

FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month

Sourcing

May/June 2010



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RATIONALE

Students in history classes often hear the phrase “think like an historian” but most of them do not really know what this means. In history classes students receive opportunities to work with primary source documents, much like the way historians would, but many students do not use the critical reading skills necessary to enhance their learning of the content. These critical reading skills used by historians, called heuristics, help them to determine contradictions and patterns in the documents they read (Nokes, Dole, & Hacker, 2007). One heuristics skill in particular, sourcing, helps historians to analyze and evaluate the source of the document. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) have studied the way professionals in the field read text and have found that historians, specifically, focus on the author or source when reading the text. The purpose for this is because they try to “figure out what story a particular author wanted to tell”; as they read they are aware of the fact that the text is an interpretation of historical events rather than the actual truth (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008, p. 50). What do our students do when they read historical text? How do they approach it? As teachers, we need our students to make certain critical decisions about texts; sourcing is a disciplinary specific strategy that can help students take a critical evaluative perspective on primary source documents.

HOW TO TEACH THIS SKILL

Students need to become familiar and comfortable with reading primary source documents. Before instruction can take place, teacher knowledge and understanding of the strategy must be established.

Prior to instruction, the teacher needs to determine specific characteristics or criteria that will help students look beyond the content. It is also important to understand and teach the bias rule before introducing this strategy. The bias rule states that every primary source document has a certain level of bias and it is the responsibility of the reader to determine the manner in which it is biased (Designed Instruction, 2002). Establishing criteria can help to determine the bias of the document and more about the author who created it. These criteria include the date or time period it was created, the author’s point of view, the document’s special qualities, and its evaluation. Feel free to use our “template” and examples for primary source evaluation.

Once criteria are established, it is the responsibility of the teacher to scaffold instruction. Sourcing is such a demanding and challenging task, that we need to not only activate students’ background knowledge but we also need to build and scaffold it, plus provide constructive feedback. Students need many opportunities to practice implementing sourcing with varied text(s).

Modeling through a Think Aloud

To teach students how to do this type of critical reading, we recommend beginning instruction by presenting the purpose for using primary source documents. Once the purpose is established and understood by the students, the teacher should activate students’ background knowledge about the main topic of the documents. The next step in instruction is to model think alouds using the primary source documents. Think alouds can help students better understand how a teacher implements a strategy or how he or she thinks through a task by making his or her thinking process and decision making visible to students through thinking aloud. The think aloud process should include what one already knows about the topic (background knowledge on the subject matter) and the inclusion of the criteria that he or she used to evaluate the document.

The following think aloud example is from Shanahan and Shanahan’s (2008):

“Note what one historian said when reading a text about Abraham Lincoln: ‘I saw, oh . . . I don’t know him [the author] very well, but he is part of a right-wing group of southern conservatives who is a secessionist. I’m not sure that the best model for thinking about Lincoln as a president is one that comes from a racist. So I have my critical eyes up a little bit, so it’s a bit of a stretch to be friendly to, so I wanted to make sure to read it fairly.’ In this nuanced example, the historian is revealing that he does not read the text as truth, but rather as an interpretation that has to be judged based on its credibility. He attempts to evaluate its credibility through an examination of the author’s biases. Knowing that the author belongs to a right-wing southern secessionist group, the historian understands that any criticism of Abraham Lincoln’s role in the Civil War may be fueled by this right-wing stance. However, he also knows that he, as a reader, has his own biases, and that his disregard for right-wing secessionist groups might color his reading to the point that he could miss important insights. The point is that he reads with a view in which both author and reader are fallible and positioned.” (p. 50).

Collaboration and Independent Practice

In order for students to feel comfortable with critical thinking and reading, they need ample opportunities with, and exposure to, a variety of primary source documents. Student collaboration can be used during instruction (i.e., during guided practice) so students can see other classmates’ different perspectives and understandings of the document at hand. This is also the opportune time to provide scaffolding and feedback. Students can use the sourcing template we have developed in a variety of ways—independently or as part of collaborative group work.

Please see a template and two examples for a graphic organizer on sourcing.

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Sourcing

Name: _____ Date: _____

Document Title	
Document Type • Photograph • Letter • Other	
Date/Time Period • Century • Hemisphere • Other	
Special Qualities/Characteristics A stamp or seal • A signature • Other	
Author and Position/Title A high ranking soldier • A slave • Other	
Audience The residents of the city • Family • Other	
Author Motivation To inform • To persuade • Other	
Evaluation of Author Descriptive • Propagandist • Other	
Evaluation of Document • How it was used • How it represented the time period • How it helped convey the point of view One question you still have about the document or topic at hand:	

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Sourcing Template

RESOURCES

Why Historical Thinking Matters

<http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why.html>

This website is a video about reading like a historian and sourcing that can be shown to students.

Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/index.html>

This website, from the Library of Congress, gives teachers and students access to many primary source documents.

Using the Familiar to Introduce Students to the Study of Primary and Secondary Sources

<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/teacher-support-traces.html>

This website details a fun activity to use for introducing the concept of primary source documents in the classroom.

REFERENCES

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