

Teaching with Source Documents: Creating Meaning Through Historical Source Document Analysis

In any research endeavor, evidence is essential. We turn to evidence for a deeper understanding, to put theory into perspective, to substantiate claims, and to get a firm grasp on reality—to get context. Historians turn to the past for that evidence. They go to the source.

Source Documents and the Historical Record

It is important that students understand the nature and constraints of the historical record. As with historians, students trying to piece together clues from the past will encounter gaps in every sequence recorded. Between what has been lost, intentionally destroyed, never documented or witnessed, or recorded with an ulterior motive or outright bias, it can be frustrating trying to piece together a reliable picture of the past. If time permits, introduce the concepts of the historical record, sources, and thinking historically by using a familiar context—their own lives (access [Using the Familiar to Introduce Students to the Study of Primary and Secondary Sources](http://www.designedinstruction.com/using-the-familiar-to-introduce-students-to-the-study-of-primary-and-secondary-sources) and the student activity “I Left a Trace” at <http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/teacher-support-traces.html>).

Analysis of Primary Sources

There are a number of ways in which historians analyze primary sources, but all have a common purpose—to identify certain salient bits of information and stimulate further thought and investigation. Instructionally, the goal is to promote historical thinking. The term *heuristic* has been aptly used in this sense to explain how historians think as they analyze primary sources. There are two principal heuristics.

Sourcing heuristic


Historians employ the sourcing heuristic by establishing a non-biased context in which to examine a primary source. They ask questions about an author's purpose, motivation, and reliability in terms of their knowledge and proximity to

A Long Time Ago
 - Uncovering Context Through Reading to Learn and Purposeful Mapping -

Teacher Guide

Background

In 1908, a school teacher named Lewis Hine embarked on a journey to change the world. His goal? To abolish child labor. His sponsors? The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), a small organization founded in 1904 to “promote the rights, awareness, dignity, well-being and education of children and youth as they relate to work and working.” Through the dedicated efforts of Hine and others, the NCLC made a difference for children everywhere. Its work, still relevant, continues to this day. (for more, see <http://kapow.org/nclc.htm>)



For our instructional purposes, the special collection of scrapbooks, stories, and photographs collected by Hine and the NCLC provides an excellent opportunity to explore

Alternative Instructional Strategy
 To learn more about the historical context.

Address both history and reading comprehension. Coming soon --

A Long Time Ago: Uncovering context through reading to learn and purposeful mapping

Free for our teachers and parents of students in grades 3-6

Get the teacher guide with lesson plan and procedures, accompanying student guides and ready-to-use worksheets, and even additional instructional strategy supports.

<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/a-long-time-ago.html>

events at the time a document was written. Through delving into the original intent of the source, the audience for whom it was created, and the setting and backdrop within which it was created, students begin to appreciate past perceptions and thinking that are quite different from those of today. Students put themselves in the shoes of past players while simultaneously creating a distance between our own views and those of people of earlier eras.

Corroboration heuristic

Historians employ the corroboration heuristic by comparing information from several documents. Through cross-indexing sources, students note corroboration among primary sources, as well as among historians' interpretations of these sources over time—through second- and third-order documents.

When engaging in either heuristic, it is helpful to keep in mind a couple of rules typically applied by historians when examining primary sources.

Time and Place Rule

The rule states that the closer in time and place a source and its creator were to the actual past event, the better the source will be. Generally speaking:

Direct artifacts or traces of the event are the most reliable sources.

Accounts created by actual observers are more reliable than those created by people who did not witness the event.

First-hand accounts created at the time of the event are more reliable than those created after the event occurred.

The further the account is removed from the actual event, in terms of the creator or the time elapsed, the less reliable it is.

Bias Rule

The rule states that every source is biased. The *manner* in which it is biased is what is in question. Generally speaking:

The perception of the creator of the source must be considered. No source—whether it is a published document, a letter or diary, or even a photo—is devoid of the influence of its creator's point of view.

Many sources were created to serve a purpose, often intentional and sometimes unintentional, and must be examined critically and with a degree of skepticism.

Factually speaking, sources are not absolutely "correct." Every source should be cross-indexed and compared with other sources and evidence.

A Critical Link: Teaching for Reading Comprehension and Historical Thinking

Analyzing a source document requires students to comprehend what they read. Though it is often overlooked in domain-specific instruction, any teacher who has taught for content learning has experienced the frustration that can occur in the absence of reading comprehension skills. There is no single model to address the dilemma. Every subject has its

Seize the opportunity! Check out our article [Reading Comprehension and Historical Thinking: Classroom Realities in Building a Context Connection](#) for additional background on helping students build a solid foundation for historical source documents.

Access at:
<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learning-leads/reading-historical-sources.html>

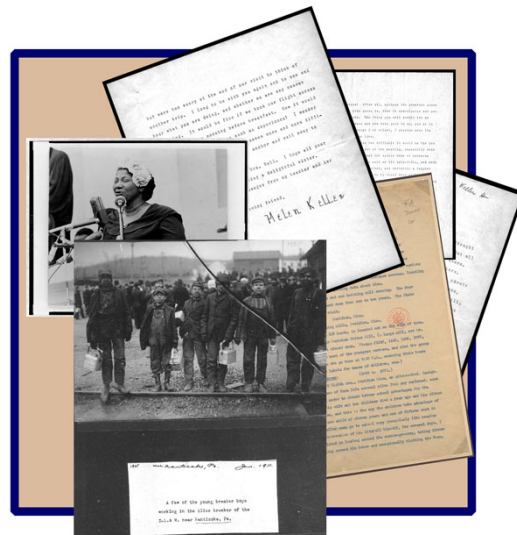
own particular ways of thinking and perceiving information. History—and historical thinking—is no exception. Yet, there is a fundamental research and theoretical basis for using *reading to learn* to enhance *learning to read*, and vice versa. Given the past absence of history content in most elementary schools, and the deepening of that trend due to the increasing focus of legislation on achievement in reading and writing, the symbiotic relationship presents a compelling rationale to seize that opportunity.

Review also the Research Précis - [Contextualized Learning: Addressing Standards in History](#) on historical thinking, here-there-then, and incorporating historical narrative. Other contextual aspects associated with “reading to learn” and “learning to read” can be accessed through LearningLeads’ curriculum and learning strand [Learning Through Context](#).

<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learning-leads/learning-through-context.html>

Going to the Source: Factors and Procedures for Enhancing Students’ Analysis Skills

There are as many ways in to use sources as there are types of sources (see right, [Types of Primary and Secondary Sources](#)). Sources can be used to introduce a topic, therefore generating student interest in an upcoming set of activities or unit. They can be brought in at a particular point in a lesson as substantiation for certain facts or events students are studying. Sources may serve as a guide for certain activities—a reenactment of an invention or scientific experiment, for example. For the most part, the effectiveness of the method used to integrate the source depends upon the intended learning objective. However, using primary sources can offer an opportunity to address and model historical thinking in a thorough and deliberate manner not available through many modes of instruction. That is relevant to good instruction, whether addressing historical thinking skills or reading skills in a real context, or most other domain-specific studies (e.g., science inquiry skills and the role and importance of past achievements in understanding and using science and technology, applying standards-based scientific operating principles related to the history and nature of science, or background related to mathematical theories and proofs). Though the process is as adaptable as the function it serves, addressing certain elements ensures a more robust and appropriate application. Regardless of the subject domain being addressed, *deliberate* analysis of sources enhances clarity and adds structure to student learning—contrary to the notion of constraining or stifling student initiative or independent learning, it enhances planning for contingencies that will arise and sets a stage for encouraging flexibility and responsiveness on the part of the instructor. It promotes our ability, if we choose, to engage in linear and sequential approaches that can adapt and respond to situations as they arise, new student discoveries or insights, and/or pursuit-worthy questions. It allows



Find out about [Types of Primary and Secondary Sources](#) that can be used to supplement instruction. Access at: <http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/types-of-sources.html>

us to engage in “structured chaos.” What it does not do is allow us to just bring out a source and then leave it alone. It begs attention and follow-through. As both a means to an end (student learning) and as a method of discourse, thoughtful deliberation requires that we consider a number of factors. Our *DELIBERATE Sourcing Approach for Context-Based Analysis* calls for instruction that addresses the following:

Definitions and distinctions between the types of terms used with students.

Elaboration of details and clues that can be sleuthed from a source.

Limitations of sources, the creators, and our ability to validate assumptions.

Intent or purpose of the source.

Bias—similar to “intent,” only usually more personal or societal in nature.

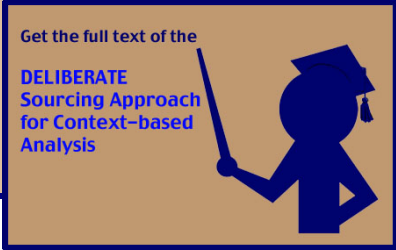
Epistemology—origins, methods, and extents of our knowledge.

Reading.

Associations among sources.

Time.

Extensional needs.

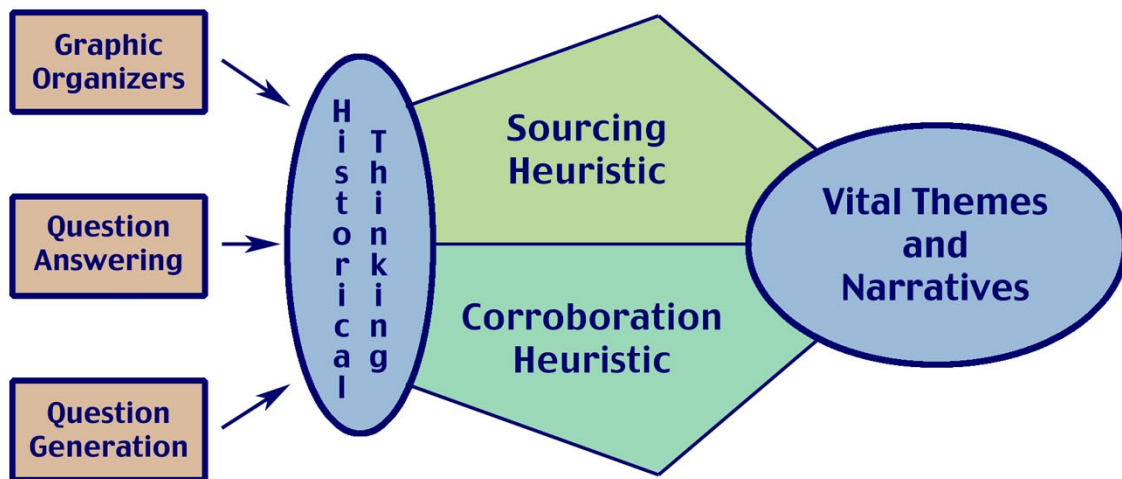


Get the full text of the
DELIBERATE
Sourcing Approach
for Context-based
Analysis

Instructional Practices and Approaches

Instructionally there are numerous considerations when teaching for student acquisition of analysis skills and conceptual understanding of a past event or issue. Many of these have been addressed either in this document or in those associated and linked from this document and elsewhere (e.g., CASE, the Learning Through Context overview page, and so forth). However, to tie in these considerations along with objectives, standards, and an appropriate instructional sequence and set of strategies requires further thought and effort. The key is, as before, remaining focused on inculcating historical thinking skills. Historians and educators Nelson and Drake (2001) suggest that when implementing a context-based approach for comprehending source documents, analysis guides that draw students' attention to the sourcing heuristic are helpful in initiating historical thinking. They suggest that teachers can organize reading guides by five tasks: (1) identify the document, (2) analyze the document, (3) determine the historical context, (4) identify the vital theme and narrative of the document, and (5) indicate the relationship of the document to a discipline in the social sciences/social studies. Each task and its sub-tasks emphasize the sourcing heuristic, what historians do before reading for content comprehension; the corroboration heuristic, what historians do to relate one document to another document; contextualization, the way historians describe the time frame and local and national conditions at the time a document was created; and comparison, which historians use to describe conditions in other parts of the world at the time a document was created.

Inherent in this reasoning is the identification of clearly articulated learning objectives, the specific interpretive and critical analysis skills students must master in order to meet these objectives, and the effective use of research-based instructional strategies (e.g., use of graphic organizers, question answering and question generation, among others) that have been shown to positively impact these skills. The figure below provides a simplified view of the interaction of these working parts, including, as an outcome, a conceptual understanding of a specified Vital Theme and Narrative (identified by the seminal document in history education *On Building a History Curriculum*, by the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools). Our research previously discussed has indicated that students develop self-regulated interpretive and critical analysis skills through accessing and interpreting source information; investigating source details, perspectives, and contextual relationships; and constructing corroborating supports that withstand scrutiny. These constitute, in essence, our central learning objectives in terms of historical thinking. Once attention has been given to the standards that must be addressed, and localization of these required standards to these learning objectives, the vision of appropriate instruction can become more complete.



**Context
Analysis
Source
Explorations**



Check out the **FREE** sample unit "A Long Time Ago"

Resources for teaching through historical source investigations. Access at:

<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/case.html>

For more on teaching and learning using historical source documents and artifacts, see [CASE: Context Analysis Source Explorations](#).

CASE represents a cohesive instructional approach that is adaptable to any classroom or home teaching environment. The CASE overview page contains a regularly updated variety of CASE instructional units (including the free sample unit on child labor— "A Long Time Ago"), as well as links to each pertinent instructional resource used in units. Visit regularly for new additions and options.



Go to the
**Contextual
Learning**
overview page

Go to the
LearningLeads™
homepage

<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/learning-through-context.html>

<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/>

October 2009 Focus on Modeling

For six months, it's been in development, and now it's ready. *Modeling for Student Learning*, a translation of research into science 9th grade, is even on the shelves of research in the practice. It's back to classroom, one of the best of its kind, if you use models in your teaching, order this multi-media - a CD, page, 96 books and 42 slides, a \$1 for all, a must for science teachers.

For more information, go to:
<http://www.designedinstruction.com/updates/>

Ever wondered what the research says about contextualized learning - using a setting, particular scenario, or event as the focus for instruction? Check out the most recent information, in three different formats: PDFs, ready for download at:
<http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/>

Click the links above and go there right now, or visit the [LearningLeads homepage](http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/) first. See you there!

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