examining. For example, rather than writing about how a political cartoon makes them feel, students are required to write an analysis of the source by citing specific details from the cartoon to support their claims.

Citizenship

Whether students are studying American history, world geography, or economics, an underlying goal of social studies education is to prepare students to fulfill their citizenship responsibilities. Incorporating primary sources into instruction is an effective way to teach critical thinking about complex content. Many primary sources reinforce responsible citizenship actions, such as voting and petitioning the government (Potter 2005). By using an inquiry-based approach, students are put into the position of being historians who must analyze primary sources. Rather than being told what to think, students discover social studies for themselves by studying multiple perspectives and points of view.

Cooperative, Paired, and Independent Learning

In cooperative learning, the teacher groups students together in order to create heterogeneous teams. Within each group, students are given the instructions needed to complete a task. In fact, a recent study has revealed that cooperative learning accompanied by teacher-guided instruction is significantly more effective than cooperative learning with minimal guidance (Law 2011). Research has also demonstrated the benefits of heterogeneous group learning. One recent study revealed that working in heterogeneous groups "emphasized complementarities and pluralism in [students'] ways of thinking" (Kyprianidou et al. 2012, 103).

There are many structures used for cooperative learning groups. Some techniques are often used for research. Although no leader is designated, every student has a particular job. Students are assigned different cognitive jobs, such as recorder, speaker, voter, organizer, or clarifier. All the members of the group must contribute to the assignment. Every member is reminded that it is necessary to try to see other points of view within the group. A member of the group may ask the teacher a question only after the group has tried to solve the problem or answer the question themselves. At the end, the speaker of the group is selected to present the group's findings to the rest of the class.

Another structure for cooperative learning involves having each student obtain a different area of information for the group's theme. Then, all students participate and share their work for the group as a whole. By either assigning roles or allowing students to choose subtopics to research, the teacher helps students focus on the information they need to contribute to the group report.

Paired learning is useful when students are asked to reflect on personal experiences. At times, personal experiences may help students intimately identify with the content of a lesson. For example, if students are studying international conflicts as an integrated unit, the teacher may want to pair students and have them discuss their personal relationships with family and friends. Although the originally paired speaker and listener may only hear these personal anecdotes, students may be able to better understand why conflicts exist when they can identify and share conflicts that are close to home. Such personal reflection, however, should never replace the steady diet of source-based activities and assessments.

Cooperative, Paired, and Independent Learning *(cont.)*

Although working cooperatively warrants support, learning what is possible on one's own is equally valuable. When students are engaged in independent work, the primary goal of the teacher is monitoring progress. When teachers assign a long-range task, it is imperative to discuss and negotiate a contract with students. It is important that the teacher maintains a balance of monitoring student progress while allowing room for students' self-monitoring, which research has shown to be an effective strategy for independent work behavior (Coughlin et al. 2012). Periodically, the teacher should ask students to bring to class necessary materials for "inspection." How closely a teacher monitors students' work during independent study is usually a good indication of the overall quality of the finished piece. The more attention paid to the tasks by the teacher, the better work produced by the students. Hence, having a checklist is often valuable. Not only should the teacher critique this stage of development, but students can also critique one another before the final project is due.

One of the most important skills a student can learn is how to constructively critique. At first, the group discusses the project that has just been assigned. Students are then sent off to either create or solve a problem. Then, the group reconvenes to critique each other's work. Part of their grade is determined by their ability to critique and analyze one another's work in a positive spirit. The emphasis is always on growth, rather than on creating a "perfect" product.

There are many opportunities for cooperative learning within the *Primary Sources* lessons. Each kit comes with a Teacher's Guide that features cooperative learning lessons and activities. There are also opportunities for paired learning within the lessons. During a lesson, the teacher may want to pair students and have them discuss the ways in which their pasts parallel some of the events. The teacher can then create meaningful ways through lessons with *Primary Sources* for the information to be shared with the whole class. The pairs can work together to use their personal experiences to relate to the content and create more meaning out of the reading.

Primary Sources also features independent learning activities. For example, assume a teacher asks his or her students to list 15 items necessary to survive for two weeks in the Negev Desert. Then, they are asked to select and prioritize the five most important items. Students would have to first consider what they feel they need in order to survive, and then they would have to be critical of their own selections. As a final step in this exercise, students may have to defend their choices against any challenges posed by their peers.

Assessment

"In education, assessment refers to the wide variety of methods or tools that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of students" (Abbott 2015). Assessment is an indispensible learning and teaching tool in today's classrooms. Teachers use the data gained from assessments to guide their instruction. They need to know whether to scaffold a lesson, differentiate an assignment, or make other instructional decisions to support the diverse learners in the classroom. *Primary Sources* offers multiple assessment opportunities. The assessments require students to demonstrate chronological thinking, comprehension of the historical contexts, and the ability to write evidence-based responses.

There are multiple forms of assessment in *Primary Sources*. The questions on the backs of the photograph cards can serve as informal assessments. They cover multiple levels of Norman Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) outline (1997) and Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. The activity sheets can also serve as a type of informal assessment. The document-based question assessments test students' abilities to analyze primary sources. Finally, the document-based question tasks serve as summative assessments and require students to draw upon what they learned throughout the unit of study.

Using Technology in the Classroom

Perhaps the single most significant change in classroom teaching over the last 20 years has been the gradual incorporation of more technology-based lessons and activities. While it is no secret that the current generation of students uses technology outside of the classroom far more frequently and extensively than any generation that preceded them, data shows that they are using more technology inside of the classroom as well. According to the U.S. Department of Education, around 75 percent of American students have access to computers in their classrooms or labs (Mitchell, Bakia, and Yang 2007). Researchers have discovered that incorporating technology in the classroom can help increase student achievement, improve higher-order thinking and problem solving skills, enhance student motivation and engagement, and improve students' abilities to work collaboratively (White, Ringstaff, and Kelley 2002).

Primary Sources features many resources that provide a variety of opportunities to integrate technology into social studies instruction. The Digital Resources contain many materials that teachers will find useful. They include introductory activities, student reproducibles, digital primary source images, and general primary source images that teachers can incorporate into their lessons and activities.

Conclusion

The *Primary Sources* series provides teachers with creative, research-based supplemental kits that help students learn how to interact with primary source materials. *Primary Sources* is an integrated approach to active learning that features activities to accommodate different learning styles and levels. When students are offered the freedom to participate actively through independent, cooperative, and student-centered learning, they are more likely to retain a greater percentage of the content.

This approach to teaching will encourage teachers to act as facilitators rather than as lecturers. This will support not only the best interests of students, but excellence in teaching, as well. The freedom to explore knowledge through an integrated approach to active learning allows teachers to harmonize with their students rather than force them to strain to follow one tune.

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