

# READING BEYOND BIAS: USING HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS IN THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT.** Social studies and history teachers have, in recent years, taken up with enthusiasm the use of “real” historical documents, (primary sources) in elementary and secondary classrooms across North America. Such documents have an immediacy, and often a personal element, that is more interesting to students than the history found in the average textbook. This paper argues, however, that the pedagogical promise of primary documents is too often limited to a superficial appeal, and the potential of primary documents to stimulate either critical thinking or deeper learning about the past is limited to an analysis of “bias.” Beginning with a quick overview of the remarkable potential of primary documents in history education, the paper goes on to provide some practical examples of how teachers can most effectively use them in the classroom.

## LIRE SANS PRÉJUGÉS : L' UTILISATION DE DOCUMENTS HISTORIQUES DANS LES CLASSES AU SECONDAIRE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Depuis quelques années, dans les écoles primaires et secondaires d'Amérique du Nord, les enseignants d'histoire et de sciences humaines ont adopté, avec enthousiasme, l'utilisation de documents historiques authentiques, appelés aussi documents de premières mains; et ce, dans les écoles d'enseignement primaire et secondaire de toute l'Amérique du Nord. Ce type de documents offre une immédiateté et, fréquemment, une touche de personnalité, qui les rendent plus intéressants que l'histoire telle que présentée dans les livres. Cet article soutient, cependant, que le potentiel pédagogique des documents authentiques est souvent superficiel et que leur utilisation pour stimuler soit l'esprit critique soit un apprentissage en profondeur se limite à une analyse des 'partis pris'. Débutant par un survol du grand potentiel des documents authentiques, cet article poursuit en donnant des exemples pratiques pour utiliser plus efficacement en classe ce type de documents.

### *Introduction:*

#### *The promise of document-based inquiry in the history classroom*

**H**istorians bring together texts and contexts in a meaningful dialogue about the past. Students, on the other hand, tend to see history as an inert set of mostly irrelevant and usually disconnected facts (Alleman & Brophy,

1993; Goodlad, 1984; McNeil, 1986; Pope, 2001; Paxton & Wineburg, 2000; Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1980; Stodolsky, Salk, & Glaessner, 1991). In the past few years, history educators have rediscovered primary documents as a classroom resource that can help solve the problems of irrelevance and boredom that too often characterize the teaching of history. Historical documents, they argue, are more engaging for students than textbooks, for they make the study of history more personal, more interactive and therefore more interesting. (Milson & Downey 2001; Grant & VanSledright 2001; Barton, 1997).

Others, however, take their arguments even further. A number of educators are recommending the use of primary documents in the history classroom because they allow students to engage with some of the deeper and broader purposes of history education. Many are taking up the challenge, offered so coherently by Tom Holt, to use history as a way of engaging students in a process of evidence-based critical enquiry. (Holt, 1993, p. 23). Advocates of constructivist learning argue that the study of primary documents can potentially include students in the kind of community of enquiry that makes learning meaningful (Seixas, 1993). The study of primary documents reinforces the idea that history is not, after all, a product to be defined and consumed, but instead a process of critical inquiry to be engaged in. Like the revolutionary science educators of an earlier era, these history educators are suggesting that knowledge is not about facts so much as it is about understanding processes. For teachers who see science as a kind of knowledge or process of knowing, Bunsen burners and the techniques of scientific observation are to overshadow the memorization of complicated nomenclatures. For teachers who see history as a kind of knowledge or process of knowing, primary documents and the techniques of inquiry-based interpretation are to overshadow the memorization of events, names and dates (Barton & Levstik, 2001; Zeller, 1987).

Students use historical documents, in other words, as science students use hands-on experiments: so that they can act like practitioners in the field by entering into a process of critical enquiry. Because of history's dual emphasis – on evidence-based enquiry on the one hand, and on the great human experiment on the other – history has been identified by some educators as being at the heart of citizenship education. Because citizenship education is a foundational principle of the entire project of public education, history education is being heralded in some quarters as one of the most important components of the public education system (Barton, 2001).<sup>1</sup> The study of history is, they argue, particularly well suited to helping students learn how to make the responsible and informed decisions required of citizens in a pluralistic, participatory democracy.

### *The problems of document-based enquiry in the history classroom*

Unfortunately, the use of primary documents in the classroom has not really worked out in practice. In his well-known 1991 study, Wineburg asked students and historians to think aloud as they read historical texts, both primary and secondary (Wineburg, 1991). 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 enquiry, students were simply not able 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 any real critical enquiry. But this is not, more recent research suggests, simply because students are unfamiliar with the tasks involved in critical thinking, or unable to apply them to historical materials. The work of Barton (1997), Van Sledright (2001) and Weinert (2001) has clearly demonstrated that, with proper instruction, children as young as seven are indeed able to understand some of the foundational aspects of critical enquiry, and engage in sophisticated evaluations of historical events. The problem of using primary sources to teach students the process of critical enquiry is not to be found in students' *ability* to engage critically with the materials, these researchers argue. Instead, it is students' *reluctance* to do so that is creating problems with evidence-based enquiry. Milson (2002) argues that students using web-based materials regularly sought out the "path of least resistance" when looking for ways of constructing historical knowledge, rather than searching for a more complex understanding. As Barton summarizes, "rather than evaluating information from multiple sources, [students] moved directly to search engines to find sites they thought would give them all necessary information to accomplish their task." (Barton 2002).

Barton's study of fourth and fifth grade American students documented their remarkable ability to engage critically with such issues as the contingency of historical narratives and the constructed nature of historical documents (Barton 1997). After critically examining historical documents, however, he discovered

one remarkable and unexpected problem. After three days of this [critical enquiry] activity, the teacher pulled students together to discuss their conclusions. . . . Each student had an opinion, and they were eager to share. *But none of the opinions had any relationship to the evidence that they had just spent three days evaluating.* Students did not use the evidence to

reach conclusions; they were just making up what they thought must have happened. (Barton, 1997, 2002,8)

Even when they have become acquainted with the skills and the resources that would allow them to participate in the process of history, in other words, students continue to understand history as a series of dead, inert and generally inaccessible set of facts about about what “really” happened. European educators have noted a similar reluctance in their students, and new research into “levels’ of historical consciousness, and differences between historical knowledge and historical belief are now underway to account for the phenomenon whereby students know about history as critical inquiry, but refuse to take it seriously (Wertch, 2001; Lee and Ashby, 2001; Barton, 2002).

*Document-based enquiry and the problem of absolute knowledge*

Barton has traced this disjuncture – between the ability to think critically about history, and the inclination to do so – to the absence of meaningful questions characteristic of so much history education (Barton, 2002). Arguably, however, the problem may be even deeper than this. For the research of history educators clearly documents that students remain deeply attached to the belief that history is simply not *about* processes and interpretation, but is *about* absolute knowledge (Barton,1997; Van Sledright,2001; Seixas,1998; Wineburg, 1991, 2001). While some secondary school students achieve, as Lee and Ashby have demonstrated, a sophisticated understanding of “the past as (re-) constructed in answer to questions in accordance with criteria,” the great majority either “accept the past as given” or “the past as inaccessible,” the two most elementary stages of historical understanding (Lee and Ashby, 2001, 212). Students’ understanding, in other words, is that history is not a process of inquiry, but absolute knowledge that they may or may not have access to.

In one sense, students’ reluctance to see history as a form of critical enquiry, at least in North America, is not surprising (Barton, 2001b; Lee and Ashby, 2001) It is not clear, after all, where either students or teachers in most North American schools would have encountered the idea – the definition – of history as an open dialogue about, or critical engagement with, evidence from the past. Most teachers would not have encountered this idea in their university history courses, where the authoritarian and closed pedagogical structures of the university classroom continue to characterize history education (Sandwell, 2002). Students at secondary schools throughout North America may be encouraged to use primary documents as an interesting add-on to their curriculum, but what they are being tested on, and what students reasonably conclude “really matters,” continues to be fact-based questions. This trend may be increasing, not decreasing, with the

ever-increasing emphasis on high stakes testing (Wilson, 2001). Even though television and movies present history in a format that is more engaging for students than most university lectures or high school classes, history is commonly represented here, too, as a set of facts or absolute knowledge, rather than a set of reasonable interpretations of available evidence. Museums occasionally do a better job of representing history as a process of critical enquiry than a set of true facts to be uncovered, but they, too, are dominated by the belief that history is a product to be consumed, rather than a process to be explored.

Whatever the content, the form of history presented to school children remains surprisingly similar: history is a closed system of information imposed through authoritarian structures that students find generally irrelevant to anything in their material or intellectual lives (Barton 2002). By failing to engage in a dialogue with either primary sources or with other historians writing about any particular topic, students are, as Peter Seixas argues, exiled from crucially important contexts within which any human learning takes place: a community.

What started as contributions to an active, translucent dialogue among historians as an opaque, authoritative voice, giving facts and explanations about the past. Even where alternative interpretations of the past are presented, they are conveyed with an authority of a community of which the students are not a part. . . . Students are not invited into a community; rather, the voice of the historical text systematically excludes them. If the constructivist theorists are right, there is not much room for real learning here. If the philosophers of history are right, there is not much real history either. (Seixas, 1993)

In spite of the potential for primary documents to engage students in a dynamic or dialogical process within a community of enquiry, therefore, it is not surprising that students cannot recognize this invitation.

#### *The problematic role of "Bias" as an analytical tool in document-based enquiry*

Unfortunately for them, while students have the deeply held belief that history is about absolute knowledge conveyed through authoritarian forms, in an important sense, they no longer confidently believe in absolute truth either. These two belief systems – modernism's belief in absolute truth, and post-modernism's rejection of it – are in conflict, and it is causing problems.

These problems are clearly manifested in students' responses to primary documents. While they are capable of deep critical analysis, most students tend to revert to one question as they contemplate an historical document: is it true? (Wineburg, 1991; Grant & VanSledright 2001). As no account ever could be unequivocally true, students' attempts to analyze primary

documents as truth collapse almost immediately. What they collapse into, most commonly, is the attempt 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 enquiry ("by uncovering the bias, we can critically examine the truth behind the document"). The concept of bias seems to nicely erase the conflict between the two opposing philosophies – there is absolute knowledge and no absolute knowledge – in a kind of contingent relativism that both *assumes* an absolute reality (bias is after all an incorrect view of absolute reality), and rejects it.

Discussions of bias, though certainly valuable in some areas of historical study, as applied to the study of primary documents serve in most cases only to reduce students' potential for understanding history. For bias is used to describe the very things that need to be explained in critical historical enquiry: 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 and analysis instead get reduced to rigid, simplistic and stereotyped impressions that students might have about the self-interest (itself a profoundly historical concept) of the person who created the document.

Once the students have successfully identified the bias of the creator of the document, furthermore, they believe that they have satisfied their best attempt at 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 only can be "just his or her own opinion" (Barton, 1997; 2002).

For these students, then, at an important level, historical knowledge is not so much irrelevant as impossible to obtain. Their encounters with primary documents is 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 & Van Sledright, 2001).

These students need help in clarifying the terms upon which human beings can, and indeed do, on a daily basis, build up meaningful (though always contingent) knowledge about the world. They need this knowledge not only

in the history classroom, when they are asked to make sense out of evidence from the past, but everywhere in their lives that requires critical evaluation and judgement in order to make sense out of the world in the present. And they need it now – now that traditional structures of knowledge and belief are being undermined. They need to learn alternative ways of creating legitimate, meaningful knowledge about the world and their place in it. And, as the proponents of citizenship education through history have argued, the help they need can be found, and perhaps best found, in the active and dialogical processes of historical investigation, of creating historical knowledge. For it is historians, I would argue, who spend their days contemplating how we negotiate that middle ground between complete relativism and absolute truth. How to do this is the central activity of the discipline of history.

### *Strategies for reading primary documents*

I have argued here that a basic misunderstanding about the nature of history is responsible, at least in part, for the problems students are encountering as they try to work with primary documents. Because they have mistakenly understood history as a series of facts about the past, they are not able to take seriously the invitation to apply methods of critical enquiry to the documents they are asked to investigate. Instead, they are confused. Rather than trying to uncover the complex meanings of the texts they are examining, they more commonly try to use the tools they have available to answer the one question that they think is relevant to historical investigation: is it true?

What follows here are three sequential lessons that I have used to introduce students in secondary social studies, in junior college history, and in social science pre-service education to historical documents. I have found these lessons particularly valuable at providing students (and their teachers) with a starting point for dealing directly with the particular and profound problems that they encounter as they attempt to deal with historical evidence-based enquiry and the problems of legitimate knowledge. The first of these techniques teaches students the differences between history and the past. The second simply draws attention to a question that allows students to get beyond “is it true?” to the more useful – and realistic — question more familiar to historians: “what does it mean?” The final lesson described here explores one specific technique that allows students to closely examine history as a form of critical enquiry based on evidence from the past. In this lesson, students will use a series of guided questions to focus on the circumstances of the document’s production. This lesson has the advantage of showing, rather than simply telling, students about the contingency and constructed nature of historical “facts,” while providing a point of entry into understanding the historical contexts of life in the time the document was created.

*Introducing primary documents I:  
Taking seriously the difference between history and the past*

Primary documents may be the building blocks of history, but students need time and practice to get used to the two ideas being discussed here: that history is a contextualized dialogue about evidence (usually documents) from the past, and that students are able to participate in that dialogue, if only as “beginners.” Students need to learn, in other words, not only how to critically engage with the evidence contained in primary documents, but to recognize that this activity is doing history.

The first exercise that I do with my students before embarking on a study of historical documents is a deceptively simple one. Dividing students into groups of two or three, I ask them to discuss the following question: What are the differences between history and the past? Students are asked to list at least two differences. As students respond, their answers are listed on the board. Early in the discussion, students are asked to consider that while the past is every single thing that happened or thought about or dreamt of – every event, thought, belief, atom moving, tree falling in the forest while no one was there – that history is, alternatively, someone’s attempt to bring order and meaning to that chaos of everything-ness. The first and most important difference between history and the past, as I tell my students if they do not come up with it, is that evidence is the key difference. And in my experience, students do not usually suggest this crucial difference between the past and history, confirming my supposition time and again that most students really do not understand the fundamental foundation of history – that it is based on evidence left to us from the past. Little wonder, then, that they do not “get” the process of critical inquiry, or their role in it!

Because students commonly resist the idea that history is not everything that ever happened, or everything that historians have already written about, and because it is almost impossible to for them to understand history as a process of critical enquiry without this understanding, it is worth spending some time on the importance of evidence from the past. I explain, as an aside, that while historians tend to use written documents to understand the past, they are not limited to those kinds of records. Increasingly historians are branching out and using people’s oral reminiscences about the past, or photographs, and even home movies. While debates rage about the limits of interpretation for any particular source, it is nevertheless true that no statement can be made about the past without evidence that has lasted through time, whether that evidence is written, pictorial, archeological or spoken. We simply cannot know about it if there is no trace left over. If students are still in doubt, I ask them to give an example of any exceptions to this rule.

Not only does a record of an event, or thought, or belief have to be created, but it has to be preserved if people are going to know about it later. To emphasize this second point that distinguishes history from the past, I ask students to consider what records they have already left behind that a historian, a hundred years from now, might use to understand them in his or her history of high school students in the twenty-first century. Students should note not only the *narrowness* of the records they are leaving behind, compared to the total of their lives, but also the fact that many of the records they are leaving – like their school notes, and perhaps family photographs, or emails – probably will not survive for a hundred years, or be in a place where a historian might find them. What view might a historian have of high schools if the only records that survive are the teachers' assessments of them?

This leads into a third difference between history and the past: significance. At this point, I tend to take students back to the example of the records that have been created to document their own lives. I point out to them that a record usually only exists because of a decision, conscious or not, that someone has made about what is important. Who determines what records are created, and what records are preserved? And then who determines, and on what basis, what historians might be interested in? The reasons why different kinds of records or evidence, like late slips, or counselors' files documenting aberrant behaviour, or student emails, or students' notes, or personal diaries, are created and preserved (or not preserved) speak to very different ideas about what is significant about high school life. Not only do the people (like students and principals) creating documents disagree about what is important about any experience at the time it is occurring, but historians differ among themselves about what is important when they come to write their histories. If a historian in the twenty-second century wanted to document a time of particular violence in society, for example, then he or she might be looking to the schools to find evidence that could provide examples of conflict. A historian interested in high schools as a community that prepared students for life might look instead for evidence that would document co-operation, or academic success as a precursor to a successful career.

As Barton has suggested, this point might be worth discussing in some detail precisely because the work that so many students are asked to do, with primary documents as well as in school generally, has so little meaning or relevance to anything else. Many students might be surprised to learn that historians actually decide just what, exactly, they think is worth writing about, using criteria drawn from present day questions as well as received wisdom about what historians should be writing about (Barton, 2002). Changing beliefs about the importance of racial and gender inequality, for

example, have prompted historians to write about women and racial minorities in the past, subjects that earlier historians cared little about. While talking about the question of significance, I often find it useful to ask the students to tell me what it would take, exactly, to turn today's lesson into history, and to explain why. This exercise can be instructive in clarifying the previous three points: history, unlike the past, relies on the creation of evidence, the preservation of evidence, and human decisions about the significance of what the records contain.

This exercise also provides a good introduction to the fourth difference between the past and history: interpretation. I urge the students to consider the possibility that the truth really is *NOT* out there. Because the past really is gone, because it simply does not exist any more, the best that human beings can do is to make reasonable evaluations of the available evidence, examined in the context of what other people have thought about the event, or behaviour or belief. Even the first act of critical inquiry that defines historical research – the decision about what to write about – is an act of interpretation. Why write about high schools? Why not office workers, or presidents? The second act, that of selecting evidence about the topic is also interpretive: why use principals' records to try to understand high school life in the twenty-first century? Why not student diaries? Or census records discussing average family size of the student population? Or the gender and marital status of teachers? Each of those will give the historians of the future a slightly different interpretation of "what happened" in high schools in the twenty-first century. For every decision about what to look at, and why, reflects a decision on the part of the historian about what matters in society, past and present.

This leads to the final point: in order to make a useful interpretive statement about the evidence from the past, historians need to incorporate their interpretations in a meaningful narrative, one that makes sense of the evidence they have examined in a number of contexts. Historians need to address the kinds of questions that other historians have asked of the past – it would be difficult to write about the American Civil War, for example, without talking about slavery. It needs to make sense, in other words, not only in terms of other evidence from the past, but in terms of what other historians have said about that evidence. But they also often address (if only implicitly) the kinds of issues, and questions that people are interested in in the present as well. The narrative, then, must demonstrate not only the reasonable-ness of the interpretation, but also its significance, past and present.

To summarize, here are the five points that, by highlighting the contingent and constructed nature of history-as-process, can provide students with a useful introduction to the examination of primary documents.

1. there has to have been a record created (if only a memory);
2. the record has to be preserved over time;
3. the record has to be found by someone, and considered significant (i.e. at the time that it is found);
4. what is documented has to be interpreted,
5. it has to be incorporated into a meaningful historical narrative.

*Introducing primary documents II:*

*Taking seriously the difference between truth and meaning*

I begin the second lesson (and indeed, in almost every class relating to primary documents), by re-iterating the point that history is a commentary on, or discussion about, evidence left from the past. No commentary can portray exactly “what happened” because no one could possibly see everything. Even if someone could, however, how would they convey this “everything” to us in the present? Where would all the records be stored? As the past no longer exists, and as there is no omniscient narrator telling us all what really happened, all we are left with as we try to understand the past and its ever-changing significance are the traces and accounts that have been left in the present (Seixas, 1996). These records effectively allow us to see some things, from someone’s perspective, through time. Unfortunately, they do not provide, and cannot provide, a true and complete view of what really happened.

After students have been introduced to the idea that historical truth is not absolute, but instead is constructed by historians, they usually feel uneasy. If there is no absolute truth, if we can never know what “really happened,” they ask, is not any interpretation as good as any other? Is not everything just someone’s opinion, then, or just an interpretation? Why should we believe them?

I begin the second lesson with a discussion of how they know the world they live in. Drawing on examples of hallucinations and multiple view points about the same event (the example of a car accident is one usually drawn on by students here), students are obliged to acknowledge that they cannot always be sure that what they are experiencing is real. We have no way of corroborating the correspondence of our senses to the outside world, except for the evidence of our senses. So while we act as if we have absolute knowledge – we put one foot in front of the other, after all, in the belief that we will get where we are trying to go – nevertheless we know that philosophically we cannot prove that the world we are sensing corresponds to an external reality. But even though we know, at some level, that we might be wrong, we nevertheless continue to act as though we are certain.

Historians work in the same way. Even though they have much less information to work with in their study of the past than people do in their interactions with the world in the present, historians generally accept — have faith — that major events that are described in the documents they are studying “really happened,” in just the same way (and with the same provisos) that we “really know” the world we are experiencing in the present. Occasionally people writing the documents that historians are reading have been mistaken about something, or have lied. In those cases, historians have discovered the fraud generally by comparing notes with other historians, or by checking different kinds of sources from the past. In the same way, if we were told that enemy aliens had just landed from the moon, we might ask around to our friends and acquaintances if they had heard about it. Or we might ask to see more of the evidence that the landing had, indeed, been made.

Many students find it strange, however, when I tell them that most of the time historians are simply not as concerned as students with the question: Is it true? What the work of historians involves, and what their evidence-based critical enquiry is really directed at, is a different question. While students are usually most concerned with the question, “is it true,” to which it is generally difficult to give the kind of firm and absolute answer that the questions seems to demand, the work of most historians, most of the time, is involved in asking of the evidence, “What does it mean?”

While the dichotomy between these two questions collapses philosophically at a certain point in the process of historical inquiry, the distinction is an important one for students as well as historians. For, pedagogically, it can help students to understand that there is more than one “really big question” that can be asked about the past. For as Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg have argued (Seixas 1996, 1998; Wineburg 1991), primary documents, and the representations of the past that they contain, in a certain sense *are* history as much as they are a report *about* history.

As part of this second exercise, students are asked to examine the following primary document. It is an excerpt from the diary of Ebenezer Robson (students can be informed beforehand). He was a Methodist preacher living, in 1861, in the British colony of Victoria, British Columbia. Most of the population of the colony at this time was Native. The non-Native population on Saltspring Island, that he is describing specifically in the letter below, was comprised of a mixture of British, European and African American families and individuals, who were mainly involved in clearing their lands under frontier conditions.

Monday March 25, 1861 :

Arrived at the north settlement [of Salt Spring Island] about 6 p.m. I visited the different houses to inform the neighbours of my intention of

holding service in the evening. This involved a walk of nearly 4 miles. . . . The hour fixed arrived It was pouring rain and very dark so that we had no service, only one man coming. The great sins of this place as at Nanaimo are adultery [sic], drunkenness and sabbath breaking. There are 9 men now in this settlement. Quite a number of the settlers are gone to the mines and elsewhere for the summer. Of these 9 men, 5 are living with Indian women in a state of adultery. Some have families from such connexion. One man has commenced this [degrading?] course since I was here last. He is a young man who was educated in Massey [?] College, England, for the bar and passed his examination for this profession. His father is an old and wealthy Methodist. his son, poor man, is far gone in the way to Hell. I took supper at Mr Begg's and lodged with Mr. Lawless.

Robson, Ebenezer, Diaries, 16 September 1861 to 27 March 1862, H/D/ R57, R57.3, British Columbia Archives, Victoria, British Columbia

I begin by asking someone to read the document out loud. I then give them a piece of paper that contains two columns. One column is headed with the words, "Facts/ Information: Is it true?" and the second is headed by the words, "Testimony/Evidence: What does it mean?" Students are then asked to decide what the document contains that would fit into each column. I help them to get started by providing one piece of factual information, such as the date and time of the minister's arrival, and one example for the second column, like the Christian values that the minister espouses. Students work in pairs with this document for a few minutes, and present their list to the class. I work with them to uncover the different kinds of truths that the document contains: those that purport to document the world as the minister sees it, and those that tell us about the minister and the social and cultural world that he lives within. I also ask the students to comment on why this document might be of interest to people in the present. Why might historians in the present be interested in the kind of sexist and racist interpretations that were made by Robson, in colonial British Columbia?

After discussing the differences between the questions "Is it true?" and "What does it mean?" I point out to the students that historians take for granted that every primary document will reveal a different interpretation of events. What they are looking for is an understanding of the range of interpretations, and what that might tell us about society, past and present, that is important. The critical enquiry that comprises history is the attempt to understand not just whether something happened, in other words, but what it meant to those who experienced and wrote (or photographed, or sang about, or drew) it. Each of these kinds of documents provides historians (and students who are engaged in critical enquiry) with a text in which they can read the ways in which meaning was inscribed onto particular events, or customs, or beliefs.

It is important to point out that Ebenezer Robson wrote this letter for his own purposes, presumably to keep track of his movements in order to be reimbursed by the church, for example, and to keep a record of sinful behaviour of his potential parishioners. People who read this text are not limited (fortunately), to this frame of reference as they try to exploit to the fullest what this document can provide. In my own work writing a history of Saltspring Island, for example, I used this document (along with many other of his letters, and the writings of other preachers and journalists) as evidence about the rate of population growth, and to document the kinds of inter-racial relationships on the island.

Distinguishing between the questions “is it true?” (which most primary documents are not very good at determining in isolation), and “what does it mean?” (which primary documents are particularly good at providing) has the practical advantage of moving students’ attention away from the impossible question of “what happened?” to an answerable and much more open and fertile question: what sense did people at the time make of the events described?

*Introducing primary documents III:  
Finding and exploring the worlds in which the document was created*

The third lesson is intended to provide students with some preliminary, but focused questions that they can actively use in their critical analysis of primary documents. The first lesson demonstrated that primary documents are not a transparent representation of reality, but someone’s representation of reality. The second lesson suggested that one of the most fruitful questions raised by the document may not be “is it true?” but is instead “what does it mean?” The third and final lesson provides students with questions that allow them to explore the various meanings of the text by focusing on the circumstances of the document’s production. Just what was going on when that particular document was being created? This process has two advantages. First, such an exploration shows students, rather than tells them about, the contingency and constructed nature of historical documents. Secondly, the attention to the circumstances of the document’s production provides an excellent point of entry into the historical world (as well as the historiographical world) to which the document belongs. This third lesson seeks, therefore, to expand students’ understanding of history as a form of evidence-based enquiry, and of the particular historical time/events under study.

In this lesson, I ask the students to turn once again to the diary excerpt previously discussed. In this exercise, instead of deciding whether the information in the document is true or false, I invite the students to explore the question “what does it mean?” in greater detail by answering some specific questions. By answering questions that relate to how, and by whom,

the document was produced, students critically engage with the document by finding and exploring the different “voices’ that the document contains. For each of these voices, once they are identified by the students, can open up a window on the world in which this evidence was created. Students are divided into groups, and asked to answer some or all of the following questions, depending on the time available.

*Listening for the voice of the institution:  
The document’s creators and preservers*

Every primary document was created and preserved by a person or people, and an examination of the contexts within which this generation and preservation occurred can be helpful in understanding its multiple meanings.

- Do you know who was responsible for creating this document? How do you know? Why was the document created? How do you know?
- Who was the intended audience for this document – who was meant to read it?
- Who preserved this document? Do you think that their goals influenced the information the document contains?
- What can we learn about the people who created and preserved this document, their attitudes, and the society they lived in, from its contents?
- Can you think of other ways, perhaps unintended by the document’s creators, that this document has been, or could be used?
- What else does the historian need to know about the creation and preservation of this document that could increase its usefulness as a source for interracial relations?

*Listening for other voices*

The agendas that directed the creation and preservation of this document – its particular discursive structure – can be important to assessments of its meaning. This document also, however, describes events, behaviours and beliefs that refer to people, places and structures of meaning that may lie outside of its purview. Questions in this section refer to the ways that historians can “read through” this document, beyond the intentions of the document’s creators, and out to alternative ways that meaning was constructed.

- Can you reconstruct the physical setting in which the document was created? What value could such a reconstruction hold for someone interested in learning about the past?
- Whose voices are being represented in this document? Do they all have names? How would you characterize these voices? Happy? Sad? Impartial?

Frightened? Authoritative? Can you tell what and who is determining/directing what these voices say?

- Can you tell if anything has been taken out of the written text of the accounts contained in the document? Can you speculate on what it might be?
- What can you infer about the people represented in this document? Gender? Race? Place of Birth? Occupation? On what bases do you make infer these?
- What can you tell about the relations between the people represented in this document from the voices that we hear? Are they equal or unequal? Are they related, or friends? What gives you these impressions?
- Whose voices have been left out of, or marginalized within, this document?

Students and teacher then work through these questions together as a way of entering into a critical enquiry about the document. Most students will not know the answers to many of these questions, particularly if this document is used at the beginning of a unit on, say, colonial Canada. Students can, however, use this document to frame new questions about the social, economic and political world that Robson found himself in. Why was he so appalled about mixed race liaisons? Why was he so concerned about drinking and swearing? What were those people doing on the island, so far from their homes in Britain? Whose voices are represented, and whose left out, in this letter? Why would this be so?

By approaching the document in this way, students can begin a dialogue with evidence left from the past. If they are provided with the opportunity to actively explore these questions through research into what other historians have written, then they will become part of a dialogue with other people about records from the past. In both these senses, students will become historians searching, and trying to make sense of, the past in a meaningful and thoughtful way. Primary sources will become a way to open up their knowledge of the past, and their understanding of history. This lesson can be usefully integrated into other documents from the past, and used as a point of contrast or comparison. The point will not be to discover the bias of the document, but to find a way to use these documents as windows that might provide us glimpses of a complex and varied world of the past.

### *Conclusion*

While historians bring together text and context in a meaningful dialogue about the past, students in elementary and secondary school tend to learn about history as an inert set of mostly irrelevant facts: history is a “finished product” rather than an “active process.” A number of educators and educational theorists have recognized this as a problem, one that effects both

the teaching and the learning of history. Primary documents have been offered as an important solution to both the boredom and the irrelevance that tend to characterize students' response to history. Primary documents like personal letters, diaries, and photographs are usually much more engaging for students than the condensed overviews provided in textbooks. The study of primary documents offers more than informed entertainment, however. Just as the model of science teaching through experimentation emphasizes scientific thinking rather than any particular body of facts, so the teaching of history through the analysis of primary documents emphasizes history as a type of knowledge, as a kind of enquiry, a way of thinking about the world. The study of historical evidence becomes the raw material upon which students can practice the types of critical thinking needed by citizens in a pluralistic egalitarian democracy.

Although the study of primary documents has been enthusiastically embraced by some social studies teachers throughout North America, this paper has suggested that its promise is seldom realized. Many teachers have little experience in the analysis of historical documents, and students are reluctant to engage in the kinds of critical enquiry that they are capable of employing. Even when students understand the process of evidence-based critical enquiry, their attempts to apply critical analysis to history are thwarted by deeply held and often contradictory philosophical beliefs about the nature of historical knowledge. Students tend to seesaw back and forth between believing in absolute truth, with its suggestion that students are simply required to find the "right" answer provided by some authority, and complete relativism, in which any interpretation is as good as any other, and all are equally meaningless. The term "bias" often shrouds both these problems.

In this paper, I have provided exercises intended to encourage students to recognize both the contingent nature of historical truth, and their ability (and their right) to participate in its construction. Students are first taught to distinguish between the past and history, focusing on history as something that is created by people who contemplate documents surviving from the past, who evaluate their significance, and who interpret this evidence in narratives that are constantly being revised. Secondly, students are invited to distinguish between two questions, "Is it true" and "What does it mean." In this way, they are encouraged to consider how historians do more than simply establish "truth;" they talk about the meaning of a document, both in its own historical context, and to those in the present. Thirdly, students are provided with practical methods of reading *through* historical texts to find and explore the multiple voices and contexts that every document contains. By distinguishing between the truth and the meaning of the text on the one hand, and by exploring the contexts of the documents production on the other, students and teachers alike can be drawn into a evidence-based critical enquiry that is a meaningful and situated history-as-process.

NOTE

1. This is particularly relevant in the province of Quebec, where historically derived political divisions between Quebec and the rest of Canada have prompted the provincial government to place the teaching of history at the forefront of citizenship education.

2. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the College and University Faculty Assembly, National Council for the Social Studies, Phoenix, Arizona November 2002

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