

Historical Sources in the Classroom: Purpose and Use

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Abstract

Historical sources are a common feature of history classrooms, but the purpose of using them is not always clear, and as a result, instructional activities with sources may not be as effective or meaningful as they should be. This lack of clarity stems in part from the fact that there are four distinctly different reasons for using sources, and each carries its own implications for classroom practice. These purposes are 1) illustration and motivation; 2) evidence for historical inquiry; 3) visual or textual interpretation; 4) source analysis. By reflecting on how each of these purposes can play a role in the classroom, which kinds of sources are appropriate for each, and where they fit into an overall sequence of instruction, teachers can ensure that their use of sources deepens and extends students' historical understanding.

All history teachers know they should be using original historical sources—often misleadingly referred to as “primary sources”—but sometimes they are less clear on the purpose of using them. Students encounter original historical sources in textbooks and accompanying exercises, and they may be required to analyze them as part of examinations. But these encounters are not enough to communicate the purpose of including sources in the curriculum, particularly given that they are often difficult to read and understand. In order to have educational value, teachers need to think

carefully about why original historical sources are important, and how their purpose affects their use in the classroom.

Perhaps the lack of clarity about sources stems in part from the fact that there is no single reason for including them, and thus no “right” way of having students engage with them. Rather, there are four distinct purposes for using original historical sources, and each carries its own implications for educators. It is important to think through how these purposes differ and what their role might be in the history classroom.

A note on terminology

Teachers and textbooks often refer to “primary sources” and “secondary sources,” but this is a misleading distinction. Primary sources are sometimes thought of as being directly connected to the historical time period or event being studied; this would include letters or diaries written by people at the time, artwork from the time, government documents, and so on. Secondary sources are thought of either as later interpretations (e.g., the accounts in scholarly articles or textbooks) or as the work of others who were not present (e.g., hearsay from someone who did not directly witness an event).

The problem with this distinction is that educators often conclude that a source can be classified as either primary or secondary without regard to how it is used.

But any source can be a primary source, depending on what purpose it serves. Consider a newspaper article from 1950 about the Maria Hertogh riots: primary or secondary? This comes from the time of the event, so it seems like a primary source, but the reporter may not have been present and instead based the article on the words of others—that makes it seem like a secondary source. The reality is that it can be either, *depending on the question that is asked of it*. If we want to know what happened, it is a secondary source (assuming the reporter was not present). However, if we want to know how newspapers in 1950 covered the event, then it is clearly a primary source—a direct example of what we want to know about.

Similarly, imagine a school textbook from the 1960s about British colonialism in the 19th century. Most people would quickly identify such an account as a secondary source, since it was written long after the event and its author did not directly experience the events. If we wanted to know about British colonialism, this textbook would indeed be a secondary source. However, if we wanted to know how British colonialism was portrayed in the 1960s, then it would be a primary source—it provides direct insight into how people wrote about the topic at the time that we are interested in. All sources are like this—their status as “primary” or “secondary” changes based on what use we put them to. As a result, using a more neutral term like “original historical sources” may help us avoid these confusions.

The four uses of original historical sources

There are four main reasons for using original historical sources in the classroom, and each carries its own implications for

teaching and learning. Moreover, some have deeper and more profound consequences for students’ understanding of history. It is important, therefore, that teachers not simply employ some of each, but that they prioritize their time based on what each can accomplish for students’ learning. These four uses can be classified into two broad groupings, each with two sub-categories: using sources as a means to an end, and using them as ends in themselves.

Sources as a means to an end

Illustration and motivation: One of the simplest and most basic uses of original historical sources is to illustrate points being made in a lesson, often as a way of motivating students to become more engaged with the topic. Even the best textbook writing is not very exciting, and there is no necessary reason that students would become interested in an account of events that happened in the past without something more to inspire them. Without interest, students’ learning is likely to be superficial at best. Therefore, it has become common for texts to include photographs, quotations, or images of artifacts to illustrate the content being discussed. Teachers obviously can supplement these with sources they themselves have located.

Among the most useful sources for motivating students’ interest include those that are produced by people as part of their everyday lives—letters, diaries, memoirs, or other personal accounts. (By contrast, government documents or public speeches by government officials are rarely the kind of sources that will catch students’ attention.) Such accounts can illustrate how an event such as the Japanese occupation affected people’s lives (Wong, 2017), and students can often identify with the ordinary people who created such

sources. This helps students see the events of history as relevant to everyone and not only to the famous people who often form the centerpiece of historical narratives. In addition, personal accounts often include an affective or emotional component, as

people write about how they felt about what was happening to them. (See Figure 1) This also can create even greater interest and further reinforce the subject's relevance.

Figure 1. Memory of Gabrielle Lim's Mama. Singapore Memory Project.

My grandmother or 'Mama', as I call her, was given away to a rich Singaporean family since my Mama's parents were too poor to support a large family. She was only two to three years old then! ...

She was distraught when she was forced to call another family her own but she eventually grew up to love her new family as they treated her very well. "I cried myself to sleep every single night and missed my parents so much," recalled Mama. I could tell that till today, she is still hurt by the fact that she was "the chosen one". I hugged Mama at this point in time. How horrific it must have been for her!

When she grew older, she attended school at CHIJ Katong Convent. At that time, she had to travel to school by trishaw. Whenever it rained, she would be drenched from head to toe! Her favourite food was and still is durian, durian cake and any durian dessert! She was the queen of durian!!! Her favourite games were 'kuti kuti' with metal bottle caps, hopscotch, playing with saga seeds and rubber band games.

<https://www.singaporememory.sg/contents/SMA-a24a575d-6bde-422c-85fa-e2aeec072b2e>

Visual sources can be particularly interesting, and there is a great deal of evidence that students' understanding of history—and particularly their understanding of historical time—is encoded in visual terms (Barton & Levstik, 1996). If we want students to understand when something happened, it is particularly important for them to be able to *see* what that time looked like. The richness of detail in photographs is especially important: architecture, technology, fashion, and the activities of people are all ways to draw students into a photograph. (See Figure 2) By contrast, photographs that are simply portraits of individuals or that feature the exterior of monumental buildings are not especially captivating. Physical objects such as old tools or other pieces of technology—or even photographs of such artifacts—can

also help students visualize past time periods (Levstik & Barton, 2015).

In working with these sources, the first step for teachers is to make sure students understand what they read or see. Helping students comprehend a text (particularly if the language is difficult) or spot details in images is foundational to later learning; we cannot simply assume that they know how to make sense of what they read or see. However, it is also common to spend too much time on this kind of comprehension, and to turn what should be a motivating source into a boring reading exercise. Once students have apprehended the basic context of the text or image, it is important to stimulate their curiosity by having them develop questions about the source, by asking them what they find interesting or puzzling, how it connects to their own

experiences, and what it makes them want to know more about. Such discussion need not be lengthy, but it is an important part

of history lessons. It is this curiosity that makes the source motivating and encourages further engagement in the topic.

Figure 2. First Aid Lesson at St John's Ambulance Brigade, 1953. Donated to Singapore Memory Project by Gan Soh Tin, at the Heritage Roadshow 2008.



(<https://www.singaporememory.sg/contents/SMB-a6ccb64-052b-4c44-8252-ad00ce957f73>)

Evidence for historical inquiry: Perhaps the most important use of original historical sources is as evidence to answer historical questions. This is certainly the purpose that is most often recommended by scholars of history education and that best reflects the work of historians (Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2004). This places sources within a context of inquiry, as students draw on them to reach conclusions about the past. This inductive process inherently involves higher-order thinking, as students must evaluate a variety of sources and synthesize them in order to develop meaningful answers to historical questions, and in the process to construct their own understanding of the time period. If we want students to understand what aspirations Singaporeans

had for the future in the post-WWII period, for example, they can answer that question by reading sources such as newspaper articles, personal writings of people at the time, memories that people later had of the period, and even advertisements or photographs. Such sources will be more richly informative than textbook summaries of the same period.

The 1950s, for example, saw an ongoing struggle over the status of women in Singapore (leading, in part, to the Women's Charter of 1961), as people organized around and debated issues such as discrimination, family planning, and polygamy. Evidence of differing views on these issues can be found in reports of the meetings of local organizations such as the

Singapore Women’s Council, Singapore Family Planning Association, and the Professional Women’s Association; speeches of leaders such as Seow Peck Leng and Shirin Fozdar; letters to the editor in Singapore newspapers; and responses from a variety of community representatives. (See Figure 3) Of course, many other issues also animated Singaporeans during this period—working conditions, race relations, living standards, political independence, and others, and

students’ understanding of each of these will be deeper and more meaningful if they have a chance to engage with the words (and images) of people at the time. Sources of evidence on these topics can be found in archives such as Singapore’s National Library Board newspaper search (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/>), the National Archives of Singapore (<http://www.nas.gov.sg/>), and the Singapore Memory Project (<https://www.singaporememory.sg/>).

Figure 3. “Women hail one-wife plan,” *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1959, p. 7



Reaching conclusions from such evidence necessarily requires that students evaluate the sources they encounter. The issue is not (as many students mistakenly assume) a matter of a source's "reliability"; no one created these sources in order to fool students or historians of the future. Instead, with careful guidance from their teachers, students should consider what they can and cannot conclude from a given source, and how to use a set of sources to reach answers to their question (as historians do). If a newspaper reports the speech of a leader, it is almost certain that such a speech took place; but students have to consider how the context, and the social position of the speaker, affected how the speaker represented the topic, as well as what decisions the newspaper may have made about what to include. We cannot conclude from a single speech or other response what "all Singaporeans" believed, nor what members of any community within Singapore thought. But by drawing together a variety of pieces of evidence, from different sources (and different *kinds* of sources), students can reach some tentative and qualified conclusions about the range of ideas that were part of the struggle over women's status or other issues in the 1950s—and this is precisely what historians do.

Using sources as evidence to reach conclusions about historical questions is important not only because it mirrors the work of historians. It is more fundamentally important because it helps students develop an understanding of what knowledge is—not only historical knowledge, but all empirical knowledge. Our understanding of the past, like our understanding of the social and natural worlds, is always an interpretation of the evidence we encounter. The conclusions we reach about history are never certain, and they do not proceed from any direct access to the past; instead, their credibility

depends on the extent to which they are based on a range of available sources and on how well the usefulness and limitations of those sources have been evaluated. If students do not understand this, then they will not understand the nature of history (or of any subject); and they can only understand it by taking part in the process of historical inquiry themselves.

Guiding students through this process is obviously complicated and time-consuming. Sometimes students should develop their own questions, and teachers must help them identify questions that can be answered through available evidence. Even if the questions are set for them, teachers have to help students understand what kinds of sources are available to answer those questions, and more importantly, how to evaluate sources in light of the questions. Asking students to critically examine a source in order to determine what can, and cannot, be learned from them is a laborious process, and so is the task of developing supportable conclusions. It is much easier—and more tempting—to simply tell students what happened, or to resort to using sources as illustrations of predetermined conclusions rather than having them reach their own conclusions. But although "telling" seems to save time, it is ultimately a *waste* of time, because it misrepresents what history is all about. Teachers need not engage students in inquiry for every topic they encounter; however, if teachers never expose their classes to this use of sources, then they are preventing students from understanding the subject meaningfully.

Sources as ends in themselves

Visual or textual interpretation. Some historical sources, such as important works of art, architecture, literature, and so on, are so rich in meaning that we want students to interpret them on their own

terms. Such sources could also be used for motivation or as evidence, but on occasion we want students to set aside these external uses and delve deeply into how their creators have structured them and the meanings they aim to convey. Motivational speeches are a prominent example of this use: By examining speeches and writing by inspirational leaders such as Malcolm X (e.g., “The Ballet or the Bullet,” <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/mx.html>) or Martin Luther King, Jr. (e.g., “Beyond Vietnam,” http://www.aavw.org/protest/homepage_king_beyond.html), students can explore how they use evocative language, deeply embedded cultural themes, and a variety of rhetorical devices to engage with their audiences and convey their messages. (By contrast, a policy-oriented speech by a government official may not convey any such richness and would not be appropriate for this use.) Often, such analysis takes the form of a Socratic seminar, a “method of shared inquiry into the ideas, issues, and values expressed in powerful works of art, literature, and music” (Parker, 2003, p. 55).

Similarly, students may examine a painting in order to better understand how the artist has portrayed a person or scene. They can explore how the use of color and texture, for example, affects the feeling that the painting conveys, or how the composition draws attention to particular actions and details. Students studying post-World War II Singapore, for instance, could compare *National Language Class* (1959) by Chua Mia Tee, and *Picking* (1955) by Tay Kok Wee. (See Figures 4 and 5) How do the posture and placement of individuals in the two paintings suggest different moods, and how does the

differing use of color contribute to these feelings? Why has Chua chosen to use a great deal of light in much of the painting, while Tay emphasizes darker hues more uniformly? What segments of society are suggested by the dress and appearance of individuals in the two paintings? Given the time period, what is the significance of the questions written on the board in Chua’s painting, and of the economic activities in Tay’s? Even small details can be important: Why might Tay have exaggerated the size of some individuals’ feet? Overall, what are the artists suggesting about the present and future of Singapore at the time?

Note that unlike the first two uses, interpreting sources on their own terms requires that students *already* have an understanding of the topic or the time period. Students will only be able to interpret a literary or artistic source if they understand the context in which it was produced; the goal is for students to interpret how its creator was influenced by and engaged with his or her social and cultural setting, and this means having a prior understanding of that setting. Teachers will also need to help students understand rhetorical and artistic conventions, and while these may not be a part of all teachers’ training, such insights are crucial to understanding history. Art, architecture, literature, and public speeches are a large part of what history *is*, and without understanding them, students will have missed out on much of the meaning and purpose of studying the subject. As a result of their interpretation, students should come away with an even deeper understanding of the setting and a greater sense of how history can engage the imagination.

Figure 4. *National Language Class (1959)* by Chua Mia Tee. Oil on canvas, 112 x 153cm. Collection of National Gallery of Singapore



Figure 5. *Picking (1955)* by Tay Kok Wee. Oil on canvas, 100 x 94.5cm. Collection of National Gallery of Singapore.



Source analysis. In isolation, this is the least important way of using historical sources, but unfortunately it is also one of the most common. In this approach, students are presented with a source (or sometimes a set of sources) and asked to “analyze” them. This often involves identifying who wrote the source, the purpose it served, and whether it is “biased” or “reliable.” Identifying who created a source and for what purpose is an indispensable part of all historical understanding, and having students analyze sources in this way certainly seems more feasible and efficient than difficult and time-consuming inquiry or interpretation exercises. However, when sources are isolated in this way, their use sends a number of misleading and unproductive messages, both pedagogically and historically.

The first of these is that, like all “skills” exercises, it can be both boring and superficial. Each of the other purposes for historical sources capitalizes on their potential to involve students in deep and motivated learning. But by removing sources from any other context and requiring students to answer a series of rote questions about them, this use turns potentially fascinating historical work into a textbook-like exercise that students may dutifully complete, but that fails either to engage their interest or to provide insight into the nature of history and historical investigation. British educators, who have long experience with the use of sources in the classroom, refer to this approach as “death by sources A-F” (Counsell, 1998, p. 3).

Not every school exercise can be exciting, of course, but every exercise certainly must enable students to learn important content. And educators frequently assume that source analysis models the work of historians and thus

represents important content. But no historian is ever *presented* with sources the way students are presented with them in this kind of exercise. That is, historians do not stumble across a set of documents and then start asking who wrote them, why, and whether they are reliable. Rather, historians begin with a question they want to investigate, and then they *seek out* the sources that will allow them to answer those questions. If they want to know about gender roles in post-WWII Singapore, for example, they will look for personal correspondence, advertisements, memoirs, court proceeding (e.g., divorce cases), and other sources that will give them insight into this. They are not *presented* with sources which they then begin to analyze; instead, they begin by identifying which evidence will be useful and then seek it out.

Confusing the order in which historians do their work may not seem especially important, but it is related to a more fundamental issue: The misconception that sources should be evaluated for “bias” or “reliability.” This implies that some sources are objective and unbiased, and the historian’s job is to find those and discard all others in order to get at the truth. But historians do not evaluate sources for bias in this way, and they certainly do not reject sources because of their bias. The bias of sources can only be determined with regard to a question (i.e., as part of the process of inquiry); a source in itself cannot be biased, and its potential and limitations only become clear once a question is asked of it.

Consider speeches made by leaders of the PAP or Barisan Sosialis in the 1960s. If we want to know what life was like in 1960s Singapore in the 1960s, these provide limited evidence, because their authors are making particular claims in support of their political positions; they

would not be useless (and therefore should not be rejected as “biased”), but they would have to be combined with a wide variety of other sources in order to answer the question. However, if what we want to know is how the ideology of each party affected the way they portrayed life in Singapore, then they are outstanding sources—and they are useful precisely *because* of their bias, not in spite of it: A historian who wants to understand political portrayals of life in Singapore would have chosen these speeches for exactly that reason. Determining the usefulness and limitations of a source (much better terms than “bias” or “reliability”) can only be established within a context of inquiry—that is, when sources are used as evidence to answer a historical question. Source analysis can only be meaningful when combined with the use of sources as evidence; removing from that context makes such exercises meaningless.

Conclusions

Teachers have limited time, and students have limited attention. Making effective use of original historical sources, then, is critical. Yet although some approaches may seem to constitute a pragmatic use of time—such as source analysis exercises or illustrative quotations and images found in the margins of texts—they can actually be counter-productive because they too often fail to achieve important educational purposes. The kinds of sources that are used to illustrate past events or time periods, for example, must be carefully chosen to inspire students’ interest, and students must be given a chance to puzzle over them and develop their own questions and ideas about the period. The time for doing this in depth is at the beginning of a set of lessons, although briefer encounters with sources that stimulate interest may be sprinkled throughout a unit.

The core approach to the use of sources in the history classroom must revolve around their use as evidence within a context of inquiry—asking and answering historical questions. This is how historians use sources, and it develops students’ understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed. Using sources as evidence for complicated questions can be time-consuming, and teachers are unlikely to use this approach for every topic they cover (although simpler but still meaningful inquiry projects can also be devised). However, students must have a chance to engage in such inquiry *sometimes*, or else they will fail to understand what it means to construct knowledge of the past, and they will be left to simply remember narratives told to them by teachers or texts—hardly the kind of higher-level thinking that the subject demands. Less frequent but still crucial is the use of sources as objects of interpretation, as teachers and students look at one or two sources in depth, usually after they have already taken part in the kind of extended study of the time period that will enable them to engage in such interpretation meaningfully. This asks a lot for teachers, but using original historical sources in these ways helps ensure that students come away not only with a deep understanding of historical content but an appreciation of how historical knowledge is constructed.

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