Using Primary Sources to Build a Community of Thinkers

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Nonfiction has often been the poor relation when it comes to curricular decisions. We have so much literature to share with students that I fear we often overlook the rich material that comes from the “real” realm. The words “primary source” conjure up stale ideas of moldy texts on brittle paper preserved in archival sleeves in historical collections. History or social studies teachers might react positively to the idea of the primary source document as a vehicle for learning, but English teachers might be less enthusiastic. Primary sources and nonfiction offer valuable opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking in all fields of study. In the classroom of the next century, as information expands to fill the available space on the Internet, in textbooks, and on television, making sense of the world will depend on being able to filter out the truth, connect knowledge across disciplines, collaborate with those who are specialists in other fields, and develop strategies for finding and using available resources.

Diaries, letters, photographs, legal records, speeches, essays, biographies, and autobiographies are the core primary sources. Additionally, film, musical scores, art, and literature of all kinds are the primary sources of artists and creative writers. Primary sources of the future will include e-mail, Web sites, and virtual reality created in cyberspace. The teacher of the next century will be faced with choices of content and process unimagined now. One thing is certain: education has to change. In order to survive in the information age, students, perceived in the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth as uncritical consumers of knowledge, will need to become more adept at sorting through, analyzing, and then synthesizing large amounts of information before determining what “knowledge” they learn and claim as their own. Reading and studying primary sources offers this opportunity.

I teach in a department that offers a wide variety of electives after the ninth grade year. In addition to incorporating primary sources in my ninth grade curriculum and in my American Studies class, I teach a semester-long elective called Readings in Nonfiction. The class is open to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and although sometimes a group of friends finds its way into this class, usually I have a group of students who may not know each other and are diverse in their interests and abilities.

Crucial to the learning process is a trustworthy, supportive community in which individuals can share their ideas. How to forge a community out of this disparate group is one of the significant challenges I face at the beginning of each new class. In classrooms of students with varied abilities and a variety of social skills, or even in so-called leveled or tracked classrooms, teachers need to build community by maximizing opportunities for interaction. As in any social situation, students need to get to know each other and the teacher. Enter the primary source.

I like to begin the study of primary sources with two letters my daughter wrote home from camp when she was eight or nine years old. (See Figure 1.) I prefer to give photocopies to students so they can look closely at the document, and I make
an overhead transparency to use in whole-class discussion. I tell them nothing about the origin of the letters. Pairs of students work together to answer four questions:

1. Location of writer
2. Age of writer
3. Recipient of letter
4. Date of document

This simple activity requires students to read and then think critically about the letters, discuss their answers, and provide reasons for them. After ten minutes or so, some surprisingly lively discussion takes place.

In answer to question one, students speculate that the writer, Sarah, is either away at camp, spending an extended period with her grandparents, or possibly with her father, who is divorced from her mother. The evidence they use for camp is that she is riding horses; the evidence for a visit to another family member is that, while her family is remodeling their house, she is too young to be helpful, so she is sent to her grandparents; the evidence that she might be with her father is based on the fact that she refers to “mom” only in the first letter. These are all reasonable conclusions. The class tends to lean toward the idea that she is at camp, citing the first sentence of the second letter, “I wish I could come home to[o],” as evidence of homesickness, which they don’t think she would experience at her dad’s or grandparents’ homes.

Answering the second question requires close examination of the graphic evidence. Students note that Sarah prints, that her use of capital letters and punctuation is variable, and that she misspells some words. If she only prints, they surmise that she has completed no more than a second grade education. The sharp-eyed student, and there are a few in each class, notes that she used cursive to write “E.T.” Thinking back to their own education, they then conclude that she must have learned cursive but chooses not to use it. They are unable, however, to determine her age based solely on the graphic evidence, and some will even speculate that she is a teenager with dysgraphia! Someone will point out that she thinks “Todd” is lucky to be going to E.T. and that $2.00 is apparently a significant amount of money for him to spend, so they argue for the conclusion that she is between seven and nine years old.

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As to the recipient of the letter, “Todd,” they are sure he is a brother, and most think he must be older than Sarah. Some think he is quite a bit older, interpreting the first sentence of the first letter, “I hear you have Finished my room” to mean that Todd has physically been constructing or renovating her room. Others argue that if he was going to E.T. and only had $2.00 to spend, then he is probably only a couple of years older than Sarah.
The date of the documents proves harder to establish, as they offer a certain timeless quality of one child away from home writing to another. They could have been written last summer or ten years ago. Again, the astute student will immediately ask “When did E.T. come out?” A movie buff in the class will identify the year as 1981 or 1982, which helps to pinpoint the possible date of the letters.

After summarizing our tentative conclusions, I ask the students to speculate further as to the relationship between the writer and the recipient. They confer with their partners for a few minutes, and all students agree that Sarah and Todd have a close relationship. They support that opinion by saying, “Sarah asks Todd in the first letter to find out about her mom’s surprise, so I think they often do things together to maybe trick their mom. She signs her second letter ‘lots of love, Sarah’ so that shows a close relationship.” At this point I interject, “That shows Sarah’s side of the relationship. How do we know how Todd feels about his little sister?” The pair of students who has studied the letters most closely volunteer, “Todd must have written her, because in the second letter, Sarah says “I wish I could come home to[o]” which means he must have said in a letter that he wishes she could come home. He wouldn’t have said that if he didn’t get along with her and miss her.”

Finally I ask students what they can determine about Sarah and Todd’s family. If they were a researcher finding these letters one hundred years from now, what could they conclude about the culture? These questions prompt some interesting inferences. Some restate the possibility that the family is separated; most think the family is fairly well off because they are renovating Sarah’s room and, if she is at camp, they have the money to afford to send her. About the culture, they have more difficulty drawing conclusions. With some prompting from me, we finally establish that “children earn or have money”; “the society uses written communication”; “groups of people live together.”

In this introduction to a primary source, students have worked cooperatively with one other student; they have shared ideas in the large group and defended their opinions with reference to the facts of the document; they have learned to look closely at a text and think about what it can tell them both in its physical manifestation (the handwriting, spelling, and punctuation) and in its substance or content. Finally, they have thought about the location of the text in the social or cultural context out of which it was created. By the time we finish, since I have accepted all their ideas and interpretations and written them on the overhead or blackboard, they are clamoring to know the truth of the letters and whether they have been correct in their assumptions. I tell them the full story of the letters at that point—that Sarah is my daughter and Todd my eleven-year-old son; that Sarah is not quite nine years old and is at Camp Farnsworth, a Girl Scout Camp in Thetford, Vermont; and that while she was away, we were moving her out of one room and into another, which we were painting. The “surprise” she alludes to was that I had made new curtains and a bedspread for her. The letters were written in the summer of 1982, and we were an intact family, living on the campus of a boarding school in northern New Hampshire. Sarah and Todd had a close relationship and played together most of the time because there were no other children their ages around.

I encourage teachers to start the study of primary sources with a family document like this or a document of their own (a letter or journal entry, for example) for three reasons: (1) The language of contemporary sources is more accessible to students; (2) The teacher knows the document and the context for it; (3) Talking about it at the end of the lesson allows teachers to reveal themselves to their students, thereby becoming more real to them and connecting with them in a way that promotes sharing of ideas, thoughts, and selves. Because I teach in southern New Hampshire, I often have girls in class who have attended Camp Farnsworth; the camp experience is a common one for many students, and usually these letters prompt a conversation about their experiences, homesickness, camp food, and other memories. They want to know more about my children, who are now grown. I have suddenly become a person to them, not just an authority figure in the room, and because I have shared with them some small aspects of my personal life, they are now more willing to share theirs with me. In my Readings in Nonfiction class, this is critical because we are about to embark on a large documentary autobiography that involves their analysis and interpretation of their own lives. Rarely have I had students resist sharing their family stories after this opening exercise.

In a history class, such an activity can be the prelude to tackling the difficult documents of ancient history or the documents that laid the basis for
our system of government. The activity can lead to a discussion of historiography—who writes history and on what do they base their writing? What role does the ordinary person play in the making and writing of history? Finally, this activity helps students realize the truth of the old adage that "two heads are better than one." A spirit of cooperation, collaboration, and sharing starts on the opening day, which, if fostered in future activities, can lead to a socializing experience that educates students for their futures as citizens in a community and workers in an increasingly impersonal world.

Two exercises over the course of the next few days allow further opportunities for students to work together in different pairs and continue the community-building of the first day. Students have a week or so in which to collect at least twenty documents of their lives, which will form the core of their documentary autobiography. To begin, we discuss the types of documents they should look for and categorize them. First we list all the possibilities. Usually students think mostly of personal writing such as diaries or journals. Expanding on that, I ask them to think of other written documents they have produced, which leads to listing letters they wrote, notes written in school, stories, papers, and school tests. Someone will ask if drawings or paintings count. I turn that around and ask them what they think. And we proceed in this fashion. The goal is to have them work with a broad spectrum of documents, as well as to find materials from throughout their lives.

Students analyze the list on the board and come up with the following categories:

1. Documents they produced (letters, diaries, schoolwork, paintings, photographs)
2. Documents produced about them (letters from others, newspaper clippings, photographs, report cards, and other school records)
3. Legal records (birth certificates, medical records, court records, school records)
4. Personal papers
5. Creative work
6. Visual records
7. Written records

For the next day, I ask them to come to class with two documents from two different categories. I also tell them they will be sharing their documents with another student, which prevents their bringing highly personal diary entries or letters. In class the next day, I ask them to sit with someone they don’t know and trade documents. Each person studies the documents of the other and writes an interpretation, imagining they are finding the documents 100 years from now and trying to make sense of the person’s life and the time period in history. At the interpretive stage they are not allowed to ask questions of the other person. I circulate around the room and sit down with pairs of students to assist where necessary. My assistance usually consists of asking leading questions. Students who have forgotten documents usually can produce a driver’s license, and I give them another document from my collection.

After sufficient time has passed, the partners meet, and each tells the other his or her interpretation of the documents. Because I have modeled that discussion the day before, they are a little more comfortable with speculation. I meet with students who have been interpreting one of my documents to discuss their assumptions and inferences. After each pair has shared, I ask for general comments by the class about some things they found easy to interpret and some of the problems they had. We talk about how to solve those problems while actually conducting research into someone’s documentary record. By the end of class, two students who hadn’t known each other very well have exchanged information, practiced some critical thinking, and started to realize that they may perhaps be able to write an autobiography based on their own documents.

Students who hadn’t thought about it before begin to realize what it is like to write the history of a time period from which no one is alive to interview; and they have a sense of what it is like to write the biography of someone who is either dead or inaccessible. Thinking about this raises one of the underlying themes of this class, and probably all the classes I teach: What is the truth and how do we know it? I introduce that discussion in the first few days, as students work with their own documents and think about their own lives about which, presumably, they know the truth.

As students continue to think critically about their documents, they create a timeline of their lives, noting important events on one side of the line and listing the documents and appropriate dates on the other side. I require them to research one year from three time periods of their lives so they can better understand what was happening in the culture and therefore establish the context for their documents.
While students are working on this project, we proceed with several readings that allow us to come together as a community of readers and thinkers. Our initial reading of Sarah’s letters from camp leads to a reading of “The Diary of Amelia Stewart Knight,” her record of her westward journey on the Oregon Trail. Students practice keeping a diary and compare their diary writing with hers. We continually evaluate what surprises us about her diary, and through that exercise we uncover many assumptions we have about women, life on the trail, encounters with Native Americans, and the ease or difficulty of making the journey.

These introductory readings lead to a more complex assignment involving reading a section of Vincent Van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo and examining their relationship based solely on Vincent’s side of the correspondence. We try to imagine Theo’s reactions and write some letters to Vincent from Theo. This unit also allows us to look at some great art and try to replicate some of Van Gogh’s paintings. I bring this assignment back to the context of the students’ autobiographies, as I ask them to think about an activity that they are as passionate about as Vincent was his art. I ask them to think about which of their siblings might support them in this activity, as Theo supported Vincent. Some thoughtful reflection occurs throughout this unit, some of which finds its way into the students’ autobiographies.

We continue to grapple with primary sources in the form of letters and diaries, culminating in two challenging units. The first involves reading a few chapters from Laurel Ulrich’s study of Martha Ballard’s diary, *A Midwife’s Tale*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. Groups of students read selected chapters and teach the class about their findings. We do several activities as a whole class with the introduction to the book and with diary entries at the beginning of each chapter before students read on their own. This text is dense and requires reading and rereading. I sit in on student groups as they talk about their understanding of the reading and prepare notes and visuals with which to teach the class. By the time we reach this stage, the students have had enough experience with primary sources and developing the context for the source that they are better equipped to appreciate the cultural texture Ulrich has created in her study of this diary. We are also able to watch the excellent PBS video based on the book and talk about the filmmaker’s transformation of the text.

Our final unit involves pairs of students working with an original letter, scout report, or telegram written by southern soldiers just prior to the siege at Vicksburg. This is a collection that has been in my family since the Civil War, and I place the documents in protective sleeves so that students may handle them. They need to read, transcribe, and annotate their document. Each stage of the process provides plenty of challenges. When each pair has typed an annotated transcription, I make copies for the whole class. Each student then writes an introduction to the set of documents that incorporates their research about the War and the individuals who wrote the...
documents. In doing this activity, they have Laurel Ulrich's work as a model, and they can rely on each other for discussion and interpretation.

Though we also study more traditional forms of nonfiction such as autobiography, biography, and essays, I find that the primary sources often provide the most engaging activities for the class. Each of the units I've described above gives students the chance to connect their reading and study with their autobiography project, each builds on skills they have developed in a previous unit, and each challenges them to think critically as they read and interpret a text. I think students leave the Readings in Nonfiction class with an expanded knowledge of themselves and greater confidence as critical readers and thinkers. Who could ask for more?

**Works Cited**


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