
Digitized Primary Source Documents from the Library of Congress in History and Social Studies Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS (LC) NATIONAL DIGITAL LIBRARY is digitizing collections of primary source materials and making them available on the World Wide Web. EDC Center for Children and Technology (CCT) has been working with the Library of Congress to help make these materials accessible and useful to educators teaching American history, social studies, and language arts. This article, based on CCT research, discusses some of the pedagogical and technological challenges of using digitized primary sources in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine browsing through a series of photographs taken by Matthew Brady during the Civil War or reading some of Walt Whitman's notebooks—in his own handwriting. Traditionally stored in musty archives, primary source materials such as these have only been available to people who could make a special trip to access them. But a number of government and university libraries around the world are digitizing their collections and making them available on CD-ROM and the World Wide Web. The two sets of materials mentioned above are from the Library of Congress (LC), which has digitized some thirty collections of primary sources in U.S. history to date through its National Digital Library, including photos, films, pamphlets, oral histories, and political cartoons.

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At the Center for Children and Technology (CCT), we have spent the past year watching teachers use the Library of Congress collections. Supported by the Kellogg Foundation, LC asked CCT researchers and curriculum designers to help them understand what roles these kinds of online resources can play in history and social studies curricula, and what kinds of support educators and students need to use them well.

Teachers, we've found, are enthusiastic. After years of teaching with textbooks cobbled together so as to offend no one, and with the often inadequate resources of small school libraries, classroom teachers, librarians, and media specialists with World Wide Web access can now engage students in authentic historical inquiry. Instead of consuming predigested accounts of historical figures and events, students get fragmentary and detailed pieces of evidence that historians themselves use as building blocks in fashioning their narratives. At their best, these fragments are vivid and personal—a letter, a domestic photograph—in ways that intrigue students and provoke questions and curiosity. For teachers who have taught the Civil War through textbooks and lectures, for instance, the Brady photos—views of battlefields, but also portraits of slave “contrabands,” documentation of military technology, and images of what daily life was like for common soldiers—open new windows onto an old subject, and new avenues for their, as well as that of their students', curiosity and research.

CCT's mission is to understand and develop the roles that new media can play in changing education, making it more learner-centered, more rigorous, more collaborative, and more inquiry-based. In working with the Library of Congress to make its vast archives of online primary sources useful for K-12 educators, we undertook several areas of work. First, we mapped the connections between the library's collections and the K-12 curriculum in history, social studies, and language arts. Second, we developed sample lesson plans that would model ways of using primary sources to build narrative understanding of history, strengthen critical thinking skills, and help students make connections between history and their own lives. Third, we field tested the model lessons in a variety of classrooms in order to understand the challenges and opportunities that teachers and students face in using these materials. Based on what we learned in these activities, we have designed software tools to support students' and teachers' work with primary sources and have also begun a substantial teacher professional development effort, using both face-to-face and online workshops and seminars.

The great promise of online resources for classroom inquiry is immediacy—students' ability to search and find materials as the need for them arises, at the point of intellectual purchase or, as educators are fond of saying, at the “teachable moment.” Student use of the collections for collaborative inquiry, even posting and sharing of history monographs, is one of CCT's ultimate goals in working with LC. But the current realities of access for the vast majority of classrooms make this ideal difficult to

realize. The number of computers available to a class of thirty is often small. The level and reliability of Web connectivity varies widely. Search engines are not learner friendly, and it can take students quite a while to find the kind of information they are seeking.

These challenges are common to many digital resources. The pedagogical challenges of using primary sources in the classroom are more novel. Our research with students and teachers focused, therefore, on the use of primary source documents as recommended in the six model lessons rather than on the technology. Kids worked with paper print-outs of the documents. We did not focus on the technology—how teachers and students access and search the online collections—because, for the classrooms we worked with, such access was not possible. Accordingly, teachers were introduced to the technology, to the online library collections, and to model lesson plans that had been built around selected texts. Some teachers chose to supplement the selected texts with others they found themselves. But all student work with primary sources involved print-outs from the Web, not real-time Web access. The computer's primary function was thus to deliver nontraditional learning materials, materials that were available only to scholars just a short while ago. We were interested in students' use of new kinds of historical resources made available by the Web, not the Web itself.

The account below is drawn from our observations of one class that participated in the study. It offers a good example of the kinds of questions that can arise when students confront primary sources and one teacher's approach to facilitating the inquiry process.

THE LESSON

The lesson was based on a text document from LC's collection of African American Pamphlets—*What Became of the Slaves on a Southern Plantation? Great Auction Sale of Slaves*. It is an account of an 1859 Savannah slave auction written by a northern abolitionist, Q. K. Philander Doesticks. The twenty-page narrative quotes from the catalog for the auction (listing slaves' names, jobs, and prices) and offers vivid descriptions of the auction itself, written so as to move northern readers to moral indignation and protest.

CONCEPTUAL GOALS

The conceptual goals of the lesson are for students to understand:

1. the economics of a slave auction and hence the economic function of slavery in the rural south;
2. slavery's impact on African Americans and their families; and
3. the perspective of a northern abolitionist on slavery and how African American perspectives might differ.

PEDAGOGICAL FORMAT

The format of the lesson is designed to address the fact that the original primary source document is twenty pages—too long for the typical middle school or even high school class to deal with productively. The text is therefore broken up into several pieces, each of which offers a different kind of testimony about the slave auction:

- excerpt from the slave auction catalogue, which offers evidence of the names, jobs, and prices asked for slaves;
- descriptive passages, which convey information about the context and consequences of the auction; and
- point-of-view passages, which highlight the abolitionist narrator's overall perspective on slavery.

Also, since African Americans have no active voice in the text, an oral history interview with a former slave girl from the library's WPA life histories is included to provide a point of comparison.

Each of these types of text anchors a different mode of using primary sources: analyzing data to find out how an institution works, reading closely for context and meaning, and finding evidence for an author's point of view. A mix of whole-group and small-group strategies is suggested, and sample questions are supplied for teachers and students.

The initial activity around the auction catalog was a whole group activity, the goal being for students to use the numerical data in the passage to understand what made a slave valuable to white planters. Guiding questions for discussion were supplied to teachers.

The second activity, based on the descriptive passages, was a small-group activity. Each group reads a passage about the background of the auction and its effects on the people involved and discusses the questions provided at the end of the passage. Following this, they share what they have learned with the larger group, either through whole class presentation and discussion or by creating written "exhibits" that other students read.

In the final exercise, students read and answer questions on passages underscoring the abolitionists' point of view and compare them to the voice of an ex-slave. This exercise can be conducted either as a whole-group or small-group activity.

A SEVENTH GRADE CLASS: THE TEACHER AND HER CLASS

There are thirty-three students in this social studies class in a progressive school in Manhattan with a diverse student body. Five are black, six are Asian, and two are Latino. According to their teacher, Julie, the students are very curious and motivated to do well in school. They have a good educational background and good skills, and Julie regards it as

her task to challenge and stimulate them.

She describes her teaching style as "very diverse" with an emphasis on process. Sometimes she talks to her students in class and has them answer questions, while in other classes she gives them instructions and has them work in small groups to discover or learn something for themselves.

Julie has had considerable experience working with primary source materials and often makes up packets of them for her students—photocopying excerpts or photographs. She also creates situations where students review various kinds of source materials and, after figuring out whether they are primary or secondary, discusses what they can learn from different kinds of sources. Her goal has been to let the students acquire a sense of history and draw their own conclusions without the interpretations of others; her hope is that they will gradually develop the skills needed to analyze primary source materials by themselves.

The biggest problem Julie encounters in using these sources is the time it takes to locate and acquire them. She finds it too time-consuming, for example, to read an entire book of slave narratives just to select the three or four she wants her students to read, and says it would be very helpful if primary source materials were categorized in some way so she could access them easily. In addition, it is difficult for her to find them in a pristine state or in their entirety; many of the materials her students have found contain some historian's interpretation.

Slave Auction Catalog

Julie introduced the lesson by asking the class what an auction was and then explained that the purpose of an estate auction was to sell off the property belonging to a person at the time of their death in order to pay off their outstanding debts. She passed out the slave auction catalog (see figure 1) to the students, and told them that slaves were sold the way we sell objects today—i.e., as property.

When each student had received a copy of the catalog, Julie read the introduction aloud in accordance with the lesson plan and asked how they thought the bidding process might have worked to arrive at a final price. One student thought older slaves cost more, while others thought age did not necessarily matter. Julie told them that slaves were sold as a group and had students work in groups of four to answer the following questions suggested in the lesson plan: (1) How were the slaves grouped? (2) Which group cost the most? (3) What things brought the price of a slave up or down? (4) What does "prime" mean? (5) Why were cotton and rice the primary skills people had?

The students wrestled with what formula to use in determining the cost of slaves. They saw that slaves were grouped by family and were not sure whether cost should be defined by the total amount of a given group

NAME	AGE	REMARKS
103-Wooster	45	hand, and fair mason.
104-Mary	40	cotton hand.
Note: Sold for \$300 each		
105-Commodore Bob	aged	rice hand.
106-Kate	aged	cotton.
107-Linda	19	cotton, prime young woman.
108-Joe	13	rice, prime boy.
Note: Sold for \$600 each		
109-Bob	30	rice.
110-Mary	25	rice, prime woman.
Note: Sold for \$1,135 each		
111-Anson	49	rice, ruptured, one eye.
112-Violet	55	rice hand.
Note: Sold for \$250 each		

Figure 1: Excerpt from the Catalogue of Slaves To Be Sold

Excerpt from "What Became of the Slaves on a Southern Plantation? Great Auction Sale of Slaves," by Q.K. Philander Doesticks. Published in *The Tribute*, an abolitionist newspaper, in 1863. Source: Library of Congress collection of African American Pamphlets. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aap/aaphome.html>

or the average cost per person. One group did some calculation and agreed the definition of cost should be based on the total for the cluster. Students also thought that male slaves who were young and strong would sell for more than those who were not, while physical illness, old age, and disabilities would lower cost.

Another group of students discussed the word "prime," defining it as "the good years." Two students argued about whether prime was related to age, while another thought it depended on how well you could work, regardless of age. A fourth believed that age had to be connected to the definition of prime, and substantiated this by referring to the catalog, where a fifty-five year old slave had sold for very little, while another was sold as prime. In the end, the group agreed they needed to define an age range.

Group Presentations

Julie then asked a group to read their answers to the class and comment on what affected the price of slaves. One student said she had looked through the catalog and found that men cost more than women, while another commented that lack of skills reduced cost. When Julie asked why cotton and rice were the slaves' primary skills, one student replied that these were the main crops of the plantations in the area, and Julie emphasized that the region's entire economy was based on these crops, and that the skills slaves possessed were necessary to sustain it.

Then she asked the class to pay attention to Anson and Violet, who were listed as #111 and #112 in the catalog and sold for \$250 each. She read their story aloud. Anson was described as "ruptured" and having one eye while Violet was sold as sick. The buyers declared Violet would die within three months and said, "I won't have nothing to do with her—don't want any half-dead Nigger about me." After hearing this, one student remarked that slaves were not treated as people but as merchandise: "It was like you went to a store to buy a CD. You wouldn't want to buy a CD that had been hit by a baseball bat."

The students struggled to make sense of slavery and understand the slave owners. One thought peer pressure may have contributed to the way owners treated their slaves, while another thought that owners did not consider what they were doing as wrong, or rationalized it by believing they were helping people whom they regarded as unable to live without them. Other students thought slave owners might have felt what they were doing was wrong but did it anyway—just as they themselves sometimes did things they knew to be wrong, and a black student thought slavery had lasted so long because people thought it was the way things were supposed to be: If you were taught since early childhood that blacks were no good, you would be likely to think that way all your life. When one student pointed out that slave owners could not stop using slaves because they required the labor for their plantations, Julie reiterated that slavery was an economic institution that affected both blacks and whites, and that the slave trade was a very profitable and important industry upon which the economy and many people's lives depended.

Reading of Primary Texts

The instructor then passed out to each group five excerpts from the text, assigning each group to read one passage and answer the questions at the end. She told them they did not have to arrive at an agreement.

This portion of the lesson plan demonstrated nicely how primary source material provided support and lent credibility to students' arguments. The students frequently referred to the passages for answers and were often able to find the exact words which supported their claims. For example, when one group read how traders treated slaves during the

days before a sale and a white student remarked that they could not say slaves were treated badly, a loud chorus of disagreement arose: Students referred to the text, which stated that slaves slept on the ground and were not given enough food. What care they received was strictly in the slave owners' interests who just wanted them alive until they were sold.

Group Presentation of Text

During group presentations, Julie was more active, asking questions to test the students' understanding. She read aloud the passage about different kinds of jobs the slaves had and then began a discussion about what other skills slaves might have had that were not mentioned in the text and why. Some students said cooking and the care of children were not included because it was taken for granted that slaves had these skills. Several discussed why no blacks became doctors.

Julie asked a student to read the next passage aloud, which described the separation of slaves and the pain it caused them. She asked the class why the word "nigger" was in quotations and was told it was because the text was written by northerners, who wanted to use the right term. Then, since time was up, she assigned a passage about the love story of two slaves named Jeffrey and Dorcas (see figure 2) as homework.

Reading a Love Story

At the beginning of the next class, Julie told the students to take out the passage about Jeffrey and Dorcas, and their answers to the questions that followed it. She reminded them that slavery was part of the economy and that this passage was about its impact on a black family torn apart by a slave auction. One student wanted to know who had written the story. Julie told him it was a northern abolitionist and reminded them to keep in mind the author's point of view.

The story was powerful, and the class seemed very attentive and affected by it. Several students read portions of it aloud but had difficulty pronouncing some words. When they had finished, Julie asked why the competition for the slave Jeffrey was stiff. After a few students voiced their opinions about it, the students resumed their struggle to understand the horrors of slavery. One black student, for example, said it was hard to imagine families being separated so callously; he could not have slept if he had been there and seen the tears running down their faces. He asked how slave owners could handle it. Julie, too, said she couldn't imagine families being sold away like that. She asked them what they learned from the story. A white student replied that she had learned three things: first, that slavery could break love; second, that the master tried to please Jeffrey—he tried to buy Dorcas; and third, that the master didn't listen to Jeffrey no matter what he said. Other students did not believe the master tried to please Jeffrey or buy Dorcas. A black student said the master had just wanted to appear nice, while another expressed

..Jeffrey was sold. He finds out his new-master; and, hat in hand, the big tears standing in his eyes, and his voice trembling with emotion, he stands before that master and tells his simple story, praying that his betrothed may be bought with him. Though his voice trembles, there is no embarrassment in his manner; his fears have killed all the bashfulness that would naturally attend such a recital to a stranger, and before unsympathizing witnesses; he feels that he is pleading for the happiness of her he loves, as well as for his own, and his tale is told in a frank and manly way.

"I loves Dorcas, young Mas'r; I loves her well an' true; she says she loves me, and I know she does; de good Lord knows I loves her better than I loves any one in de wide world—never can love another woman half as well. Please buy Dorcas, Mas'r. We're be good sarvants to you long as we live. We're be married right soon, young Mas'r, and de chillun will be healthy and strong, Mas'r, and dey'll be good sarvants, too. Please buy Dorcas, young Mas'r. We loves each other a heap—do, really true, Mas'r."

Jeffrey then remembers that no loves and hopes of his are to enter into the bargain at all, but in the earnestness of his love he has forgotten to base his plea on other ground till now, when he bethinks him and continues, with his voice not trembling now, save with eagerness to prove how worthy of many dollars is the maiden of his heart:

"Young Mas'r, Dorcas prime woman—A1 woman, sa. Tall gal, sir; long arms, strong, healthy, and can do a heap of work in a day. She is one of de best rice hands on de whole plantation; worth \$1,200 easy, Mas'r, an' fus'rate bargain at that."

The man seems touched by Jeffrey's last remarks, and bids him fetch out his "gal, and let's see what she looks like."

Jeffrey goes into the long room, and presently returns with Dorcas, looking very sad and self-possessed, without a particle of embarrassment at the trying position in which she is placed. She makes the accustomed curtsy, and stands meekly with her hands clasped across her bosom, waiting the result. The buyer regards her with a critical eye, and growls in a low voice that the "gal has good p'int." Then he goes on to a more minute and careful examination of her working abilities. He turns her around, makes her stoop, and walk; and then he takes off her turban to look at her head that no wound or disease be concealed by the gay handkerchief; he looks at her teeth, and feels of her arms, and at last announces himself pleased with the result of his observations, whereat Jeffrey, who has stood near, trembling with eager hope, is overjoyed, and he smiles for the first time. The buyer then crowns Jeffrey's happiness by making a promise that he will buy her, if the price isn't run up too high. And the two lovers step aside and congratulate each other on their good fortune. But Dorcas is not to be sold till the next day, and there are twenty-four long hours of feverish expectation.

Excerpt from "What Became of the Slaves on a Southern Plantation? Great Auction Sale of Slaves, by Q.K. Philander Doesticks" published in *The Tribute*, an abolitionist newspaper, in 1863. Source: Library of Congress collection of African American Pamphlets. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aap/aaphome.html>

surprise that Jeffrey could talk to his master and speak up for Dorcas; he had never heard of anything like that before. Julie explained that the way slaves were treated by their masters was an individual matter and also depended upon their mood; she added that it must have been terrifying for slaves never to know what response they would receive.

A black student made a connection between his own life and the story: the master and Jeffrey might look equal but were not, because slaves were treated as pieces of property—just as at home, he could ask his parents to buy him something and they might do so, but it was not to please him, just to shut him up. Another student added that she felt the focus of the story should not be the master but the tragedy of the two lovers. Julie reminded the class that the way they perceived the story of Jeffrey and Dorcas depended upon themselves as individuals.

Reading for Different Perspectives

She then passed out two passages that had been written by a white journalist who opposed slavery and asked the students to determine the writer's point of view. One student read the first aloud, and Julie helped him with the pronunciation of words like "mulatto," "defiled," "degenerate," "docile," and "physiological." When he was finished, she defined those words for the class and translated the entire passage, reading it aloud and paraphrasing some of the sentences.

The students began working in small groups to answer the questions at the end of the paragraph. One group discussed whether the author was sarcastic; they felt it outrageously racist that slaves who were of mixed parentage were considered undesirable because they were said to be smarter and more difficult to control. The students in the group were unable to decide if the passage reflected the point of view of a master or an abolitionist who was being sarcastic. However, time was up and Julie assigned them written homework: "What a day of life would be like for slaves."

Five days later, she continued the lesson by re-reading passages A and B and asking the class to discuss and compare their points of view on the subject of slave auctions. She asked, "What makes a person desirable?" One student said someone who was not mixed race. "Yes, someone who is controllable, who doesn't question. What is so tragic in passage B?" Julie asked. "They are close, they know each other, they are torn apart...they have no control," one student replied, while another said the author described a very beautiful scene—with stars in the sky—but what was actually happening was very ugly.

Julie asked about the tone of passage A. "This is a racist guy," one said, but another thought the author was being sarcastic. This second student asked the class to note the word "degenerate" and remarked that a slave owner would not use the word—nor phrases like "the starry flag,"

“they have forgotten it,” or “you may have heard.” She listed some of the sentences she found unlikely to be the voice of a supporter of slavery in order to demonstrate that the article was written by an abolitionist making fun of slavers. The rest of the class did not seem able to discern the sarcasm in the passage. However, Julie agreed with the student that the author was poking fun at white people who thought they were superior. After she expressed her opinion, the students discontinued their discussion. If any disagreed or did not understand, they did not say so.

Julie then asked them about the tone in passage B. One student said it was how the author felt after seeing slaves torn apart and was not sarcastic. Another thought this passage more effective because most people were unlikely to perceive the sarcasm intended by the first. A third agreed with the idea that the second was more effective because it was “more sincere.”

Julie designated a student to read the story of Molly Kensey (who had been a slave until she was ten years old and had been interviewed about her experiences), and asked the class what Molly Kensey’s childhood was like. After some discussion about the ways in which slavery had affected her, Julie asked the class whether the point of view in this passage was different from the others. They did not think so. One student said he would like to read passages written by slave owners to see their point of view. Another said that Molly Kensey’s interview had affected her more than any other passage: It was so real. A black student added that he could see the sarcasm in passage A, but he didn’t understand how black and white came to be mixed, to which another responded that whites probably raped black women without thinking about whether they would bear children. Julie told the class the author of the passage was making fun of the idea that one race was smarter than another and reminded them to consider the author and point of view when reading documents in the future. She also told them she had put more primary source materials on the board at the back of the room and secondary source materials on slavery and the Civil War on the table next to the board. She ended the class by asking the students to do an independent research project using these materials.

Julie used four forty-five-minute class periods over three days to implement this lesson plan and succeeded in having her students explore issues involved in the economics of slavery.

CONCLUSION

This story exemplifies a number of ways in which primary sources can support the investigation of history. Students in Julie’s class grappled with a number of complex issues raised by the content of the materials they read, such as the motivations of slave owners. They considered the impact that a narrator’s point of view might have on a story, with at least

one student expressing an interest in reading accounts written from other perspectives. And they developed their own interpretations of the events they read about, using the materials to support or refute their arguments. Julie's students did not merely learn a set of facts but rather engaged with ideas, constructed answers to questions of their own asking, and had their curiosity piqued. These experiences are quite a departure from those of students educated in the traditional history-as-a-set-of-facts approach.

Our research on this and other projects suggests additional benefits and challenges for teachers, librarians, and media specialists using digitized primary sources with students. Good teachers have always spent a great deal of time collecting and collating materials for their classes, and librarians often play a crucial role in this process. Appropriate and relevant primary sources may be difficult to locate, and digitized archives make a much expanded range of interesting materials available. Sorting through these archives is not necessarily any less time consuming than working with nonelectronic materials, however. In addition to the vast numbers of items, the search tools available may not be terribly useful in seeking materials related to a specific theme or curriculum topic. Teachers may need help designing search strategies and ferreting out items that are appropriate for their curriculum.

The lesson plans developed for our work with the Library of Congress included downloaded and organized materials from the Brady collection. A number of teachers have said that, while they are excited by the prospect of having access to primary sources, and while they used the lesson successfully in their classrooms, they would be unlikely to use primary sources if they had to select the materials and develop the activities themselves.

In addition, when the curriculum is opened up to student exploration and inquiry, questions can arise that teachers feel unprepared to address. Opportunities to talk with other teachers working in similar situations can be invaluable as they negotiate their new role in the classroom.

CCT and the Library of Congress are exploring the possibilities of an online forum for educators that would help address all of these issues. The forum would be a virtual space where participants could discuss their experiences with one another; share materials, search strategies, and lesson plans; point to interesting materials that they have come across; and seek the support and guidance of their peers. As more primary materials become available in digitized formats and more educators have access to them in their classrooms and libraries, these kinds of approaches can facilitate the use of primary sources in history and social studies curriculum as an alternative to traditional textbook teaching and learning.

The Library of Congress National Digital Library collections can be found at: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem>