27 Using Primary Documents in Social Studies and History

Ruth W. Sandwell

Teachers are increasingly urged to include primary documents—records or evidence of the past created in the past—in their teaching of history and social studies. Primary documents have clear advantages over textbook accounts. Historical documents such as diaries, photographs, letters, and even house-by-house census manuscripts provide personal points of entry into history. They can offer eye-opening perspectives for students who believe that history is impersonal and therefore irrelevant to their lives. Criminal trials, inquests, and newspapers offer a sense of immediacy about the past, providing students with a window on history that is more urgent and interesting than textbook histories. However, the usefulness of primary documents is not limited to their ability to entertain students. Initially engaged by the immediacy or personal nature of primary documents, many teachers use primary sources as a "hook" to draw students into historical thinking. In the process of thinking critically about these documents, students develop a deeper understanding of the content—the larger events, themes, and issues of history—in meaningful ways that are likely to be remembered beyond the final exam. Students who learn to use primary documents effectively learn how to "do" history like historians, interpreting evidence to piece together a narrative of historical explanation and to make richer sense of the everyday world around them.

Despite these advantages, their potential is not always realized for at least three reasons:

- difficulties in finding useful documents,
- challenges in using documents to advance an already crowded curriculum,
- uncertainty about how to teach students to analyze them critically.

I address each of these challenges, providing suggestions for finding and using primary documents effectively. I conclude by arguing that use of primary documents is not only possible for busy teachers who need to meet specific curriculum requirements, but also central to the very reasons for teaching history.

The "What" and "Where" of Primary Documents

Teachers are often uncertain about what constitutes a primary source, what kinds of information primary documents contain, or where to find historical documents appropriate for classroom use. This section defines primary documents and explores the particular benefits that primary documents can offer to teachers of social studies and history. I provide examples of how historians use historical documents, and where they might be found.

DEFINING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Primary documents are those records created in the past, at or close to the time under study, that have survived into the present. Historians have traditionally used a wide variety of written records, from personal diaries created by a child to statistical records kept by government departments, as the foundation for their historical investigations. More recently, historians have been drawing on non-document records, including photographs, moving pictures, the spoken word, and even architectural plans or botanical (plant) inventories to find clues about how people lived in the past. All of these primary documents are, in an important sense, the "raw materials" that historians work with as they attempt to figure out what happened in the past, and what it means to us in the present.

Ultimately, primary documents are our sole sources of

evidence about the past. But what they reveal depends on the questions that historians ask. For example, statistics about factory wages in Canada in 1914 might be used by a historian to prove any number of conclusions, including the following:

- women were paid less than men,
- the economy in Canada was in a slump in that year,
- Montreal was the leading manufacturing centre in Canada in the pre-war years,
- the Canadian government was more interested in factory work (since it collected these kinds of statistics) than it was in child-raising practices (about which few statistics were collected).

As the historian E.H. Carr explains in his famous book, *What is History*?:

> The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean, and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two facts being, of course, determined by what kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kinds of facts he wants (1961, 23).

The uses to which primary sources can be put, in other words, have as much to do with the questions asked by the historian using them as they do with the "facts" they contain.

IDENTIFYING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

There are literally millions of potentially usable primary documents. Fortunately, school boards, ministries of education, and other educational organizations have compiled collections and lists of primary documents. It is well worth the time to examine these sources. Many of these guides to primary sources are available online.

In Table 27.1 are listed examples of primary documents routinely used by historians, with a brief description of what they contain, and suggestions about where you might find them.

TABLE 27.1 COMMON DOCUMENTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

KIND OF RECORD	DESCRIPTION	WHERE TO FIND THEM
Family records	Personal letters, diaries, family photographs, newspaper cuttings, inventories of possessions, clothing.	Attics, basements, shoe boxes, archives, museums, historical societies.
Census records	A wide variety of information about individuals and families, household by household, before 1901 across Canada, including age, marital status, place of birth, ethnicity, date of immigration to Canada, income, and employment. The aggregate data (the "counting up" of the information in the household census material) is available for all censuses.	The government of Canada protects individual information on the Census of Canada for 94 years and makes it available to the public in archives and online after that time period. Aggregate (non-individual) data is available as soon it is generated by Stats Canada, which has also compiled historical statistics for public and educational use on their website at http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/11-516-XIE/sectiona/toc.htm.
Wills and probate files	Provincial governments across Canada obtained and preserved in their archives copies of all wills that were legally registered. They contain information about the individual, as well as family and community relations, and property. Probate files, created when a will is put into effect, provide detailed information about the deceased person's financial status, including lists of possessions.	Provincial and local archives.
Cemetery records	Cemetery headstones often contain a wealth of information about individuals and the families and communities in which they lived.	Local historical societies are good places to find listings or "rubbings" of cemetery stones. Many offer cemetery tours.

TABLE 27.1 COMMON DOCUMENTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM (CONT.)

KIND OF RECORD	DESCRIPTION	WHERE TO FIND THEM
Birth and death records	The federal and provincial governments have been keeping track of vital statistics (records of births and deaths) and publishing these statistics in annual reports in the Vital Statistics portions of the Sessional Papers for over 140 years. These records provide information about individual family members, but also provide a lot of statistical information that helps us understand how people lived and how and why they died.	National registers are now available for much of Canada online from some provincial archives and the National Archives of Canada (www.archives.ca); for earlier time periods, and particularly in Quebec, parish records of births, marriages, and deaths can be found in churches, local historical societies, or church archives.
Old maps	Useful for understanding how a place and the people in it have changed, and what remains the same.	Local, provincial, and national archives; local historical societies; museums; a variety of online sources.
Photographs and moving images	Rich source of information about and impressions of people, places, and events.	Personal papers; local, provincial, and national archives.
Household artifacts	Items in use in everyday life in the past can provide real insights into how people lived before electricity or indoor plumbing.	Flea markets, second-hand stores, church bazaars, basements, museums, local historical societies.
Newspapers	Historic newspapers provide an up-close view of particular events as seen at the time. Each edition also provides a snapshot of news, local events, advertising, and letters to the editor that can provide great insight into local as well as national and international views.	Newspapers are available on microfilm and online through most municipal and university libraries. Indexed newspapers are the easiest to use, because you can search by topic through time. Ask the librarian or archivist for an index list.
Court records	Criminal trials, inquests, depositions, and civil cases provide an excellent view of conflicts in society, and what people thought of them.	Provincial or national archives.
Historical textbooks	A number of university libraries across the country have collections of textbooks used in elementary and secondary schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.	University libraries, school archives, local museums and archives.
Military records	There are a wide variety of records pertaining to the military and war generally. They can include enlistment and war pension information.	Department of National Defense, national archives.
Business and industry records	Business records can provide detailed information about the kinds of industry in Canada, as well as information about work and employment conditions experienced by people in the past. Many Canadian towns are or have been single resource communities, and company records may provide detailed information about the wider community, its problems, and its successes.	Records of local and national businesses may have been deposited in local, provincial, or national archives. Occasionally, businesses themselves create and maintain their own archives that are open to the public (such as Rogers Sugar in Vancouver).
Local government records	These records are generally the official records created in the running of a municipal or local government. They can reveal a wealth of information about a community, from police records to agricultural fairs to protests against commercial development to welfare rolls.	Municipal or local archives.

LOCATING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS ONLINE

The internet is largely responsible for the recent burst of interest in primary documents in teaching. Before documents were available online, researchers had to visit archives in person, and hunt through multiple card catalogues. Prior to large scale computerization of primary documents, educational publishers assembled small selections of primary documents useful in teaching, the most famous being the "Jackdaws" series. Jackdaws provided file folders with reproductions of a variety of primary sources—letters, photographs, government reports—about a particular issue or event, and students were guided through their interpretation with supporting materials. Finding primary documents has become much easier now that many archival documents are available—and fully indexed—online. At the end of this chapter is an extensive list of searchable databases of primary documents useful in secondary school teaching in Canada, and many provide grade-appropriate online support materials.[1]

> Identify a topic in the curriculum dealing with a historical event or person. Think of three kinds of primary document that you might use as an entry point to raise important themes connected with the historical topic you have identified. List several questions to ask students to guide them in thinking about the bigger issues raised by each kind of document.

The "How" and "When" of Primary Documents

Before discussing how and when primary documents might be most effectively used in the classroom, a more general point needs to be emphasized. Primary sources are the *only* authentic connections between the past and the present. Without evidence available in the present that is "left over" from the past, we have no sure way of knowing "what happened" or what it meant. Professional historians may have greater skill at finding and interpreting evidence from the past than other people, and they certainly have a greater knowledge of how other historians have used the available evidence, but, in the end, all historians "do" is to interpret evidence from the past available through primary documents, usually in the context of what other historians have written. While history is generally defined as "the story of the past" or "what really happened"—as a finished product, as a fixed body of knowledge—the study of primary documents introduces students to the idea that history is not simply "what happened." Instead, they learn that history is *an active process of developing knowledge, an act of interpretation.* As one of my student teachers put it, using primary documents in the history and social studies classroom teaches students that history is a verb, not a noun.

INTRODUCING THE IDEA OF PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Students need time and practice to get used to the idea that history is a contextualized dialogue about evidence (usually written documents) from the past, and that students can participate in that dialogue, if only as beginners, by finding and analyzing primary documents. Students need to learn, in other words, how to engage critically with the evidence contained in primary documents, and to recognize that this activity is "doing" history. The following activities illustrate some of the ways to introduce students to the role of primary documents in the construction of history:

- ask students to keep a record of the documents they create in a given week, of the "traces" that they are leaving behind for future historians to find (phone message, e-mail, homework);
- arrange for students to create a journal, diary, or short essay that they might leave for historians of the future;
- get students to create a "time capsule" that best represents their lives, the lives of their family, or their school;
- invite students to write a history of their lives or of their family based only on the documentary evidence available in their home.

The highlighted text, "Seeing Myself in the Future's Past," describes in detail an activity to introduce students to the idea that primary documents are the "raw materials" or the building blocks on which they can base their interpretations of the past.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EMBEDDING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Of all the reasons given for not using primary documents in the classroom, concerns about curriculum coverage are the most frequently heard. Many teachers feel that primary document analysis is simply too time-consuming within an already overcrowded curriculum. It can seem impossible to take the time necessary to examine a primary document about a particular issue or event when there is so much other information to cover. Moreover, many teachers may be uncertain how to use primary sources to their full advantage, as ways of teaching content knowledge, research skills, and critical thinking.

Although most teachers feel constrained by curriculum

SEEING MYSELF IN THE FUTURE'S PAST

Introduce the following scenario to students:
A historian of the twenty-third century, feeling that teenagers have been misunderstood through time, wants to write a history of teenagers. The historian wants to know about all aspects of teenage life, from work, family life, and formal education to leisure activities, social life, and personal issues of concern to the twenty-first century teenager. Explain that while historians read a lot of things written by other historians, the books and articles they write are based on their own research into evidence created in the past—called primary documents—that have been preserved into the present. Students are to suggest answers to the following question:

> What records will the students in the class have left behind that this historian might use to understand teenage life? What records about their life will have been created and might be preserved for that historian to find?

Record their responses on the board, encouraging students, if needed, with the following suggestions. Issues to raise about the creation or preservation of each source are in parentheses.

- diaries and journals (Who will keep them? Will they make it into a public archives, as hundreds of thousands have in the past?)
- e-mails (Will they be preserved? Will they be machine-readable in the future?)
- credit card bills (Where will they be stored? Will historians have access to them?)
- home movies (Will the technology still exist to view them?)
- photographs (Who will preserve them? Will they be in public archives?)
- school records stored by the school and then by the provincial archives, as required by law (Who will have access to them in the future? If they are kept by individuals, who will preserve them and who will have access to them?)
- school work (How will this be preserved?)
- clothing (How will someone in the future understand what the clothing "means"?)
- music (How will someone in the future understand what the music means? Will the technology exist to listen to it?)
- court records—juvenile court records may become part of the public domain after 100 years
- census records—every Canadian will appear on the census if they are in Canada in a census year, even though their individual information will not be available to historians for 96 years
- birth, marriage, and death records (What might these tell someone in the future about teenage life—AIDS statistics, car accidents, teenage pregnancy?).

In pairs, ask students to rank the three sources from the list that will be most useful to the historian wanting to learn about teenagers in the early twenty-first century. Explain how to complete the chart below using one source (e-mails, Visa bills, photographs) as an example.

After completing the chart, arrange for each group to present its best sources to the class. Discuss the limits and potential misrepresentations that arise when historians draw conclusions from the available sources that may be partial and incomplete. As an extension, invite students to identify the very worst source for representing their lives, and to write a one-page history based on that source. Debrief how this would misrepresent their lives.

SOURCE	WHAT WILL THE HISTORIAN LEARN ABOUT ME?	WHAT INFERENCES ABOUT TEENAGE LIFE MIGHT THE HISTORIAN DRAW FROM THIS EVIDENCE?
Best source:		
Second best:		
Third best:		

requirements, Canadian history and social studies teachers have considerably more freedom in their selection of materials within the curriculum than do most other teachers. Teachers are more likely to find the time and enhance their coverage of the curriculum if they attend to four principles when embedding primary documents in their teaching.

ILLUSTRATE MORE THAN ONE CURRICULAR THEME, ISSUE, OR EVENT

Primary documents must be explicitly connected to the broad themes in the curriculum. When choosing a primary document, teachers should ask themselves (and their students) what "big idea" the source represents. In fact, the most effective primary sources will address multiple objectives within the curriculum. For example, an examination of World War I posters might allow students to explore various themes from Canadian history and identity from nationalism to women's participation in society to conscription to regionalism. Finding primary documents that illuminate several issues or events helps to allay fears that document analysis takes up too much time because it is covering too little subject matter. The strategy in Figure 27.1 is useful in helping students draw insights from primary documents about an individual's

FIGURE 27.1 IDENTIFYING PERSPECTIVES

Provide two supporting reasons from the historical documents for each rating.

LOYALTY TO CANADA	
5 *strongly unpatriotic* — **4** — **3** — **2** — **1** *strongly patriotic*	
Clues from the document	**Possible conclusions**
•	•
•	•
Questions	
VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION	
5 *very welcoming* — **4** — **3** — **2** — **1** *highly restrictive*	
Clues from the document	**Possible conclusions**
•	•
•	•
Questions	
ECONOMIC VALUES	
5 *strongly socialist* — **4** — **3** — **2** — **1** *strongly capitalist*	
Clues from the document	**Possible conclusions**
•	•
•	•
Questions	

or groups' perspectives on a range of topics. Students are expected to look for clues in a primary document that suggest how a particular individual or group might have felt about the identified issues.

USE PRIMARY DOCUMENTS TO ADD VALUE TO EXISTING RESOURCES

Primary documents work best when they add value to existing resources in at least two ways:

- **enhance content knowledge:** add value to the textbook and other resources by exemplifying, extending, or even contradicting key facts in the textbook.
- **engage students:** draw students into a topic by presenting an immediate and often vivid and dramatic perspective on a topic.

A letter describing life in the trenches at Passchendaele can reinforce "facts" about World War I, and a testimonial about child labour in a nineteenth-century factory will help

PERSONALIZING THE PAST

Typical textbook account of Jewish immigrants (1930–1948)

During the 1930s, "isolationism"—the desire by many Canadians not to get involved in European conflicts—became very strong. The economic collapse, or Great Depression, that occurred in this decade resulted in the Canadian government taking measures to prevent immigration into Canada. Many Jews who wanted to escape persecution in Nazi Germany were refused entry into Canada during this time. In one instance, 907 Jewish refugees aboard the *S.S. St. Louis* were refused entry into Canada. The ship was forced to return to Nazi Europe. Between 1933 and 1945 Canada admitted only 5,000–8,000 refugees, the worst record of any large non-European country (Misfeldt and Case 2002, 74).

Excerpt from an interview with Mariette Rozen, a Jewish war orphan who arrived in Canada in 1947 (reported in Miller 1997).

Mariette Rozen

Arrival in Canada

I arrived in Canada on December 2, 1947. I was twelve years old but with the mind of an old person. I wore a name tag, pinned to my coat with a safety pin. We went into a building with bars on the window. It looked like a prison to me and I worried that I had done something wrong. We had been told that Canada was a free country and that we would be welcome, but when we arrived, we were guarded like we were in a prison camp.

What they put us through when we arrived in Halifax was terrible. The customs officers took everything we had, and we were too afraid to mention this to anyone. I still had a little diamond ring that my sister Sara had given me, and I tried to hide it. Throughout the entire war I had saved the ring. They removed the diamond, took my money and loose coins. I think the custom officers took advantage of us but we didn't want to make trouble so none of us ever reported those things. Finally, after they examined us, we were put on a train across Canada. On January 3, 1948 we arrived at the train station at the foot of Granville Street in downtown Vancouver.

Becoming Canadian

I had no expectations about what Canada would be like, none. For a long time afterwards, I wanted to hide who I was and where I had come from. I didn't want to associate with other survivors, because I did not want to be identified as a survivor. My siblings and I were like strangers. Because we had been separated throughout the war, we were not bonded like most families. We loved each other but we seemed to have nothing in common. That's what the war did to us. To this day, I have trouble trusting people.

We were all worried about who we were going to live with in Canada. When we arrived in Vancouver I was separated from my sister and brothers. We all went to live in different homes. I went to live with my foster parents, Joe and Minnie Satanov, who were childless. When Mr. Satanov came to the train station and saw me, he said, "I want that little girl." The social worker Jean Rose, took me to their great big house. Mrs. Satanov was in the kitchen ironing and didn't even look my way when I arrived. I knew right then that she didn't want me but I had no choice and I was too tired. They took me to my room and Jean Rose said good-bye. I asked for Esther's, Jacques' and Henri's phone number and I called them right away and told them to come and get me.

students remember key issues about employers and employees, long after the textbook section on war or industrialization has been forgotten. So too, primary documents can engage students in issues as arcane and seemingly remote as Canadian confederation debates and the conscription crisis by expressing a sense of urgency or representing the issues in very personal ways.

The use of primary documents to enrich information found in textbooks and to provide a gripping hook to draw students into the topic is illustrated in the highlighted text, "Personalizing the Past." It suggests supplementing a typical secondary account of Canada's response to attempts by European Jews to escape Nazi persecution with a young Jewish girl's autobiographical account of her arrival in Canada just after the war. As you read both accounts, image the deficiency in students' appreciation of the meaning of Canada's response if they had read solely the textbook account.

MAKE THE TEXT AND CONTEXT ACCESSIBLE TO STUDENTS

Historians best describe their work as being about "text" and "context." "Text" does not refer to textbooks, but to the primary documents that they use as the sources of evidence about the past. "Context" refers to the material other historians and writers have written and published on the historical topic. The challenges of historical text and context are vexing to social studies and history teachers: How can we help students learn to read the primary document for literal meaning and acquire the background knowledge about the topic they need in order to make sense of and contextualize what they are reading? The more students understand the text and historical context, the better equipped they are to benefit from use of primary documents. The activity in the highlighted text, "Pre-Reading Historical Documents," illustrates a strategy for preparing students to read a primary document by inviting them to anticipate its contents based on the clues found in a list of key vocabulary provided by the teacher. Other ideas for tools to help students interpret cartoons, photographs, maps, and other primary documents are found in the Learning Centre Toolkit available on the Library and Archives Canada website (www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/education/008-3000-e.html).

The more knowledgeable a teacher is about the subject, the easier it is to select appropriate documents and to provide the context that will help him or her use these documents to advance the curriculum. Teachers who are worried about providing adequate background context might want to purchase a university level textbook for the period covered by the course they are teaching.

PRE-READING HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS[2]

Prior to sharing a primary document for students to interpret, invite them to anticipate its contents based on key terms you have extracted from the document. Make a list of 15 to 20 words that are key to interpreting the text or will be difficult for students to understand. Explain any words from the list that are unfamiliar to students. Invite students to use the words to anticipate the contents of an as-yet-unseen document. Indicate that they are to use five questions known as R.A.F.T.S. (Role, Audience, Format, Topic, Strong Verb) to guide their investigation:

R the **role** from which the author created the document (for example, a government official, a concerned citizen, a business leader, someone with much or little power)
A the **audience** for whom the writing was intended (for example, themselves, the writer's peers, the general public, a social superior, a government official)
F the **format** in which the document was written (for example, official letter, formal essay, post card, diary)
T the **topic** about which the document is written (for example, a recent event, problems in the community, plans for the future)
S a **strong verb** that best captures the tone or overall purpose of the document (for example, plead, persuade, complain, inform).

Encourage students to answer as many as possible of the R.A.F.T.S. questions using the list of key words as clues. Invite students to summarize their preliminary conclusions about the document using the following structure:

I think ____________ *role* ____________ created
a ____________ *format* ____________ about
____________ *topic* ____________ to
____________ *strong verb* ____________ directed
to ____________ *audience* ____________.

Encourage students to support their tentative conclusions with evidence and to challenge alternative interpretations presented by others in the class. Students are now ready to view the actual document and assess their conclusions about its contents.

INVITE CRITICAL THINKING, NOT JUST RECITATION OF FACTS

Unfortunately, primary historical documents are often used to emphasize only superficial and the most accessible aspects of the documents, and leave untapped the documents' deeper potential to stimulate critical thinking and historical understanding. Recent research suggests that students are most comfortable using primary documents—particularly those available on the world wide web—to simply get to the answer that they think the teacher wants as quickly as possible. When

designing lessons that use primary documents, teachers can best use their potential to stimulate critical thinking by asking students questions that do not simply require them to find particular pieces of information, or come up with a single right answer. Instead, lessons should be framed that require students to think critically by offering a judgment based on criteria.

One way to promote critical thinking is to provide students with more than one primary document to analyze. This allows us to invite students to assess the relative merits of various records. For example, students might compare the representation of a single event in three different sources—a newspaper, a trial record, and a diary—and decide which account provides the clearest picture of life at the time under study. They might compare the coverage of a single event in three different newspapers. Alternatively, we might ask students to draw conclusion about an event based on several sources. As Figure 27.2 illustrates, students might be asked to analyze letters to the editor, statistical data, and Hansard records in an attempt to understand historical attempts to support bilingualism in Canada.

The "Why"of Using Primary Documents

While many teachers appreciate the interest and enthusiasm that primary documents stimulate in their students, there remains a lingering uncertainty about just what, exactly, the study of primary documents accomplishes in the history classroom. If history is a narrative about facts already

FIGURE 27.2 USING MULTIPLE SOURCES

In 1927, the post office issued bilingual stamps to commemorate Canada's sixtieth anniversary, and continued to do so. In 1934, R.B. Bennett created the Bank of Canada and authorized the printing of bank notes in either French or English. In 1936, Mackenzie King decided that the bank should end this practice and provide bilingual bank notes in both French and English. Based on the historical documents, argue whether or not Canada should have adopted bilingual currency in 1936.

Document #1

It is an insult to any loyal Protestant to think that every time we post a letter we have to lick a bilingual postage stamp, and every time we buy a postcard or money order, we are insulted by the French language being given equal prominence with English. . . . If the French get away with this it will not be long before they will give us bilingual coins and Federal bills.

Letter to the editor, The Sentinel and Orange and Protestant Advocate, *Chatham ON, March 14, 1929*

Document #2

Are official bilingualism and the equality of the races in the Constitution rights or are they myths? Are they legal and political realities or simply oratorical devices for the first day of July for naive French Canadians? If the contract of 1867 was not a fool's bargain, why does a single race reserve for itself the rights to use its own language, and nothing but its own, on one of the principal official documents which affirms at home and abroad the national character of the state.

L' Action Nationale, *Montreal, February 1933*

Document #3

Ethnic breakdown of population

Ethnic Origin	*Percent*
French	28%
English	26%
Scottish	13%
Irish	12%
German	5%
Scandinavian	2%
Hebrew	2%
Ukrainian	2%
Other	10%

Canadian Census, *1931*

Document #4

I have been amazed . . . to see this house spending a day and a half discussing what to many people in Canada is a very trivial aspect of this bill. . . . I cannot help feeling that if the hon. members had used as much energy and as much heat in getting money into the pockets of the people as they have in worrying about the language in which the money is printed, we would be a great deal further ahead. Being a Scotsman, I am glad to get a dollar whether it is printed in Siamese or Chinese, provided I can buy something with it.

T.C. Douglas, House of Commons Debates, *June 16, 1936*

"discovered" and interpreted by expert historians, what is the point of asking students, with their limited experience and knowledge, to examine documents from the past? Isn't the analysis of primary documents more "busy work" added to the real work of the course as a diversion or entertainment for the students (Barton 2005)?

In his well-known study, Samuel Wineburg (1991) asked students and historians to think aloud as they read historical texts, both primary and secondary. He noted that whereas historians entered into a complex dialogue with the multiple meanings of the text, students were usually able to marshal only one kind of question about what they were reading: is it true? With little familiarity with primary documents, without the appropriate background information, and without an understanding of the processes of critical inquiry, students were unable to engage in discussions of how to construct historical knowledge from the documents.

Wineburg's research helped to promote the use of primary documents in history classrooms, but recent research suggests that they are seldom used to promote critical inquiry. With proper instruction, researchers such as Keith Barton (1997), Stella Weinert (2001), and Bruce Van Sledright (2002) have demonstrated, students as young as 7 years old are able to learn and apply sophisticated understandings of historical selection and construction, learning to deal with complex narratives and conflicting evidence. However, even when students have been taught how to interpret documents critically, they are often reluctant to use these skills.

Instead, students often prefer to follow the path of least resistance in getting to the answer that they think the teacher wants. As Barton (1997) notes, "rather than evaluating information from multiple sources, students move directly to search engines to find the sites they thought would give them all the necessary information to accomplish the task." Even after intensive training sessions where students have demonstrated their skills at evaluating complex historical evidence, students are more likely to give whatever answer they think the teacher wants by guessing at an answer, justifying their answer by saying "I just kinda know."

One of the reasons for this unwillingness to think critically about history appears to be a deep attachment by many students to the belief that history is, quite simply, not about the process of interpretation, but about facts, information, and absolute knowledge. While some students demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the past as a constructed narrative, the vast majority accept the past as a given or as simply inaccessible. For these students, critical inquiry is seen as irrelevant to the study of history.

While students are capable of critical analysis, students tend to revert when approaching historical documents to one question: Is it true? (Wineburg 1991; Grant and VanSledright 2001). Since no account *could possibly* be unequivocally true, students' attempts to analyze primary documents as "the truth" or "the facts" immediately collapse. What they collapse into, most commonly, is attempts to discover the primary document's bias (Seixas 1998; Barton 1997). Bias has the advantage for students and many teachers of looking like both a foundational truth ("every point of view is biased") and a tool for critical inquiry ("by uncovering the bias, we can critically examine the truth behind the document").

Discussions of bias, though certainly valuable in some areas of historical study, when applied to the study of primary documents usually serve only to reduce students' potential for understanding history. This is because bias is used to describe the very things that need to be explained in critical historical inquiry: What are the factors that can explain why the author of the primary document represented the world the way he or she did? What were the economic forces, social influences, historical chronology, family situations, ethnic origin, or gender and age factors that made the world look the way it did for the person creating that document? Examined through the lens of "bias," the complexities of historical interpretation get reduced to simplistic and stereotyped impressions about the self-interest of the person who created the document.

Once students identify the bias of the document's creator, they believe that they have satisfied the requirements of critical analysis. Students routinely declare the document biased and conclude that it is therefore unworthy of consideration (Wineburg 1991). Discussion then moves on to another topic. When students are challenged about the usefulness of the term "bias," they typically declare, with some frustration, that it is, after all, impossible to find a single truth about what happened, and so every interpretation can only be "just his or her own opinion" (Barton 1997).

For these students, then, at an important level, historical knowledge is not so much irrelevant as impossible to obtain. Their encounters with primary documents represent a process of swinging wildly between two opposite and mutually contradictory beliefs: the complete belief in the single coherent truth tantalizingly implied by the word "bias," and a belief in the impossibility of any knowledge, underwritten by a kind of relativism (Grant and Van Sledright 2001). Historians, I would argue, spend their days contemplating how we negotiate that livable and comprehensible middle ground between complete relativism and absolute truth. How to do this defines the discipline of history.

Given the emphasis on "the facts" and history as a single truth, it is really not surprising that North American students find irrelevant and meaningless the kinds of critical inquiry so relevant to historians. Students need to experience the idea that history is an open but disciplined dialogue about evidence. They will not encounter this idea if history is pre-

sented through lectures and textbooks as a series of facts, the knowledge of which is measured by standardized tests. Sadly, most will not encounter this idea of history as a process of critical inquiry at university either, because historical knowledge, though perhaps in a more complex way, is still presented there through lectures and scholarly monographs as a series of more or less self-evident facts—a product, rather than a process, of inquiry. It is no wonder that many students see document-based inquiry as busy work added to the real course material.

The disconnect between what historians do and what history teachers teach their students highlights yet again the question: Why teach history at all? History does not just allow us to learn lessons from certain events in the past. This kind of critical inquiry is exactly the kind of complicated and compassionate process of knowledge-building that we need to have to understand our contemporary world. How do we know what accounts in the media make sense in terms of evidence and interpretation? How do we evaluate the significance of a particular event in our own lives, or in the lives of others? How do we find the language to talk about the kind of world we want for humanity? The process of historical inquiry—the dialogue among people about evidence from the past—is the best way to explore who we were and are, and how we can turn that into who we as the human race want to be (Barton and Levstick 2004).

Conclusion

If teachers believe that history is the true facts about "what really happened" organized within a clearly defined "master narrative" of national development or progress, then primary documents will indeed have only a limited appeal. Usually written by one person from one point of view, and often a clearly biased or openly contradicted one at that, primary documents do not always lend themselves to teaching the coherent narrative that passes for history in so many provincial and territorial jurisdictions. Ironically, the same documents that provide the foundation of historical research can seem irrelevant to teaching history. As students encounter primary documents, they gain an opportunity to open up to inquiry the ways that knowledge is constructed from evidence. They are learning to think like historians. The point is *not*, however, to change every student into an amateur historian but to give students the tools to think cirtically and creatively about human societies, including our own. I have suggested where to find and how to select and use primary documents that work within curricular constraints. I have discussed how teachers can use primary documents to support the coherent narrative of history presented in most Canadian history and social studies curricula. But I have also suggested how teachers can take full advantage of the fragmentation and dissonance of primary documents to teach a history that involves students in the meaningful, active, and disciplined construction of knowledge.

Assemble at least two primary documents that pertain to a historical topic in the curriculum. Design a lesson to help students use these documents to learn about a broad theme or "big idea" of the curriculum. Provide details and sample resources indicating how you will teach students to analyze the sources and interpret them in light of background information about the topic.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Marian Press in the Education Commons of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto for her help in assembling the list of websites supporting the use of primary documents.
2. I am grateful to my colleague Garfield Gini-Newman for developing this strategy.

REFERENCES

Barton, K.C. 1997. "I just kinda know": Elementary students' ideas about historical evidence. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 25: 407–430.

———. 2005. Primary sources in history: Breaking through the myths. *Phi Delta Kappa* 86 (10): 745–753.

Barton, K. C. and L.S. Levstik. 2004. *Teaching history for the common good.* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Carr, E.H. 1961. *What is history*? Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books.

Grant, S.G. and B. Van Sledright. 2001. *Constructing a powerful approach to teaching and learning in elementary social studies.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Miller, F. 1997. *Journey to Canada: The war orphans project 1947–1949.* Vancouver: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. Available online at the "Open Hearts/Closed Doors: The War Orphans Project," http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/orphans/english/biographies/rozen/chapter1.html.

Misfeldt, C. and R. Case, eds. 2002. *Immigration in 20th century Canada.* Vancouver: The Critical Thinking Consortium and the British Columbia Ministry of Education.

Seixas, P. 1998. Student teachers thinking historically. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 26 (3): 310–341.

Van Sledright, B.A. 2002. Fifth-graders investigating history in the classroom: Results from a researcher-practitioner design experiment. *Elementary School Journal* 103 (2): 131–160.

Weinert, S.R. 2001. Young children's historical understanding, Unpublished master's thesis. Vancouver: Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction, University of British Columbia.

Wineburg, S. 1991. On the reading of historical texts: Notes on the breach between school and academy. *American Educational Research Journal* 28 (3): 495–519.

SUPPLEMENTAL READING

Lee, P. and R. Ashby. 2001. Progression in historical understanding among students ages 7–14. In *Knowing, teaching and learning history: National and international perspectives,* eds. P. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg, 199–222. New York: New York University Press.

Levstik, L.S. and K.C. Barton. 2001. *Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Milson, A.J. 2002. The internet and inquiry learning: The integration of medium and method in a sixth grade social studies classroom. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30 (3): 330–353.

Milson, A.J. and P. Downey. 2001. WebQuest: Using internet resources for cooperative inquiry. *Social Education* 65 (3): 144–146.

Paxton, R.J. and S.S. Wineburg. 2000. Expertise and the teaching of history. In *Routledge international companion to education,* eds. B. Moon, M. Ben Peretz, and S. Brown, 855–864. London: Routledge.

Pope, D.C. 2001. *"Doing school": How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sandwell, R.S. ed. 2006. *To the past: History education, public memory and citizenship education in Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Seixas, P. 1993. The community of inquiry as a basis for knowing and learning: The case of history. *American Educational Research Journal* 30 (2): 305–324.

———. 1996. Conceptualizing the growth of historical understanding. In *Handbook of education and human development: New models of learning, teaching, and schooling,* eds. D. Olson and N. Torrance, 765–783, Oxford: Blackwell.

Stodolsky, S.S., S. Salk, and B. Glaessner. 1991. Student views about learning math and social studies. *American Educational Research Journal* 28: 89–116.

Wertsch, J.V. 2001. Is it possible to teach beliefs, as well as knowledge about history? In *Knowing, teaching and learning history: National and international perspectives,* eds. P. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg, 38–50. New York: New York University Press.

Wilson, S.M. 2001. Review of history teaching. In *Handbook of research on teaching,* ed. V. Richardson, 527–565. Washington DC: American Educational Research Association.

Winebury, S. 2001. *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

OTHER RESOURCES

GATEWAY SITES

Academic Info: Canadian History
http://www.academicinfo.net/canhist.html
Links to Canadian history websites, principally those with some full text documents.

Canadian Archival Resources on the Internet
http://www.archivescanada.ca/car/menu.html
Provides a comprehensive list of links to Canadian archives and associated resources on the internet. These include links to individual repositories, multi-repository databases, archival listservs, archival associations, educational opportunities, and other related sites.

Canadian Institute for Historic Microreproductions
http://www.canadiana.org/eco.php?doc=cihm
CIHM was established in 1978 to locate early printed Canadian materials (books, annuals, and periodicals), to preserve their content on microfilm, and to make the resulting collections available to libraries and archives in Canada and abroad. A wide selection of these materials is now available, in searchable form, online.

Canadian History on the Web
http://canadianhistoryontheweb.ca
Canadian History on the Web is meant as a resource to get you started on your search for historical sites. It is not a comprehensive list, but merely a sampling of the types of history-related web pages that exist.

MERLOT
http://history.merlot.org/
Links to online learning materials are collected here, along with annotations such as peer reviews and assignments.

Schoolhistory.co.uk
http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk
Based on the history curriculum for the United Kingdom, but an incredible gateway to teacher's resources.

The History Guide: Resources for Historians
http://www.historyguide.org/resources.html
Links to a wide range of history resources.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS ONLINE

Collections Canada (Library and Archives Canada)
http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca
A number of online historical research tools including a searchable database of over 600,000 Canadians enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) during World War I (1914–1918) along with scanned images of 765,000 Attestation papers; the Colonial Archives database with over 35,00 images; and Western Land Grants issued in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the railway belt of British Columbia, c. 1870–1930.

Documents of World War II
http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ww2.htm
Transcribed documents from World War II.

Early Canadiana Online
http://www.canadiana.org/eco/index.html
A full-text online collection of more than 3,000 books and pamphlets. Includes some local histories, directories, and biographical collections. The contents of this virtual library are part of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproduction (CIHM) collection.

Historical Documents on the Internet
http://highschool.gardencity.k12.ny.us/socialstudies/Mcauley/teachers/historical_documents_on_the_net.htm
A gateway site to historical documents online.

Historical Text Archive
http://historicaltextarchive.com
A gateway to historical web sites, with an emphasis on those with primary texts online.

In Search of Your Canadian Past
http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas
The Canadian County Atlas Digital Project presents the Ontario county atlases (43 in total) online in digitized form.

Local and Alberta Histories Collection
http://www.ourfutureourpast.ca/loc_hist
Growing collection of digitized books on Alberta local history.

Making of America
http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp
Making of America (MOA) is a digital library of primary sources in American social history from the antebellum period through reconstruction.

New Tecumseth Digital History
http://calendar.county.simcoe.on.ca/partners/newteclib/history/index.html
Site of the digitization of local history archives for Tecumseth Township, Ontario.

Salem Witchtrials: Documentary Archive
http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/home.html
Both scanned and transcribed primary sources for the Salem witch trials.

The Champlain Society Digital Collection
http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/search.cfm?lang=eng
The collection contains thirty-three of the Champlain Society's most important volumes (approximately 16,000 printed pages) dealing with exploration and discovery over three centuries. It includes first-hand accounts of Samuel de Champlain's voyages in New France as well as the diary from Sir John Franklin's first land expedition to the Arctic, 1819–22.

The Gateway to Northwestern Ontario History
http://www.nextlibrary.com/tbpl/home.html
Photos, books, drawings, and artifacts from libraries and museums of northwestern Ontario. This includes the full text of some books, many photos of people, and a searchable version of the Thunder Bay News Index.

HISTORY FOR THE CLASSROOM

Historica
http://www.histori.ca
The website of the foundation devoted to Canadian history education. Includes the Canadian Encyclopedia Online as well as lesson plans, resources, and current articles.

Collect Britain: Putting History in Place
http://www.collectbritain.co.uk
Digital collections, exhibitions, and themed tours on British history put together from the British Library's collections.

Martha Ballard's Diary Online
http://dohistory.org/diary/index.html
Martha Ballard wrote in her diary nearly every day for twenty-seven years from January 1, 1785 to May 12, 1812 for a total of almost 10,000 entries. The full diary is online, along with suggested ways of using it to "do history."

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History
http://www.canadianmysteries.ca
A multiple-award winning collection of historical documents and supporting teacher materials (MysteryQuests) on twelve infamous events in Canadian history from early Viking exploration of Eastern Canada to the Klondike Gold Rush, and from the great fire of 1734 in Montreal to the death of Herbert Norman in 1957.

World War I: Trenches on the Web
http://www.worldwar1.com
A superb interactive site that shows what can be done with history on the web.