

*As she sits down to write...:
Using Primary Sources to Understand the Past*⁷³

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Intended Audience:

High school Social Studies

Overview:

This series of lessons helps students understand the importance of primary sources to the study of history. Utilizing an active learning approach, students will be introduced to primary sources and will begin the process of understanding how historians use primary source material to offer a more complete view of the past. Specifically, students will be able to explore the important role that primary sources play in the construction of any historical narrative by examining *Notes from a Colored Girl*.⁷⁴ In addition, through analyzing the Davis diaries, as well as constructing their own personal diaries, students will not only get a better understanding of how primary sources are created, but they will also explore what information different sources can hold, the potential limitations of any one source, as well as forging connections between their lives and the past. Ultimately, this lesson plan will encourage students to understand their role both as learners and creators of history, and through this process, they will learn to critically analyze both the histories that they read and also the materials they produce.

Scope and Sequence:

This series of lessons begins with introducing students to primary source documents. More specifically, they will learn what a primary source is and how they are created. After mastering this initial concept, students will use the pocket diaries of Emilie Davis, a free woman of color living in Civil War Philadelphia, as a lens to explore how primary sources are created, and read these sources with a critical eye for under-

standing and potential bias. *The lessons will culminate in a project in which the students produce their own primary source document in the form of a pocket diary, and also explore how primary sources can help historians and students make connections with the past.*

National Standards for History

Standard 3: Historical Thinking

- Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues as well as large-scale or long-term developments that transcend regional and temporal boundaries
- Compare competing historical narratives

Standard 4: Historical Thinking

- Formulate historical questions from encounters with historical documents, eyewitness accounts, letters, diaries, artifacts, photos, historical sites, art, architecture, and other records from the past.
- Obtain historical data from a variety of sources, including: library and museum collections, historic sites, historical photos, journals, diaries, eyewitness accounts, newspapers, and the like; documentary films, oral testimony from living witnesses, censuses, tax records, city directories, statistical compilations, and economic indicators.
- Interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created; testing the data source for its credibility, authority, authenticity, internal consistency and completeness; and detecting and evaluating bias, distortion, and propaganda by omission, suppression, or invention of facts.
- Identify the gaps in the available record and marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place in order to elaborate imaginatively upon the evidence, fill in the gaps deductively, and construct a sound historical interpretation.

Common Core State Standards in History/Social Studies

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9. Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accord with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Objectives

- Identify the differences between primary and secondary sources.
- Examine and evaluate primary sources for potential biases.
- Analyze primary sources to help students make connections to the past, present, and future.

Essential Questions

- What are primary sources and how do they inform our understanding and interpretations of the past?

- What information can historians gather from primary sources? What are the potential limitations of primary sources?
- How can primary sources help students connect to the past?

Resources for Teachers

- Library of Congress. "Using Primary Sources." Accessed March 27, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/>
- Library of Congress. "Why Use Primary Sources." Accessed March 27, 2014. <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimary-sources/whyuse.html>
- National Archives. "History in the Raw." Accessed March 27, 2014. <http://www.archives.gov/education/research/history-in-the-raw.html>
- Vest, Kathleen. *Using Primary Sources in the Classroom: Examining Our Past, Understanding Our Present, Considering Our Future*. Huntington Beach: Shell Education, 2005.

DAY ONE: Introduction to Primary Sources

Preparation:

Bring a few different examples of primary sources into the classroom. You can do this with physical items that you might have in your personal or school library (i.e. an old photo album, newspaper, journal, a map, a will, etc.), digitally with images of different types of primary sources, or both. If possible, try to include images of the Emile Davis pocket diary in your sample so that the students will already be introduced to the diary in passing.⁷⁵

Motivation (10 minutes)

Tell students that they are going to spend the next week thinking about how history is created and more specifically, how and where historians get their information about the past.

To encourage active participation and to assess students' prior knowledge, ask students to brainstorm a list of documents/items that a historian might use in order to gain knowledge about the past. As students begin to share their ideas, list them on the board and place them into two categories (primary sources and secondary sources). This brainstorming session should generate a variety of ideas that might include items like "newspapers," "diaries," "maps," "books," "census," etc.

If students are having a hard time generating ideas, do a role-playing exercise in which you tell students to imagine that they are historians who want to write a history of the school. Help them to create a list of documents that they might use to construct this school history. Answers can include yearbooks, maps, a list of their teachers, report cards, class schedules, and sports trophies. Use this exercise as a springboard back to brainstorming a list of all of the different types of materials an historian can use to explore the past.

Whole class: Mini-Lecture (20 minutes)

Give a mini lecture about primary sources drawing on the brainstormed list, and explain to students that there are two categories of materials that historians use when examining the past: 1) primary sources, and 2) secondary sources. A primary source is an original first-hand testimony, document or record that was created during the time period that you are studying. Even more specifically, they are “materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration.”⁷⁶ Primary sources come in many forms and can include: pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, diaries, artifacts—like clothing, furniture, jewelry, maps, paintings, cartoons, photographs, and government documents—codes of law, legal certificates, census records, and many more. As you explain what primary sources are, share your prepared examples.

After spending time clearly defining primary sources, also define what a secondary source is in order to make sure that students understand the difference. A secondary source uses primary sources to create an interpretation of the past. Thus, historians produce secondary sources because they use primary sources to explain what occurred in a particular time period. An example of a secondary source is a textbook. Explain that this week we will be focusing on primary sources—what are they, where they come from, what this information can they tell us about the past, and how historians use these sources.

Follow your mini-lecture with a short “check-in assessment” and ask them to re-explain what a primary source is in order to verify that they have understood the concepts you presented.

Then ask your students to return to the brainstormed list and add any other types of sources that they might not have thought of originally. If needed, guide them through this process. In the end you should have sources that fall into all of the following categories:

- Printed Materials: magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs, advertisements, etc.
- Manuscript sources: diaries, journals, letters, speeches, etc.
- Artifacts: furniture, clothing, jewelry, weaponry, instruments, tools, etc.

- Visual: paintings, maps, photographs, prints, cartoons, etc.
- Audio: oral history, music, etc.
- Legal: laws, census records, certificates of marriage, birth, property ownership, or death, etc.

Once it is clear that students have a solid understanding of what primary sources are, introduce the concept that every primary source can tell us about the past but they do so in different ways. Using the brainstormed list, ask students to think about the different types of information that they might be able to get from an artifact, a map, a newspaper, and a diary.

Activity: Small Group (15 minutes)

Break students into four (or more if necessary) small groups and assign each group a particular source (i.e. a piece of clothing, a map, a newspaper, a diary, etc.) and have them discuss together what information that that source might tell a historian.

Wrap-Up (10 minutes)

Conclude class with a quick overview of primary sources and introduce the topic for next class, which is going to be exploring how primary sources are created.

DAY TWO: Telling Your Story: Exploring How a Primary Source is Created

Motivation (15 minutes)

Open class with a review of what they learned the day before. To help with this review process tell students to pretend that they are historians in the year 2120 and tell them to imagine that they came across a technological artifact from the past. Have your students pretend that this is the only piece of information that they have found about life in 2014.

Choose a “technological artifact” that is currently trendy like: a cell phone, a Facebook page, an Instagram page, a twitter feed, a newspaper, or a popular television show.

Have a class discussion about what that particular item might tell a historian about today’s society. Push students to think about how much material they can learn from a single item, but also about how that item does not tell the whole story. Tell them that this last point will be discussed further in a few days.

Now that you have student’s thinking about primary sources, ask them to talk about how these sources were created and their intended audience. For example, depending on your previous activity, this might lead to a discussion about how who creates a Facebook profile, what information they include on their profile, and who is the audience. Use this discussion as a springboard into a mini-lecture on the creation of primary sources

Whole Class: Mini Lecture (15 minutes)

Give a mini-lecture in which you discuss how and why primary sources were originally created highlighting the difference between public and private documents.

You should also explore why people choose to document what they do. Introduce Emilie Davis and her pocket diaries to the class and use

them as your central example primary source.

For instance, you might discuss that her diaries were her private records, spaces in which she documented her movements.

You could also discuss when she chose to write and when she stopped writing her diaries (tell students for the purposes of this discussion, they are going to assume that she stopped writing and not that her later writings have yet to be discovered).⁷⁷

Encourage students to begin to think about why and what gets recorded and also the implications of these facts. As well, help students to consider how audience might impact what is contained in any particular source.

Activity: Small Group (15 minutes)

Break students back into the small groups that they were in the day before and have them re-examine the source that they were assigned.

Have the students discuss and write down answers to the following questions: What is the source? Who wrote it? What is the document about? What information might a historian be able to glean from the item/document? Who was its intended audience? Is it a public or private source? How might the audience impact the information included in the source?

If you have Internet access, tell the groups to research the author and the document to provide some background information.

Time permitting, have students present their information to the class. If not, have them turn in the group notes from the discussion for you to examine.

Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

Encourage students to continue to think about how and why documents are created and how this information could impact their content. Explain that tomorrow they will be examining Emilie's diary to explore what information is discussed in a private source.

Homework (10 minutes)

Tell students that for the next few days, they will keep a “pocket diary.” Explain to students that they should write in their diary everyday for the remaining duration of the lesson plan series (approximately 5 entries). A “sample” diary worksheet is included with this lesson plan. Each day they should write a minimum of 40 words (similar in length to Emile’s diary entries) in which they account their lives for that particular day. You might suggest the following topics: food they ate, where they went that day, what they learned in school, who they talked to or ate lunch with, what were the topics of conversation, what activities did they do for fun after school, what were some of their happy/sad/ nervous /excited/ angry moment, something funny that happened, the news, the weather, etc. Make sure to emphasize that each diary will be different and that they should choose to write on whatever part of their life feels important to them. They should bring this diary with them to class each day.

Important note: Make sure that students understand that what they write about will only be read by the teacher and will not be discussed in class unless they choose to share their writing but that there will be one day when they will be required to share a few examples (of their choosing) from their diary with the class.

*DAYTHREE: "When and Where I Enter" Reading and Understanding Primary Sources*⁷⁸

Motivation (15 minutes)

Open class by giving a presentation about Emilie Davis—her life as a free woman of color, a seamstress and a domestic, and her world in Civil War Philadelphia. Also, introduce the people in her world. It might be useful to include images of a family tree to help students better visualize the material. Explain that much of the information that historians know about her has come from using her pocket diaries to reconstruct a narrative about her life. This reconstruction is then used to find her (or events or people that she mentioned) in other primary sources, including the U.S. Census, church records, and club notes. Time permitting, students can go through the "Who's Who" section of *Notes from a Colored Girl* and create a family tree.

Have students brainstorm what kinds of topics they think she might have included in her diaries. If they need prompting, ask them to think about the topics they wrote about in their diary the past evening.

Small Group Work (20 minutes)

Break students into 5 groups and assign each group a portion of reading from Ch. 6 of Whitehead's *Notes from a Colored Girl*. The portions are: 1) "I have bin buisy with my dress," 2) "I went to the party and enjoyed myself nicely," 3) "Nellie and I, little Frenchy," 4) "I do not know how I could get along without him," and 5) "Concerning the several deaths."

Have the groups read the material out loud together looking for information about Emilie's life—or what she chose to write about. Have groups prepare a short creative presentation of the material from the diary that they learned about. For example, students assigned to the section "Concerning the several deaths" might draft a fictitious letter from

Emilie to “the girls” in which she is discussing how sad she is about all of the deaths in her family. The goal of these presentations is for students to share with the class one particular facet of Emilie’s life that she chose to write about in her diary.

Presentation and Class Discussion (20 minutes)

Have groups present their creative work to the class. Also, have them provide a short summary of the material that they read about.

After students have completed their presentations discuss the materials that Emilie included in her diary and also how Whitehead was able to take short diary entries to create snapshots from Emilie’s life.

Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

Conclude the day by explaining how important primary sources are to understanding the past and highlight the fact that primary sources can tell historians so much about the lives of their subjects. Weave excerpts from Emilie’s diary throughout this wrap up. End this overview by making the point that while primary sources can provide a lot of information about the past, they are also limited in their scope and so it is important to also understand their limitations.

Homework:

Have students continue to work on their diaries.

DAY FOUR: "Where Yours Ends and Mine Begins" *The Limitations of Primary Sources*

Preparation:

Bring in readable copies of the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper from a single day that corresponds with a diary entry in Emile's pocket diary.⁷⁹ For example, you could use Monday March 2nd, 1863. Also bring in copies of the diary entry from the same day (with translation if needed).⁸⁰ You might need to include a short introductory paragraph with the diary entry to give it some context of that day's entry.⁸¹

Motivation (10 minutes)

Review with students all of the information that a primary source, like Emile's diary can tell us about life in Civil War Philadelphia for a free woman of color. After students have generated a list of ideas, introduce the concept that primary sources have limitations and ask students to brainstorm what some of those limitations might be.

Mini-Lecture (15 minutes)

Segue your brainstorming activity into a mini-lecture on the potential limitations of primary sources.⁸² You should include the following points in your lecture:

- A primary source is only telling one point of view;
- The primary source is likely to contain bias;
- The producer of the item/document controls what is presented;
- Many primary sources are lost to time (i.e. records are lost) and so historians only have limited materials to use when constructing the past; and,
- The limitations of contextual factors (i.e. literacy among your subjects, whether something was valued in society or not, etc.).

To help students understand, use the critiques of the WPA slave narratives outlined in *Notes from a Colored Girl*.⁸³

Have students brainstorm the potential limitations of Emilie's pocket diaries.

Primary Source Exploration (15 minutes)

Open the activity by explaining to students that they are going to be reading a newspaper from Philadelphia and the corresponding day's diary entry of Emilie (who lived in Philadelphia). The purpose of this exercise is to explore how sources that can functionally be about the "same topic"—in this case, life in Civil War Philadelphia—can tell very different stories.

Break students into groups of two and give each group a section of the newspaper and a copy of the diary excerpt. Have each partnership read the newspaper clipping together and write a few sentences describing its contents. The students should also write a short summary of the diary entry. Once they have completed these summaries have them discuss if they can see any potential overlaps between the two documents.

Class Discussion (15 minutes)

Once students have examined their documents, bring the class together for a discussion on the limitations of individual sources. Use these questions to guide your discussion:

- What was the focus of the diary entry? What was the focus of the newspaper?
- What happened on [insert document date], that was important to Emilie? What was important to the newspaper writers?
- Did you find any potential overlap between the newspaper and the diary entry? Explain your findings.
- If the two documents seemed very disconnected, how is it possible that they were both written on the same day, about life in the same city, and yet there are no similarities? In other words, why are these sources so different?
- Which source do you think is more "accurate"? Why?
- What potential biases exist in each source?
- If you were a historian of Civil War Philadelphia, which source(s)

would you use and why?

- How might using both sources provide a more complete understanding of the past?

Wrap-Up (10 minutes)

To conclude class, remind students of the activity that they did a few days before when they imagined that they were historians in the future who found a “technological artifact” (i.e. a person’s twitter feed or a TV show) from 2014.

Have students think about how limited this single source actually is. Emphasize the fact that historians have to be careful when using primary sources to ensure that they are telling a complete story and not just one viewpoint that is likely biased in one way or another.

End class with a re-cap of your mini lecture emphasizing the importance that historians understand the limitations of any one primary source.

Homework

Have students continue to work on their diaries and remind them to bring their diaries to the next class session

DAY FIVE: Using Primary Sources to Connect the Past and the Present

Motivation (10 minutes)

Open class with a review of material (i.e. the strengths and limitations of primary sources) from the previous two days. Prepare students to think more about why and how historians use primary sources.

Reflection Essay (30 minutes)

Explain to students that they are going to write a reflective essay to synthesize the learning activities over the past few days.

Write the following questions on the board and give the students time to discuss and reflect on them: Why are primary sources important? What can they tell us about history? In what ways is your life similar or different to Emilie Davis's life based on your knowledge of her diary and the journal you have been keeping for the past week?

Class Discussion (15 minutes)

Once students have completed their reflection paper. Facilitate a classroom discussion about primary sources and how they help create connections to the past. Through this discussion, helps students to draw connections between their lives and Emilie's life. The following is a list of potential discussion questions:

- In what ways is your life similar to Emile's? How are they different? Are there things that Emile does that you do in your daily life?
- Considering what we have learned about Emilie's life, what appears to be important to her? Looking at your diary, what is important for you?
- What are primary sources and how do they inform our understandings and interpretations of the past?
- What information can historians gather from primary sources?

What are the potential limitations of primary sources?

- How can primary sources help students connect to the past?

Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

As a final note, you might encourage your students to continue writing in their diary explaining to them that their writing might eventually be found, like Emile's pocket diaries, and that thus, they are creating a primary source that historians might be able to use in the future to learn about life in the early 2000s.

