

G2. Primary Sources Overview

Focus

Primary sources enhance the learning process by allowing students to construct their own understandings of people, events, and ideas. Students can uncover, discover, and reflect on content and their conceptions of such through inquiry, investigation, research and analysis. Introducing and using primary sources leads to active learning and development of critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving. As students work with primary sources, they have the opportunity to do more than just absorb information; they can also analyze, evaluate, recognize bias and contradiction, and weigh the significance of evidence presented by the source.

Rationale

Primary sources are the building blocks of history. These traces of the human past include ideals, customs, institutions, languages, literature, material products, and the physical remains of various people. Primary sources are not limited to printed documents such as letters, newspapers, diaries and poems. Artifacts (art, pottery, articles of clothing, tools and food), places (ecosystems, dwellings, and other buildings and structures), sounds (music, stories, and folklore), and images (paintings, photographs, videos/movies) can also be considered primary sources.

To many students, history is seen as a series of facts, dates, and events usually packaged as a textbook. The use of primary sources can change this view. As students use primary sources they begin to view their textbook as only one historical interpretation and its author as an interpreter of evidence, not as a purveyor of truth. Students begin to understand that such generalizations represent an interpretation of past events, but not necessarily the only interpretation. They become aware that the text has a point of view that does not make it incorrect but that does render it subject to question. Primary sources force students to realize that any account of an event, no matter how impartially presented it appears to be, is essentially subjective.

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.

Purpose

- Expose students to multiple perspectives on great issues of the past and present
- Engage in asking questions, thinking critically, making intelligent inferences, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events and issues in the past and present.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Become aware that all written history reflects an author's interpretation of past events
- Examine the role of primary source documents
- Evaluate a primary source document and its historical significance
- Interpret primary source documents in historical context
- Demonstrate understanding of patterns of change and continuity in the history of Canada
- Identify unique qualities of different types of primary sources
- Interpret, analyze, and evaluate primary and secondary sources related to core historical themes and topics
- Create questions for investigation related to core historical themes and specific time periods
- Develop original conclusions which illustrate connections between core historical themes and topics
- Refine writing and presentation skills using oral and visual communication tools and techniques
- Analyze documents, records, and data (such as artifacts, diaries, letters, photographs, journals, newspapers, historical accounts, etc.)
- Evaluate the authenticity, authority, and credibility of sources
- Formulate historical questions and defend findings based on inquiry and interpretations
- Develop perspectives of time and place, including the construction of various time lines of events, periods, and personalities in Canadian history
- Communicate findings orally, in brief analytical essays, and in a comprehensive paper

Using Primary Sources

Through primary sources students confront two essential facts in studying history. First, the record of historical events reflects the personal, social, political, or economic points of view of the participants. Second, students bring to the 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 exists through 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. These human expressions provide history with color and excitement and link students directly to its cast of characters.

Interpreting historical sources helps students to analyze and evaluate contemporary sources-- newspaper reports, television and radio programs, and advertising. By using primary sources, students learn to recognize how a point of view and a 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.

Where to Find Primary Sources

To introduce students to primary sources, you might begin with materials that they themselves possess, such as birth certificates, social security cards, passports, or drivers' licenses. What do these sources tell us about the individuals and the society in which they live? How might these sources be used by historians? Consider how school, employment, medical, and family records could be used to develop generalizations about twentieth-century student life.

Beyond personal records, there are a variety of other sources available. Where can you locate documentation on your neighborhood or community? Your sources can be both governmental and private: Federal census figures, newspapers, local government files, personal diaries, and interviews with long-time residents. In most cities and towns, local historical groups, preservation societies, and museums serve as excellent starting points for classes locating documentary materials about local communities. On the provincial level, historical societies, archives, and museums are valuable depositories for useful primary materials. Many of these agencies offer specific programs for high school students, and many would welcome suggestions for joint projects.

Local resources and teacher imagination are enough. When students and teachers participate together in the exciting and evolving process of historical inquiry, returns, in terms of knowledge, skills and interest, can be great and lasting.

Adapted Source: <http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/raw.html>