



Using Primary Sources: An Instructional Cycle

Here are ideas for incorporating primary sources into four phases of instruction.

A. Focus Activities

Focus activities can be used to introduce a topic or to re-engage students during a longer unit of instruction. Use one or two short primary sources to begin a lesson or unit of study...

1. For focus activities, choose primary sources that:
 - present a puzzle;
 - challenge a stereotype or conventional wisdom;
 - present a contradiction;
 - offer an insight (or aha! experience);
 - promote empathy (through a human interest story);
 - present a generalization or explanation against which different generalizations or explanations can be compared later.
2. Present focus activities using the following techniques:
 - Generate one or two well-crafted questions about the sources. Use the questions to spark a class discussion or as a task for pairs of students to answer.
 - Ask students to freely write their reactions to a thought-provoking document. Then, as a class, compare different reactions prompted by the document.
 - After reviewing one or two primary sources, have small groups of students generate a list of questions about the upcoming topic of instruction.
 - Use contemporary primary sources to focus instruction on a historical period. For example, use a modern newspaper editorial on immigration, minimum wage, or welfare reform as a springboard into exploration of those issues in the past. Ask students to make predictions about historical debates based on what they have read in contemporary editorials. Similarly, a historical source on a recurrent topic can be used to spur inquiry into current debate on that recurring issue.

B. Inquiry Activities

Help students explore main concepts in a block of instruction using an inquiry approach to primary sources.

1. To develop an inquiry approach, provide students with a set of primary sources on a topic, concept, or time period. Students can use the Internet and other research tools to assemble sets of primary sources for themselves.
2. Use primary source sets as the focus for a series of inquiry activities. Have students use primary source sets to answer questions about historical eras, generate and test hypotheses, and derive conclusions.
3. Student inquiry can range from working exclusively with primary source documents to using selected primary sources to supplement the student textbook and other instructional materials.

C. Application Activities

Use primary sources to help students apply the concepts they are learning and to extend that learning beyond the textbook, other instructional materials, or other primary sources.

1. Primary sources can be used to challenge students to apply what they've learned from primary sources. Have students expand or alter textbook explanations of history based on primary sources they study.
2. Provide students with the entire text of a primary source that has been excerpted in their textbook. Based on the full text of the primary source, ask students to defend or refute conclusions drawn by the textbook author. Then have students search online and in other sources for additional documents that support their conclusions.
3. Present a set of primary sources in sequence. Ask students to consider how new documents support or challenge information and understanding garnered from other documents. Have students refine or revise conclusions based on their study of each subsequent primary source.

D. Assessment Activities

Primary sources can be useful tools for evaluating student mastery of skills and concepts.

Use primary sources to assess what students have learned and to evaluate their skill in analyzing primary sources. For evaluation activities, select either sources from the historical era under study or choose contemporary sources related to the historical topic. Actual assessment tasks might include having students:

- Write an essay about a primary source document. Explain how the source supports or challenges a commonly accepted conclusion about a time in history.
- Based on analysis of several primary sources, prepare an oral presentation taking a stand on an issue in history.
- Select primary source documents to create a museum display about an historical topic. Write captions for the items and justify the documents that were selected.
- Write a response to a primary source (speech, news article, sermon), taking the position of someone who lived at the time the source was created.
- Prepare a visual display (poster, magazine cover, illustrated timeline) that highlights the most important points to be gained from the primary sources under study.