

Finding and Evaluating Primary Sources

Hello. My name is Jessica Ellison, and I am a teacher educator at the Minnesota Historical Society and this webinar is part of the Inquiry in the Upper Midwest Project funded by the Library of Congress. And today we're going to be talking about finding and evaluating primary sources.

So, as I said, this project is funded by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources program. This grant has a number of different goals. Ultimately, we want to deliver curriculum and professional development to teachers in Minnesota and Wisconsin and we're focusing on a couple of different things. We're focusing on inquiry, on primary sources, and on culturally relevant pedagogy. This grant project has a number of components including regional workshops, webinars such as this one, culturally relevant pedagogy instructional videos, classroom observations, district in-service professional development, and summer institutes. And for more information, you can visit our website at mnhs.org/ium. But let's get right into finding and evaluating primary sources.

So, I want you to think for a second about some of the places that you already go to find primary sources online. And in this day and age, there are many, many places that you can seek out excellent primary sources that you can use with your students in class. But, how do we find the ones that will be most engaging, most relevant, and most useful to our students?

There's a number of different things to keep in mind as you're looking for primary sources. Number one, know what it is you're looking for. And we're going to talk a little bit more about what that means. Know where to look. As the last slide showed, there are many different places that you could start. Know how to search. There's a couple of different things to keep in mind as you're looking for exactly the right primary sources. And finally, know how to document your findings so you can back and find the source again, or you can direct your students to the sources.

So, first of all, let's start with know what you're looking for. So, let's say you want to find a photograph of a one-room schoolhouse. OK? Seems simple. But then you have to consider what you need it for. Do you need it to illustrate? To analyze? Do you need it from anywhere in the country or from a particular place? Do you want a picture of the outside? The inside? With certain people? And do you want a historic image or a modern image? It's important to think about these things, because once you dive into the abyss of the internet, you're going to find a lot of different things that show a one-room schoolhouse. So, know what it is you're looking for. So, I did a quick Google search of one-room schoolhouse, and this is what came up. And as you can see, it is important to know what we're looking for, because we have outside, we have inside, we have people, no people, old, new, in various locations.

So, how do we go about finding exactly what it is we want? So, the internet is the worst, and the best, because there's so much out there. But, where do we look to find the most reliable sources, that are actually accomplishing our classroom goals? So, what I did is I picked one image from the initial Google search, and I pulled it out. And it was this one right here, because I thought I would like to see the inside of the a one-room schoolhouse with people inside of it. So, I pulled this source. The problem is, I wasn't sure where the source of this source started. So, when I Googled it, I clicked on the picture and it took me to a blog entitled, very interestingly, "Things You Wouldn't Know If We Didn't Blog Intermittently", which didn't seem to me like a very reliable source. So, I looked to see what the source of their source

was, and ended up a website called SHORPY, which is a historic photo archive. So, getting a little closer, but it still didn't feel very reliable to me. So, I looked at the source of the SHORPY picture on the site, and it was in fact the Library of Congress. And so, if I know where to look, I can go directly to the most reliable source and get the information I need.

Part of how you search for particular sources is searching in the right place. So, for example, starting with the Library of Congress instead of Google images. The other part of it is using the correct search terms. So, if I were to search for this particular image on the Library of Congress website, you know, you think you could use certain terms like "schoolhouse" or "teacher" or "inside" or "students", things like that. Well, but the title of this photo is actually "School in Session". So, it's important to try a couple of different search terms as you're looking for these sources, because the source that you're looking for might have a title that you didn't quite expect.

Just a few tips on how to search for information. Number one, keep a list of your top ten websites that you go to for primary sources, including databases such as the Library of Congress and curated sets. You can also keep a running list of websites with specific content. I do this. I have a Google doc where I keep a list of all my favorite websites for primary sources. And then finally, narrow your search and vary your search terms as much as possible. If you know the exact year, start there. If you know the exact geographic location, start there so you can be as specific as possible.

So, really quick about the Library of Congress. I've talked a lot about the Library as a great resource for primary sources. There is a ton of information on the Library of Congress website. These five parts of the LOC website are the ones that I generally go to first, and that teachers find really useful. So, when you have a minute, please take a look at loc.gov, and look at "Photos, Prints and Drawings" section, "Maps", "Chronicling America", which is newspapers, the "Teacher Materials" section, which is excellent for classroom teachers, and then finally "Ask a Librarian", where you can connect with librarians at the Library of Congress and ask them specific questions

The last piece of this, when you find primary sources, is knowing how to document your findings. It's a great modeling tool, so that your students know how to properly document a source. It's also a way to honor the creator and the keeper of the source. And, most importantly, if you document your findings, you know how to get back there and find it again. There's nothing more frustrating than having a fantastic primary source, but not knowing where you found it.

One thing to be aware of as you're documenting your findings is copyright. Now, there are a couple of basic copyright regulations that every educator should know. If your source falls into these three bulleted items, it's pretty safe for you to use in your classroom in most any way that you like. If it was created before 1923, if it was created by the federal government, and if it's in the public domain. Now, if your source is not falling under one of those three bullet points, just check before you post the source on a website or on social media, or print it out for all of your students. So, document but also make sure you're checking copyright to make sure if you are honoring the creator and keeper of the source.

So, you've found your source. So now, how do we evaluate our primary sources? I would argue that source analysis is a core skill, up there with reading and writing, because when analysis is second nature to kids, they become critical consumers of all information that they see. And they are bombarded on all sides with information at all times. You know, they are automatically analyzing sources. They'll take a look at the source here on the screen, and their first thought be "Oh, that looks like propaganda". But

then as they take a closer look, and they read the words, and they look at the images, their analysis skills show them that this, in fact, not an actual propaganda poster, but something from Star Wars.

So, as you're evaluating primary sources, you really do need to find the language that works best for you and for your students. And luckily, there are many different ways and tools that you can use to evaluate primary sources. The Library of Congress uses the words "observe, reflect, question", and you can go onto their website and use their tool to have students take a really close look at their sources to start the analysis process. For the Inquiry in the Midwest project, we tweak the words just a little bit: Observe, Think, Wonder. But really, it's about what's best for you and your students.

So, as you evaluate primary sources you start with things like "observe, reflect, question" or "observe, think, wonder". You want kids to just start making observations and asking questions about sources. And then that will become second nature when they start to just automatically question. And as they observe, they'll start with things like this: "This is a photograph. It's in black and white. There's children and an adult." So, those are all observations. Desks, books, globe. And then they start to make inferences: "This is probably a school. I see some old-fashioned clothes. I see some bare feet." And then they might start to make deeper analysis observations, such as: "Those are all white students." and "I don't see any technology." Then they can start getting into some really excellent questions that will bring them to the source analysis about who, what, when, where and why.

You can begin to layer primary sources upon other primary sources to expand the story and the evaluation of this time and place that you're looking at. So, this an image of the exact same schoolhouse that we just saw, but from the outside. So, now we've got different questions that students can ask about this space. And then you can continue to add more images such as the outhouses that were behind the schoolhouse that we were just looking at, to get the kids to get a more complete picture of what they are evaluating.

So, that's just a really quick look at how we can find and evaluate primary sources to make them really engaging and relevant for our students. If you'd like more information about the Inquiry in the Upper Midwest Project, you can certainly our website. Or you can contact IUM project leaders Kara Knight and Jessica Ellison, and we would love to talk about primary sources with you. Thanks so much.