Integration of Digital Primary Sources

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of the twentieth century, the Library of Congress (LOC) began archival digitization of its holdings in order to share its rich collections with the public. The digitization process has made available, via the internet, over ten million items, many of which are primary source items (LOC, 2006, para. 5). These digital primary sources are defined by the LOC (2006) as "actual records that have survived from the past, like letters, photographs, articles of clothing and music. They are different from secondary sources, which are accounts of events written sometime after they happened" (para.4). As result of the digitization process, access to these primary sources is no longer limited to people physically present at the Library of Congress. Additionally, other libraries and organizations have begun to digitize and make their primary sources available to the public via the internet. We have listed the URLs of several of these organizations at the end of this article. The ease of accessibility through the internet creates an opportunity for teachers within K-12 settings to begin integrating these digital primary sources into the classroom. This article discusses the research on primary sources in the classroom, defines primary source-based instruction (PSBI), connects practices used in PSBI to higher order thinking skills, and offers examples of PSBI practices.

BACKGROUND

The availability and ease of access has contributed to the increased attention by teachers and the integration of primary sources into the classroom for instructional purposes (Wineburg & Martin, 2004; Pitcher, 2005; Eamon, 2006). Additionally, the collaborative effort between archivists, historians and educators has led to the development of lesson plans that utilize the most interesting and relevant digital primary sources in the classroom (Eamon, 2006). Access to these sources may have also resulted in the shift from memorizing historical facts to an inquiry based instructional approach that engages students in higher order thinking processes (Pitcher, 2005).

Primary sources have often been utilized in social studies and history classrooms. Historically, the use of primary sources in social studies instruction has provided the foundation for deeper understanding and critical thinking by students (Singleton, & Giese, 1999; Pitcher, 2005; Eamon, 2006). This deeper content understanding and critical thinking is often termed as historical thinking (Singleton, & Giese, 1999; Pitcher, 2005; Eamon, 2006). Although critical thinking and content understanding can result from instruction that does not use primary sources, Drake and Drake-Brown (2003) describe historical thinking as needing a "temporal bearing" (p. 474). Primary sources provide this "temporal bearing," and provide contextual corroboration that allows students to develop a richer and deeper appreciation for the content. Contextual corroboration is a combination of two (of four) common historian practices that Wineburg (2001) has explained as *corroboration heuristic* and *contextualization*. Contextual corroboration refers to comparing information gained from reviewing several different primary sources related to a given topic and within a conditional framework of both time and place. Through the use of digital primary sources, teachers can create contextual corroboration and facilitate deeper understanding while moving students beyond the perception that learning in this area consists mainly of rote memorization of facts, dates and places (Eamon, 2006). Additionally, primary sources provide an affective connection to the content that is often not developed when students learn through secondary sources.

Although we have discussed digital primary sources only in relation to history and social studies subject areas, we do not perceive the use of these sources as being limited to these areas. We advocate the use of

primary sources across disciplines and even encourage the use development of collaborative discipline utilization of primary sources. For example, a teacher could integrate primary sources in both Language Arts and Social Studies for literacy skills and historical content knowledge development.

At this point it is important to describe what is meant by a digital primary source. Although we presented the LOC definition of a primary source, it might be more useful to describe the types of digital primary sources. Digital primary sources are primary sources that have been converted into a digital format and made available via the internet. The LOC has digitized not only original manuscripts and periodicals, but has also digitized and made available personal writings, letters, diaries, maps, and original documents. Where these examples may fit most individuals' connotation of a primary source, the LOC also has made available original cartoons, flyers, taped speeches, interviews, music recordings, photographs, and film recording of events. Each of these digital primary sources can be integrated into instruction and provide students with multiple perspectives and contextualizes the content being studied.

Digital primary sources are unique educational tools, whether a diary excerpt, document, photograph, or taped interview, these tools expose students to "multiple and original perspectives of events," (Singleton & Giese, 1999, p. 148). L. R. Singleton & J. R. Giese (1999) continue that students working with primary sources are also more likely to "engage in asking questions, thinking critically, making reasoned inferences, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events and issues in the past and present" (p. 148).

With a keen and critical eye, students are also able to develop an understanding of bias and subjectivity when analyzing and contextualizing related primary sources. These sources serve as tools that provide the contextualization of the content being studied and give students a deeper and richer learning experience.

The practices often associated with primary sources involve classroom or learning activities described as inquiry based instructional methods. Because the definition of inquiry based methods would require a separate article, for the purpose of this article the definition of inquiry based methods will cover all activities designed to help students acquire deeper understanding of content while using primary source items as tools to reach the deeper understanding. For example, a document

analysis or photo analysis is an instructional method in which students are required to examine the primary source document or photo in order to answer specific questions about the given source. Questions that might facilitate this type of examination include: Where do you think the source is from? Who do you think made it? When do you think the source was created? Why do you think the source was created? (LOC, 2006; National Archives and Records Administration, 2007). This line of questioning leads to greater examination and critical thinking. It also requires the application of inferential skills in order to create a better understanding of the primary source being examined. This also enables the student to establish a context for a specific time and a place of actual event. From this context, the students will be able to inquire further about the given primary source(s) which, in turn, often leads to greater depth of understanding of the content area.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH USING PRIMARY SOURCES

The use of primary sources in instruction is not new. Newman (2007) noted that textbooks from as early as 1787 were integrating primary source documents within textual narratives. As such, the practice of PSBI is also not a new innovation. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (1994) report indicated that teachers across the nation had integrated primary sources within instructional practices in grades four, eight, and twelve. Further, the NCES (2002), report noted increases in all grades and the use of primary sources overall. Assessments also indicate that instructional activities with primary sources can lead to higher levels of student achievement. However, students in the United States are currently not receiving primary source-based instruction on a regular basis.

Recent research has shown that PSBI does lead to increases in student knowledge gains as well as increases in critical thinking, or higher order thinking, skills. NCES (1994), reported that tools and resources, such as primary sources, can "invite students to engage more fully with the content of geography and history and can serve to increase students' ability to think analytically" (p. 201). The NCES 2001 report on eighth graders added that "weekly use of primary documents was associated with higher scores than less frequent use" (2001, p. 95). This report further indicated that eighth grade teachers

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