

## In this Issue: Promoting Critical Thinking

**This issue explores how teachers can use primary sources to build students' critical thinking skills, preparing them for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) names as its number one Standard for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner the need to provide students with the skills, resources and tools to "inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge." Critical thinking skills are crucial to success in a changing environment. Primary source-based instruction helps students to practice and build their critical thinking skills.

Primary sources are often incomplete and have little context. In analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to questioning and making inferences about the materials. Students must use prior knowledge and work with multiple primary sources to find patterns. Integrating what they glean from comparing primary sources with what they already know, and what they learn from research, allows students to construct knowledge and deepen understanding.

### References

American Association for School Librarians (2007). *AASL standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century learner*. [www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/learningstandards/standards.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/learningstandards/standards.cfm)

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## Teaching with Primary Sources

The Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) Program works with universities and other educational organizations to offer professional development that helps teachers use the Library's digitized primary sources to deliver effective instruction. The TPS Newsletter provides information and materials that support this goal.

For more information about Teaching with Primary Sources or to identify a TPS Consortium member in an area near you, please visit the web site at <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps>.

# Primary Sources and Promoting Critical Thinking

by Carol Van West, Ph.D.

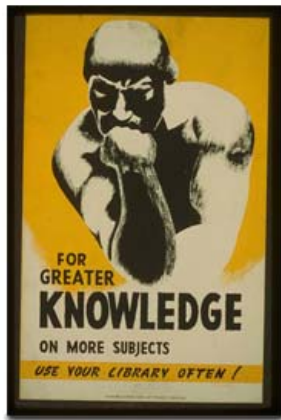
## Primary Sources: Gateways to Enhancing Critical Thinking in the Classroom

Teachers are in constant need of tools that will empower their students to explore and dig deeper into subjects and issues that matter most to them. Primary sources, which are now available in unprecedented numbers online, are powerful tools for just such empowered teaching. Not only do primary sources provide rich cultural context and unique insights into past eras; if used effectively, primary sources can be the key to making the basics of critical thinking -- asking questions, seeking answers, and drawing conclusions— central to teaching.

Scholars and teachers from different disciplines will define primary sources differently. But no matter the disciplinary slant, teachers agree that primary sources are the stuff of life—what we do, say, perform, sing, make, and create—that we categorize, study, and analyze through the lenses of the humanities, the sciences, folklife, and the arts. The Library of Congress defines primary sources as the raw materials of history—original documents and objects which were created at the time under study. They are different from secondary sources, accounts or interpretations of events created by someone without firsthand experience.

Primary sources surround us. They are in the landscape around us—historic sites, museums, town squares, historic architecture. They are bound in collections of the school or local library. They are in the voices and traditions of our communities—oral histories, folklife, and festivals. In the humanities, for instance, primary sources directly link students to the participants and witnesses of important past events. Primary sources humanize past traditions and supply the language, emotions, attitudes and values of past peoples. These original materials allow students to experience, and ask questions about, the past in a way that cannot be matched by the best textbook or any other secondary source.

Maps, for example, provide myriad opportunities for student exploration. In maps, a student can see ways in which cartographers record the ebb and flow of politics, the history of nations, the evolution of settlement and the path of scientific and mathematical thought. Because maps reflect humanity's understanding (or misunderstanding) of the world around them, sometimes they capture the work of history's most creative imaginations. Maps can enrich lessons in almost any academic discipline. Students can piece together a story of political conquest, trace a landmark expedition, or see their town develop over time. Historic maps provide the basis for writing assignments. Math students can calculate distances; science, geography, and geology students can examine the characteristics of a specific topography.



*Title: For greater knowledge on more subjects use your library often! / V. Donaghue. 1940. Chicago: Illinois WPA Art Project. Library of Congress. American Memory. By the People, For the People: Posters from the WPA, 1936-1943.*

Photographs can also stimulate a student's interest in and desire to learn about the past. Photographs can show types of transportation, fashions, architecture, social and family relationships, furnishings, professions and trades, and lifestyles across historical eras. Photographs can help teach vocabulary, textures and shapes, sharpen observation skills, skills needed to draw inferences, form hypotheses, and analyze raw data. They are a good starting point for discussion, writing assignments, and research.

The true power of primary sources emerges, however, when teachers use them to spur critical thinking by students. To use primary sources most effectively, educators must ask questions prompting students to draw from their own experiences and knowledge, to explore and think about what is before them. Questions of creator bias, purpose, and point of view may challenge students' assumptions. Remind students not to read too much into a primary source, nor draw too many conclusions from it. Remember that each primary source is part of a process involving its creator, the purpose and the subject. While primary sources can be

extremely valuable teaching and research tools, they are best used in conjunction with other sources to give a more complete understanding of a time, place, circumstance, and people.

The millions of primary sources available online from cultural institutions provide excellent opportunities for students to explore many types of evidence for comparison and analysis. Students engaged with scenes of a blues singer performing from a porch of a Mississippi shotgun-shack, for example, can look elsewhere online to hear music from that time and place or turn to an oral history repository and read what observers said about the music during the Great Depression. Literature, performing arts, geography, folklife, and history can be synthesized in a single exploration that leads to new knowledge.

Using primary sources to capture students' attention and to encourage their own sense of adventure adds immeasurably to students' ability to construct knowledge as they form reasoned conclusions, base their conclusions on evidence and connect primary sources to the context in which they were created, synthesizing information from multiple sources. In today's hectic, information-overload world, primary sources can teach the valuable lesson: "don't just accept what you're told-go to the source and find out for yourself."

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## Research and Current Thinking

**For each issue, TPS partners submit summaries of and links to online resources—articles, research reports, Web sites, and white papers—that provide research and current thinking relating to the theme. This issue's Research & Current Thinking focuses on critical thinking.**

**"Improving Classroom Instruction: Understanding the Developmental Nature of Analyzing Primary Sources"** (Dutt-Doner, K., Cook-Cattone, C., & Allen, S., Research in Middle Level Education) examines abilities of students to complete primary source document analyses based on current background knowledge.

**"Strategies for Teaching Critical Thinking"** (Potts, B., ERIC/AE Digest) addresses essential skills related to critical thinking: finding analogies and other kinds of relationships between multiple pieces of information, determining relevance and validity of information that could be used for structuring and solving problems, and finding and evaluating solutions or alternative ways of treating problems.

**"Strategy List: 35 Dimensions of Critical Thought"** (Foundation for Critical Thinking, The Critical Thinking Community) breaks down the global concept of critical thinking into 35 instructional strategies in three categories: affective strategies, cognitive strategies—macro-abilities, and cognitive strategies—and micro-skills. Within each category, strategies are defined and rationale is provided for incorporation.

**"Taking Seriously the Teaching of Critical Thinking"** (Case, R. and Wright, I., Canadian Social Studies) argues that attempts to incorporate critical-thinking skills into social studies instruction have been negligible. They outline a framework for helping students to become better thinkers.

**"Thinking Historically: Critical Engagement with the Past"** (Symcox, L., Social Studies Review) traces changes in teaching historical thinking beyond a focus on what students should learn to emphasis on how they should learn it. The author provides examples supporting use of primary source materials in the K-12 classroom "...to develop students' capacity to make connections between events and larger social and political patterns, an ability increasingly necessary in today's evermore complex world."

**To access links to articles cited please visit the Teaching with Primary Sources Newsletter online at <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/newsletter>.**



*Rothstein, A. 1915- , Photographer. Title: Lois Slinker teaching the only pupil in the second grade in one-room schoolhouse. Grundy County, Iowa. 1939 October. Library of Congress. Prints and Photographs Division.*

## Learning Activity - Elementary Level

### STARS, STRIPES AND SYMBOLS OF AMERICA: COMPARING OUR FLAG - PAST AND PRESENT

#### Overview

In this activity students learn about an important national symbol: the American flag. Students analyze an image of an American flag from the post-Civil War era (1865-7) and compare details (i.e., the stars and stripes) to those of our nation's flag today. This activity may be extended so students analyze other national symbols to consider their importance to Americans.

#### Objectives

After completing the activity, students will be able to:

- Identify the American flag as a national symbol
- Analyze details of this symbol
- Compare two different versions of the American flag to understand why this symbol has changed over time

#### Time Required

One class period

#### Recommended Grade Range

1 - 2

#### Topic/s

Government, Law

#### Subject

Language Arts, Social Studies

#### Standards

McREL 4th Edition Standards and Benchmarks

##### Grades K-4 History

Standard 4. Understands how democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events and symbols.

##### Thinking and Reasoning

Standard 3. Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences.

##### Language Arts: Writing

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

##### Language Arts: Listening and Speaking

Standard 8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

#### Credits

Activity adapted from "Stars, Stripes and Symbols," a lesson plan created by Sonja Huddleston and Angie Willis, Sheridan Elementary School, Bloomington School District 87, Illinois

#### View and Print the complete learning activity:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/newsletter/pdf/Fall2008ElementaryLevelLearningActivity.pdf>



Thirty-six star flag. Created between 1864 and 1867.  
Library of Congress.  
Prints and Photographs Division

## Learning Activity - Secondary Level

### EVALUATING DIFFERING OPINIONS IN POLITICAL CARTOONS

#### Overview

The purpose of this activity is to facilitate students' higher-order thinking skills through the analysis of issues presented in political cartoons. Students will identify sources of information about current issues. They will analyze three political cartoons related to the women's suffrage movement, discussing techniques cartoonists use to advocate through this medium and determining the cartoonists' stands on the issue. Students will then examine contemporary political cartoons, formulate their opinions about issues addressed in the cartoons, and conduct research to get more information about the issues in order to confirm or modify their initial opinion.

#### Objectives

After completing this learning activity, students will be able to:

- Explain ways that people can become informed before developing views about issues and institution
- Identify artistic and persuasive techniques used in political cartoons;
- Analyze issues addressed in political cartoons;
- Use research evidence to formulate an opinion on an issue expressed in a political cartoon.

#### Time Required

Two class periods

#### Recommended Grade level

Secondary Level: 8-12

#### Topic/s

Woman Suffrage, Political Cartoons

#### Subject/Sub-Subject

Social Studies: Civics, Life Skills: Thinking and Reasoning, Language Arts: Writing, Viewing.

#### Standards

McREL 4th Edition Standards and Benchmarks

##### Civics

Standard 29. Understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy.

##### Life Skills: Thinking and Reasoning

Standard 1. Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument.

Standard 2. Understands and applies basic principles of logic and reasoning.

##### Language Arts: Writing

Standard 4. Gathers and uses information for research purposes

##### Language Arts: Viewing

Standard 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

#### Credits

Center on Congress at Indiana University, *Teaching with Primary Sources* Staff

#### View and Print the complete learning activity:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/newsletter/pdf/Fall2008SecondaryLevelLearningActivity.pdf>



*Woman's Sphere: Suffrage cartoons. C1909? Library of Congress. American Memory. Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897-1911*

## Teacher

**Linda Egnatz**



In each issue, we introduce a teacher who participated in Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) professional development and successfully used digitized primary sources from the Library of Congress to support effective instructional practices.

This issue's Teacher Spotlight features high school Spanish teacher Linda Egnatz. The TPS program at Governor's State University (Illinois) nominated Linda for her effective classroom use of primary sources to promote critical thinking among students. Linda has taught all levels of high school Spanish for seven years at Lincoln Way Community High School in Frankfort, Illinois. In this interview, Linda discusses some of her teaching strategies and favorite Library of Congress online resources.

**How did you first learn about the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Program?** The TPS program was promoted by my department head and I knew several colleagues who had previously participated in the program and enjoyed their experiences. I was encouraged to go for it as a professional development opportunity.

**What motivated you to participate in TPS workshops in your local area?** I was motivated by a long-time desire to visit the Library of Congress. Through TPS my wish came true—digitally! When you visit the Library's Web site, you're not restricted by physical location and can bring its resources to your students. I'm

the kind of person who likes to learn new things and share what I've learned with my students and other teachers.

**Tell us about the first time you tried using primary sources in the classroom.** As a Spanish teacher, I wanted my students to learn about early exploration of the Americas from a different perspective. Students think American history starts with Jamestown because that is the historical perspective they are taught. Students examined 500-year-old Spanish-language documents and maps available via the Library of Congress' Global Gateway, featuring multilingual resources on world culture. My students thought these documents and maps were "really cool." Seeing maps of North America from the Spanish perspective surprised them because they had not realized the Spanish had mapped much of our continent 100 years before English colonists arrived. Students also liked that the bilingual Global Gateway site allowed them to check their Spanish comprehension in English.

**Based on your experiences, how do primary sources promote critical thinking among students in the classroom?**

Primary sources provide a new learning experience for students. The realization that they are seeing the actual source seems to have more credibility and weight with students than a photograph or illustration in their textbooks. Searching the Library of Congress online is more like doing real research because it requires students to find data and supporting evidence they can interpret. Teaching with primary sources encourages questions and promotes critical thinking among students because conclusions are yet to be made. Primary sources make learning interactive at the high school level and give students ownership because it is

self-directed learning.

**What is your favorite resource available on the Library of Congress Web site?**

I have enjoyed Global Gateway most. I use this area of the Library's site because it promotes two of the National Foreign Language Standards: Connections and Community. For example, the early video clips of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. Global Gateway also promotes another National Foreign Language Standard, Comparisons, because it allows for compare and contrast activities that encourage higher-order thinking. For example, students can overlay historical maps with contemporary maps for comparison. Global Gateway also includes links to other worldwide libraries and resources.

**What advice do you have for teachers who have never tried teaching with primary sources?** The Library of Congress site is big but very searchable. A good place to start your search is the Prints & Photographs Online Catalog. This collection has everything from photos of the American historian who discovered Machu Picchu to child soldiers in the Spanish-American War, which are really provocative teaching materials. Many students are visual learners and using historical images encourages their curiosity and their questions.

**Is there anything else you want other teachers to know?**

Take advantage of the Library's Teaching with Primary Sources program, whether through online resources or workshops in your community. I'd like to express my profound thanks to Luci Sweder and Sandi Estep of Governor State University's TPS program who have been very generous with their knowledge and time in helping me to complete my Library of Congress projects.