



# An Adventure of the American Mind

Joining Educators and Students with Library of Congress Resources

## Primary Sources in Perspective

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“Primary documents that launch students on a voyage of discovery increase their general interest in reading about history and researching past events and eras,” observed Michael Simpson, editor of the National Council for the Social Studies magazine *Social Education*, in his introduction to a special issue on “Teaching U. S. History with Primary Sources.” More to the point in this age of educational accountability, Simpson claimed, “Teachers who are experienced and skilled in the use of primary documents know that student performance improves as a result.”<sup>i</sup> University of Wisconsin educator Fred Newmann’s early 1990s study of higher order thinking skills in social studies classes supported Simpson’s conclusions. Newmann reported, “More thoughtful lessons relied less on textbooks and more on primary sources and other types of reading.”<sup>ii</sup>

Simpson’s comments and Newmann’s findings confirm a central idea behind the Adventure of the American Mind (AAM) project: primary sources can improve the quality of teaching and learning at all levels of education. The AAM project aims to put this idea into practice by improving the classroom use of the vast and diverse collection of primary source documents available on the Library of Congress (LOC) American Memory web site. Achieving the AAM goal rests in part on answering basic questions on the use of primary sources in teaching and learning. This essay briefly discusses primary sources, tracing the history of their employment in the classroom, identifying the current levels of use in social studies, and exploring the valuable roles they play in teaching and learning. Three sample activities developed for sessions for AAM directors are included. They can be easily adapted for use with pre-service teacher education students, k-12 teachers, and k-12 students.

### **A brief history**

An irony of primary source document-based instruction is that it is neither a new nor necessarily an innovative instructional approach. As early as 1787, textbooks supplemented their narratives with primary source documents. The source method of instruction dates back to the turn of the twentieth century when many of the core ideas of contemporary educational philosophy and practice were developed. In fact, the source method antedates the emergence of social studies as an academic subject in the K-12 curriculum.

Throughout the twentieth century, the use of primary sources in teaching history has been advocated. In 1945, Robert Keohane suggested that secondary school history teaching “would profit greatly from more extensive, intelligent, varied, and continuous use of primary sources.”<sup>iii</sup> Over half a century later, as Simpson’s comments

demonstrate, a similar message still resonates in classrooms and publications throughout the United States. But, how well has that call been heeded?

### **Levels of primary source use**

According to a 2001 study on United States history by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), most students have not yet profited from studying primary sources on a regular basis. Approximately four out of 10 fourth graders and half the eighth graders surveyed used primary sources once or twice a month in 2001. Comparing the situation in 1994 with 2001, the study noted that in both years, only one percent of fourth grade students surveyed reported using primary sources almost everyday. While 62 percent of fourth graders in 1994 said they hardly ever or never used them, by 2001, the percentage never or hardly ever using primary sources fell to 48 percent. Of eighth grade students surveyed, two percent in 1994 and four percent in 2001 used primary sources almost everyday. Twenty-three percent in 1994 and 16 percent in 2001 never or hardly ever used primary sources.<sup>iv</sup> Given the low levels of use it is not surprising that in 2003, a new teacher commented that she was not introduced to primary sources until her social studies methods course taken near the end of her graduate education.

Primary source-based instruction remains the exception rather than the rule in k-12 classrooms and university-based teacher education programs. If the AAM program is to change this situation, a first step is to demonstrate to collegiate teacher education faculty and K-12 teachers the value of using the LOC documents in instruction.

### **Why and how should teachers use primary sources?**

A potent argument related to today's educational world was supplied by the NCES study. It concluded, "weekly use of primary documents was associated with higher [test] scores than less frequent use."<sup>v</sup> One motivation is that many standardized tests now include document-based questions. The Advanced Placement history exams and the Illinois Prairie State test for secondary school social studies are just two examples. More importantly, using documents helps build literacy, critical thinking, collaborative work, and communication abilities. As Simpson explained, primary sources also motivate students to learn by bringing them closer to the topics being studied.

How can teachers ensure their students reap the educational benefits of primary sources? The greatest returns occur when teachers develop interactive, student-centered, inquiry-oriented instruction. A first step is assuming students need to learn not only how to read and analyze documents, but also how to apply what the sources have told them about the topic being studied.

For example, the attached activity "Exploring Primary Source Based Instruction: The Literacy Connection," involves students in a series of three exercises that fit within a unit on industry, immigration, and urbanization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also has relevance for a unit on progressivism and reform during this period.

First, students answer who, what, when, and where questions to read the scene depicted in a photograph showing horse-drawn wagons parked along Chicago's South Water Market Street. Students are also asked to define the type of place shown in the photo in one word. While market is an obvious answer, others are also possible, such as city. No matter what answer is given, students must defend their choice with evidence from the photograph.

In the next step, students explore a classic photo inquiry, "what don't you see?" Using the answers to the first exercise and further examination of the photograph, students first pose other queries about the scene depicted. Building upon the answers to the first exercise and the questions on what is not seen in the photo, they develop questions on the topic being studied, seeking answers by reading the textbook and other resources. The questions focus the reading helping students identify not only pertinent sections to read in the text but also relevant information. In the process, students build their knowledge of the topic and hone their literacy skills.

The final step has students communicate what they have learned in writing and offers both social studies and language arts applications. In this fashion, the activity provides simple and clear instructions to help students read the photo, make seamless connections to the topic being studied, and communicate what they have learned in writing. Equally important, the document fits within the flow of instruction facilitating learning.

The marketplace photo exercise assumes students have experience in using primary sources and identifies an important key to effective document-based instruction. The use of primary sources must be strategically developed as a regular, consistent, and progressive instructional theme over the academic year. As a result, long-term planning is essential to student mastery of primary sources. Whether the document is a printed text, photograph, map, painting, cartoon, or an artifact, to name just some of the formats, classroom exercises should enable students to effectively learn content and improve their skills. Skills mastery requires practice, but not tedious repetition. All three examples included here follow a similar path that begins with reading the source and then applying what was learned using high order thinking and communication skills. Each varies the activities, adapting the literacy exercise to different venues. Students are not confronted with another worksheet or a generic template, but rather simple, focused questions and exercises designed specifically for the source and the activity. In two cases, examining a photograph of Mesa Verde and "Slices of Life: Disease and the European-Indian Encounter: Exploring Thanksgiving from the Wampanoag Perspective," the activity revolves around answering a single focus question, offering a general pattern of inquiry and analysis to help build mastery through practice. If plotted across a United State history course, these three activities would comprise components of a series of progressive learning experiences for students.

Another important consideration is that the activities fit within a coherent and organized flow of content learning in which the document becomes the vehicle for learning and not the centerpiece. Document-based instruction works best when the sources are embedded in the activity so the students can focus on the topic being studied. The exploration of Mesa Verde would open the unit on Precolumbian America by initiating the building of a database of knowledge and also the crafting of questions to organize the study of this topic. Coming at the

beginning of the course, the activity allows the teacher to diagnose student abilities to read a photograph as well as gauge their prior knowledge of the topic, among other things such as setting up the interactive method and showing students their input is expected and respected by the teacher. In this guise, the primary source acts as a “hook” to interest students and sets the pattern for engaging students in the learning process.

The other examples are designed for use during a unit. As indicated above, “The Literacy Connection” provides a direct way to tie the document to the topic being studied by connecting it to the text and other readings. The Thanksgiving activity explores a vital component of the early Indian-European encounters, disease, and its impact on relations. It fits within a unit on the colonial era and offers insight into the meeting of Indians and Europeans during this period.

As all the examples indicate, selecting pertinent sources and editing them where necessary are critical tasks in developing successful instruction. Not every document fits and even those that do may require some adapting to be viable sources for students. The Thanksgiving sample was developed in part to highlight some of the perils of primary source use, especially regarding printed texts. Often, the length and language of printed primary sources prove too difficult or too boring for students, yet their content and value are significant. Editing documents to feature those points most relevant to the learning objectives can greatly alleviate much of the difficulty and tedium.

The excerpts trace the changing conditions in New England based on the accounts of European explorers and settlers. In 1614, John Smith describes New England as populated by a “goodly, strong and well proportioned people” who had constructed a healthful paradise of gardens and corn. As the later accounts show, the region was transformed within a decade into a place devastated by disease, dotted by decimated communities inhabited by a traumatized people, and characterized by overgrown, seemingly deserted fields. It is the latter situation that the Separatists encountered upon setting up their Plymouth colony. The European accounts offer insight into the conditions the Wampanoags faced and provide ideas on why they sought friendly relations with the European intruders, celebrated today in the annual Thanksgiving holiday.

In editing the documents, the original spelling and language was retained. On one hand, the spelling and word use shows students that language is dynamic and changes over time. On the other hand, these same characteristics may create reading comprehension problems and require the teacher to further edit the selections using more modern spelling and grammar. Students can see the original but they may need a “translation” to read the source.

### **Standards**

No discussion of educational practices is complete without addressing standards. By including specific content in history, geography, political systems, economic systems, and social systems in every unit, students progressively learn disciplinary content, concepts, and practices over the course of the academic year that help them organize the massive content of social studies while preparing them for the ubiquitous tests. Teachers, too, get into the

pattern of designing instruction that includes all these goal areas until it becomes routine. Where possible, the same method can apply to primary source activities as demonstrated by the Mesa Verde and literacy connection samples.

### **Conclusion**

Effective use of primary sources requires much upfront preparation by the teacher. Students must work with them on a consistent regular basis, not once a month. Selection and perhaps editing of the documents to ensure they fit within the flow of instruction and to guarantee that students can learn from them are other important tasks. Current educational trends promoting standards and the standardized test are influencing teachers to adopt long-term planning strategies anyway so integrating primary sources into this mix does not necessarily increase the teacher's work. Besides, as noted above, using primary sources can help improve test scores.

As Michael Simpson wrote, experience and skill are keys to unlocking the promise of primary sources, both for teachers and students. The AAM project is geared to providing the means for teachers and students to gain the needed experience and skill. The three activities presented here hopefully help fill this need.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Simpson, "Editor's Notebook," *Social Education*, 67, 7 (November-December 2003) p. 369.

<sup>ii</sup> Fred Newmann, "Qualities of Thoughtful Social Studies Classes: An Empirical Profile," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32, 3 (1990) p. 267.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Keohane, "Use of Primary Sources in United States History for High-School Pupils," *School Review*, 53 (December 1945) p. 580.

<sup>iv</sup> U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: U.S. History 2001*, NCES 2002-483, by M.S. Lapp, W. S. Griggs, & B.S.-H. Tay-Lim, pp. 93-95.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

## Exploring Primary Source Based Instruction: The literacy connection

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Primary source-based instruction revolves around literacy: reading, thinking, communicating. It also is most effective when connected to the textbook and other resources. The following exercise offers one method of building literacy skills using primary sources.

### Reading the Photograph: what do you see?

Examine the photograph and answer the following questions, supporting your answers by referring to content in the photo.



1. Where is this place? City? Suburb? Farm?
2. Who is in the photo? What else is in the photo?
3. What is happening? Describe the activity.
4. When does it appear this photograph was taken?
5. Based on your answers, in one word, what type of place is shown in the photograph?

### Connecting to the textbook: what don't you see?

Based on the answers to the above questions:

1. What important aspects of the scene are not shown in the photo?
2. What questions do the answers about what is and what is not in the photo raise about the topic being studied?

Using the answers and the questions, read the appropriate chapter or chapter section in the textbook on the topic and also any other resources provided to check the accuracy of your answers and to answer your questions.

### Exploring the photo: what have you learned?

Language Arts application:

Based on the activities above and by referring to the photo, write a four-line description of the photo as follows.

Line 1: Put your answer to reading the photograph, question five here.

Line 2: Using sounds you might hear in the scene, write an action phrase that describes what is happening.

Line 3: Based on what you might smell in the scene, continue describing the action taking place.

Line 4: In one word, summarize what you see in the photo.

### Social Studies application:

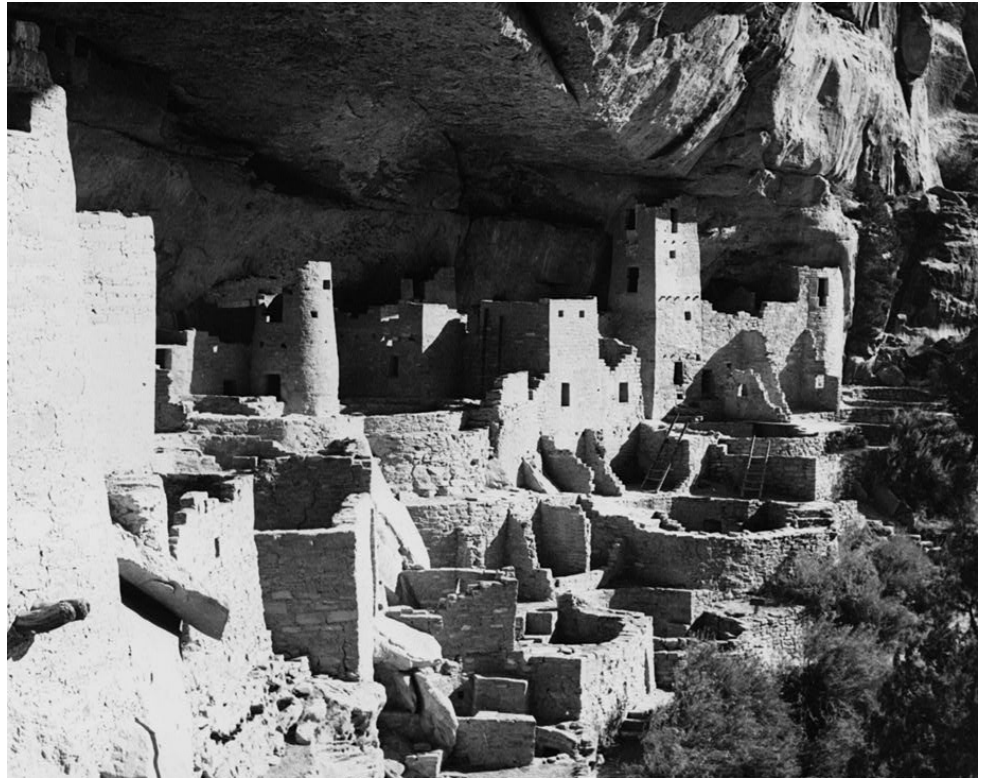
Based on the activities above and by referring to the photo, write a five-paragraph analysis of the topic of the photograph that discusses its historical, geographic, political, economic, and social aspects.

## Exploring Primary Source Based Instruction

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The opening day of a unit begins with the reading of and inquiry into a photograph of an unknown place:

- what is this place?
- where does it appear to be?
- what are the structures?
- what were they used for?
- estimate how many people lived here?
- why did they live here?
- when did they live here?



The answers generated are always supported with evidence from the photograph. The answers also lead to another question:

- What must a society have possessed to construct and maintain this place?

Items flood the board spanning virtually every aspect of life including government, religion; population; labor specialization; food production, storage, and distribution; engineering; and mathematics, among many other things. Again, the photo supplies evidence to support any findings.

The brainstorming yields to organizing the items into a web or chart, using the five state social studies goal areas: history, geography, political systems, economic systems, and social systems.

Using the chart, students pose focus questions to begin their study of pre-columbian America.

*In teacher education classes, the discussion examines the literacy practice of reading a photograph and the use of higher level thinking skills in managing information evident in the above activities. Then the conversation turns to possibilities with a single question as guide:*

- ***How else can this photo of Mesa Verde be used?***

## Slices of Life: Disease and the European-Indian Encounter

### Exploring Thanksgiving from the Wampanoag Perspective

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Thanksgiving is a major American holiday that celebrates a peaceful dinner between the Pilgrim Separatists and the Wampanoags. In schools throughout the nation, plays and feasts memorialize this meeting of European and Indians.

The perspective typically is that of the Pilgrims. Their reasons for giving thanks and inviting the Wampanoags are explained well. The Indians helped the English through hard times.

But what about the Wampanoags? The Indian perspective is seldom discussed. Why did they help the English and why did they participate in the first Thanksgiving?

The accounts of early English explorers and settlers offer insights in the conditions the Wampanoags confronted when the Pilgrims arrived. Referring to the map and these accounts, answer the following questions:

1. What had the Wampanoags and other coastal tribes recently experienced?
2. How had it affected them?
3. How had it affected the land?

Based on your answers, why do you think the Wampanoags participated in the first Thanksgiving?

### Changing Conditions in New England

In 1614, John Smith described the land and people of New England:

*“surely by reason of those sandy cliffes and cliffes of rocks, both which we saw so planted with Gardens and Corne fields, and so well inhabited with a goodly, strong and well proportioned people, besides the . . . moderate temper of the ayre . . . who can but approoue this a most excellent place, both for health and fertility?”*

In the early 1620s, Thomas Morton described this scene by Boston Bay:

*“For in a place where many inhabited, there hath been but one left alive, to tell what became of the rest, the livinge not able to bury the dead, they were left for Crowes, kites, and vermin to prey upon. And the bones and skulls upon the severall places of their habitations, made such a spectacle after my coming into those partes, that as I*



*travailed in that Forrest, nere the Massachusetts, it seemed to mee a new found Golgotha.”*

In assessing conditions in New England, an early resident explained:

*“great pittie it is to see so much good ground for Corne and for Grasse as any is vnder the Heauens, to lye altogether vnoccupied, . . . The greatest Saggamores about vs can not make aboue three hundred Men, and other lesse Saggamores haue not aboue fifteene Subiects, and others neere about vs but two. Their Subiects about twelue yeeres since were swept away by a great and grieuous Plague that was amongst them, so that there are verie few left to inhabite the Countrey. . . . They doe generally professe to like well of our comming and planting here; . . . partly because our being here will be . . . a defence from their Enemies; wherewith (I say) before this Plantation begun, they were often indangered.*

A visitor to Plymouth in 1621 described the Indians as follows:

*“Their countenance is dijected, and they seem as a people affrighted. [They were coming to the English settlement in great numbers every day] “and might in one hour have made a dispatch of us, yet such a fear was upon them, as that they never offered us the least injury in word or deed.”*

## **Primary Sources in Perspective Bibliography for Activities**

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### **Exploring Primary Source-Based Instruction**

1. Cliff Palace, Cortez Vicinity, no date, Historic American Building Survey/Historic American Engineering record, Library of Congress, American Memory, HABS.COLO42-CORT. V, 1-, <http://memory.loc.gov/pnp/habshaer/co/co0300/co0300/photos/021683pv.jpg>

### **Exploring Primary Source-Based Instruction: The Literacy Connection**

1. Chicago Daily News, 1910, View of South Water Market filled with horses and carts, with boxes on the sidewalks in Chicago, Illinois, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, DN-000826Chicago Historical Society, Library of Congress, American memory, ichicdn n00826 [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cdn:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(ichicdn+n008826\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cdn:@field(NUMBER+@band(ichicdn+n008826)))

### **Slices of Life: Disease and the European-Indian Encounter**

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  2. Force, Peter, comp. Tracts and other papers relating principally to the origin, settlement, and progress of the colonies in North America from the discovery of the country to the year 1774. Smith, John, The generall historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer isles, together with The true travels, adventures, and observations and A sea grammar. Washington: 1836-1846. Id ihcbcb 7018d, Library of Congress, American Memory, Chesapeake bay and Washington D.C. ~Books, 1600-1925. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ihcbcb&fileName=7018d//lhcbcb7018d.db&recNum=0>
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