My Primary Sources: Using Student Personal History as a Gateway to Historical Context


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Title: My Primary Sources: Using student personal history as a gateway to historical context

This lesson is two interacting activities designed to help students consider the role of historical and sociocultural context in the creation and use of primary sources. The lesson evokes students’ personal historical and sociocultural context in order to help them consider how the life experiences of historical actors affect both the types of sources left behind and the language used in those sources. The goal is to complicate student perceptions of primary sources to help students find and then use these sources. The lesson is designed as a one-shot for students new to historical research with primary sources.

The goals of this lesson are both personal and practical. By helping students become aware of how context and power dynamics affect their own language in different spaces, the lesson strengthens both search skills and skills in historical analysis. By evoking personal experience, the lesson improves understanding of the role power dynamics play in communication and information-sharing—both in the past and the present.

This lesson prioritizes the every-day interactions that students have with primary sources and language. Understanding how language shapes the documents that we create, read, and analyze is not simply a skill for the historian. It is important for our students in their current and future existence as citizens, activists, and laborers. The theory for this lesson comes out of bell hooks’ concept of holistic pedagogy in which we approach students as multi-dimensional fellow people rather than focusing solely on their classroom and scholarly needs as students. The goal is to help students develop the tools and skills to live a just and empowered life rather than merely to succeed in the classroom. This lesson is designed to both give a foundation for students’ future use of primary sources and to be useful to students as individuals who understand their history and place in the world.

The level of engagement on the individual level and trust on the group level necessary for a truly holistic and engaged pedagogy does not lend itself to the one-shot session format in which we “borrow” students. However, there are pieces of it that can be incorporated into information literacy instruction and that I have incorporated in this lesson. We can recognize our humanity inside the classroom and allow that to be part of the way that we interact with students. We can recognize and incorporate into the classroom the life that students live as multi-faceted individuals. Finally, we can teach skills that will help students function as multi-faceted, empowered individuals both inside and outside the classroom.

In addition to this pedagogical approach, critical discussions of power, historicity, and discourse inform this lesson. Michel-Rolph Trouillot provides a frame for conscious consideration about voice when finding appropriate sources. He writes, “Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation […] In history, power begins at the source.” Power is actively constructed at multiple points in the production of history—as the historical actor writes the text, as the text is distributed, as the intended audience reads and responds to the text, and as
the student engages the text in order to create a historical product. This is important to us as librarians because every instance affects the process of searching for these materials.

The connection between personal experience and historical practice is powerful. For example, David Levering Lewis, historian on W.E.B. DuBois, describes his intellectual journey in his essay within *Historians & Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History.* In it he discusses how it was his personal life experiences living as an African-American man and enmeshed in activism that influenced not only his shift from European history to DuBois, but toward a “multivocal” historical practice. This lesson aims to help students grapple with simultaneously being historical actors and researchers in the midst of multiple, sometimes competing, narratives.

This lesson combines Trouillot’s arguments about power’s role in the constitution of the primary sources students use to produce history with hooks’ centering of the student as person. The ultimate goal is to improve the student’s capability to consult and analyze multiple historical voices. As librarians, the main vehicle for this lesson is through the language students must employ and vary to find these sources. But for that consideration of language to work, it is imperative that students learn to see themselves not just as historians, but also as human individuals embedded in their own historical context.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- Explain how primary sources differ in the creation process
- Recognize the role that power dynamics play in the creation process of primary sources
- Explain the need for historical context in developing search terms
- Adjust search terms to find primary sources that match the lived experiences students are trying to understand in research
- Connect personal experiences of power dynamics to those of primary source creators

**Materials:**

- Worksheet addressing the following questions: (1) What are you going to write about? (2) Whose perspective might help you construct an argument on this topic? (3) Where might you find this perspective evidenced? It must also provide space to brainstorm at least three relevant keywords and one primary source type with synonyms for each.
- Poll Everywhere or another polling technology

**Preparation:**

- It is helpful to have a sense of student paper topics coming into the session to provide a variety of reference points.
- You will need a Poll Everywhere account or another form of anonymous polling that allows you to visualize responses. Set up three questions “What do you call this?” (A, B, and C).
- Set up a slide that provides three ambiguous pictures that you can expect differing responses on. My example includes (A) a submarine sandwich to evoke regional variances, (B) Ludwig Wittgenstein’s duck/rabbit optical illusion to evoke multiple views, and (C) a journal/diary as a type of primary source students may seek.
Session Instructions:

1. Start the class with the pre-made slide visible and instruct students to answer the questions at the polling link. Explain that you will return to their answers later.

2. For the Deduction Exercise group students by 2-3 individuals. Ask students to find a piece of paper with writing in their bag. Make sure they pick something they are comfortable sharing. If students seem uncertain of what to use, you can provide examples such as class notes, a paper, a receipt, a planner, etc. Have students trade their documents with each other. Upon trading students should take turns describing what they can learn about the other person from this document and the time in which they lived.

3. The debrief from this Deduction Exercise should emphasize the variety of experiences and voices that have been found in the class’s documents. Questions may include:
   i. Did someone have a planner? Did someone have classroom notes? Do you write differently for yourself than you do for your professor? How about for your friend?
   ii. Did someone have a receipt? What can we learn from a receipt?
   iii. Did someone have an identification card of some sort? What sort of information is on the card? What can you learn about someone from that card? Might that information change over time? Might the terminology vary geographically?

4. Bring the exercise back to their assignment by having students brainstorm what types of documents their historical subjects might have created.

5. Return to “What is this?” slide to discuss how language varies when discussing terminology to be used in searching. I find it powerful to present the responses as a visualized word cloud, which Poll Everywhere allows.
   (a) The sandwich represents one “category of variance:” – geographic. Talk about how because of varying experiences some might call it a sandwich, some a hoagie, some a grinder.
   (b) The optical illusion represents varied points of view. The same thing has multiple aspects that we may want to incorporate into our search.
   (c) The journal represents a document that they might actually need to search for and for which there will be multiple terms.

6. Brainstorm categories of lived experience with students that may affect the types of sources that students will need to search for and the keywords that they might want to use. Examples might include: race, gender, sexuality, class, education, profession, etc.

7. Lead discussion on why this is important for finding primary sources. Point out how you had already discussed student variation in language just from their different documents

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within one time period. Emphasize the connection between students’ socio-historical context and the socio-historical context of their research subjects.

8. Individually, have students brainstorm terms for their assignment that take into account the preceding discussion. Give them time to use these terms to search for primary sources for their assignment.

**Assessment:**

I have used student responses during the brainstorm sessions to assess student learning during the activity. When they understand the “context” piece well, they will offer class, language, or culture (among others) as various contexts that can affect how and where a person leaves information that becomes a primary source.

Students’ answers to the question, “whose perspective might you want to see evidenced?” should inform the question, “where might you find this evidenced?” If a student is studying the 19th century Russian immigrant’s home experience, for example, they may realize that translated diaries and letters might be more productive than newspaper accounts. If they are studying the public reaction to 19th century immigration to the US, they may realize that they want newspapers.

Students who understand the language issues will make this evident in the synonyms and search terms that they use. Assuming they arrive in class with a solid understanding of their topic and the time period, they should be able to begin to develop a list of alternative terms that might appear in primary sources. For example, in studying the development of the LGBT movement in the US, students may realize that terms that work best for sources from the 1940s, 1970s, and today are vastly different. And further, that the terms used in intra-group sources such as zines, newsletters, or diaries will vary from the terms used by individuals outside the group in sources such as government documents or mainstream newspapers.

This understanding should be evident on the worksheet and/or in free search time. I do not collect the worksheet because I want students to have their answers available for later searching. Instead, I choose to assess based on discussions during free search time. However, you may want to collect the worksheets to understand how students are brainstorming the language to use.

**Reflections**

While this lesson is focused on historical use of primary sources, the principles can be applied to any field that uses primary source documents as part of its research process including sociology, anthropology, communications, or other social sciences. In each discipline, finding, using, and analyzing sources such as newspapers will be tinged by the effect of language and power and thus a lesson like this can help students to find and analyze these sources.

Due to the difficulty of creating the trust necessary to fully explore personal experience with power relationships, I have curtailed group discussion in this lesson. However, more group discussion may be advisable in programmatic approaches to information literacy instruction, in which librarians have the time to build that trust.
The one-shot format does not allow the long-term, deep engagement necessary to adequately assess whether students are connecting their experiences as individuals in a historical/sociocultural context with the experiences of the individuals they study. However, while watching students search at the end of classes, I have seen them diversify the types of sources they are looking for and think about how the roles of the historical subject affect the terms that students use to search. For example, I had a student ask if they could use *Urban Dictionary* to find relevant terms. Going to a source they have used before to understand unfamiliar language demonstrated conceptual comprehension. The lesson succeeded in helping this student make a connection between variance in the everyday language they encounter and the academic task of finding primary sources.

**Final Question:**

How can you bring your experiences with power and privilege as document-creators and historical actors into your teaching while also bringing in those of your students?

**References**


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