

# INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITIES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



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 TPEP Criteria: Marzano 2, Demonstrating effective teaching practices  
 Inquiry Question: How does the use of primary sources impact student engagement in social studies classes?



← QR Code for .pdf of inquiry paper and all references



QR Code for digital version of poster for ease of viewing →

## INTRODUCTION/RATIONALE

In my personal life I have often heard young people describe history as “boring,” which is a shame since I absolutely love history! But I understand where they are coming from, often history classes can feel irrelevant to students today. I want to make my classroom as engaging as possible so that students can connect with the material they are learning. I believe primary sources are an excellent way to accomplish this, as students can understand the firsthand impacts of historical events on the lives of regular people. Additionally, primary sources often reveal experiences or perspectives of people who are often ignored by broader historical narratives and textbooks.

In my student teaching I utilized primary sources quite frequently and usually found success with them. These activities often engaged the students, and I noticed that they had remembered more information or took better notes from the lessons. However, sometimes the sources were difficult for the students to read or comprehend, usually due to unfamiliar vocabulary. I wanted to learn both if primary source activities can increase student engagement and how to best implement them to achieve this goal and avoid frustration.

For this inquiry project, **primary sources** will refer to firsthand accounts of a historical event from someone who was directly connected to it. **Student engagement** will refer to a student’s interest in the content, motivation to participate and learn, and on-task behavior in class.



A painting found in nearly every American History textbook, but how many students have the context to interpret and analyze this primary document?  
 Gast, J. (1872) *American Progress*.

## PRIMARY SOURCES AND INQUIRY

Primary source activities are an excellent way to support student inquiry. Students must use their existing knowledge of history to make sense of primary documents. Students develop questions about the document and seek other sources for answers. This facilitates the growth of their critical thinking and analysis skills (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012). These skills are valuable beyond the classroom, for example in analyzing media and news with a critical lens.

The National Council for the Social Studies’ College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework also highlights the importance of inquiry in engagement, stating that students can become disengaged when content consists solely of textbook work and multiple-choice tests. They promote engagement through the Inquiry Arc, a four-stage framework that emphasizes the development of questions, gathering and analysis of sources, and formation of conclusions. Primary source analysis fits perfectly into the third dimension, in which students must evaluate sources and develop claims based on the evidence. Thus, primary sources are not only useful for engaging students, but for preparing them for their futures as adults (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

### C3 Framework Organization

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries	Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts	Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence	Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action
Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries	Civics	Gathering and Evaluating Sources	Communicating and Critiquing Conclusions
	Economics		
	Geography	Developing Claims and Using Evidence	Taking Informed Action
	History		

National Council for the Social Studies, 2013



Primary sources like this helped my students to connect emotionally with the lives of young people in the Industrial Revolution.  
 Hines, L. (1908) *Children working in a bottle factory*.

## DO PRIMARY SOURCES INCREASE ENGAGEMENT?

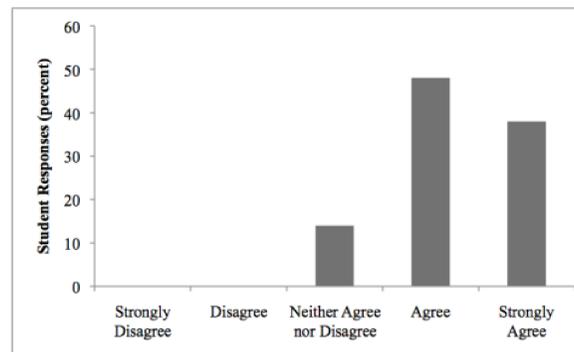
Fostering student engagement is not just about whether students like their classes or not, it has a major impact on their academic and personal lives. Students who are engaged in school content show better grades, are more likely to complete school, are less likely to engage in substance use or delinquency and are more likely to pursue higher education (Wang & Degol, 2014).

Many historians and educators think an inquiry-based approach using primary sources is a good way to increase engagement. Primary sources can “stimulate curiosity, provoke questions, and supply evidence for historical accounts” (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012, p. 594). Furthermore, reading a primary document gives students a much better understanding of how historical events impacted people’s lives, allowing students to feel more connected to the past. All of these can potentially spark interest in social studies, but do primary sources actually increase engagement?

There are surprisingly few studies testing the impact of primary sources on student engagement. Of the five studies I found, most have relatively small sample sizes ranging from 30 to 94 students. The majority of these studies support the assertion that primary sources do increase engagement. All but one study found a strong correlation between primary source analysis and student engagement (Gore, 2017). There were also several other benefits resulting from the use of primary sources, such as students completing more homework or being able to recall information more readily (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011).

It seems primary sources do generally enhance engagement, so long as they are implemented properly. Without providing students adequate contextual information for the source, they may become frustrated and disengaged (Barton, 2005). Providing this support is crucial to the proper use of primary sources for student engagement.

Figure 1. Reading Packets Were More Interesting than Textbooks

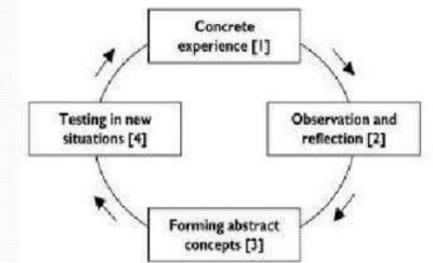


In this graph “Reading Packets” are a collection of primary documents used instead of a textbook  
 Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011

## PHYSICAL OR DIGITAL SOURCES?

Another question in the implementation of primary sources is whether there is any difference between the use of physical or digital sources. Some educators believe that working with physical sources is inherently more engaging than with digital, as students can actually hold the documents while they investigate them. While this may be a benefit for physical sources, a study by Press & Meiman (2021) showed that there was no discernable difference in student engagement between digital and physical primary sources. Furthermore, digital sources also possess some advantages over physical sources, such as increased access to online archives and the ability to share documents with peers. In another study, students surveyed reported that they preferred digital primary sources for these reasons (Lindquist & Long, 2011). Both physical and digital sources are viable for increasing student engagement, it may just depend on the class and situation which is most appropriate.

## Constructive Learning Model



<http://phenomsience.weebly.com/blog/constructivism>

## THEORIES (CONSTRUCTIVISM)

In reviewing the research on the topic of primary sources and student engagement, many of the scholars I read frequently discussed the learning theory of constructivism. This makes a great deal of sense, as constructivism “asserts that students construct knowledge from experience” and by solving authentic and meaningful problems (Lindquist & Long, 2011, p. 226). Primary source analysis can certainly fit this definition. When reading an original document, students often feel more emotionally connected to the content and can more directly understand the experience of people living through events in history. This connection not only can lead to greater engagement in the class, but also better learning and retention of knowledge (Malkmus, 2010). Additionally, primary source analysis is an authentic task, meaning it asks students to apply their skills to real world challenges. Students must use their skills of analysis and inquiry to derive meaning from primary source documents (Gore, 2017). Furthermore, students reading primary source documents often encounter unique problems to understanding. They may not know some of the words used in the text or be unfamiliar with the people and places mentioned (Fines, 1989). This can lead students to seek their own answers by referencing other materials or collaborating with peers, another important aspect of constructivism.

Another theory that connects to this topic is Lev Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development*. When first reading primary sources, students will likely be unable to interpret the documents without instructor support, which can lead to frustration and disengagement (Barton, 2005). However, when supported by proper instruction, students can utilize their prior knowledge to create questions about primary sources and find answers. In tasks involving primary sources, students are not given all the information, but enough to engage with the task while still leaving plenty of room for inquiry and critical thinking (Bickford & Bickford, 2015).

Engagement results - Aggregate (spring & fall 2018)

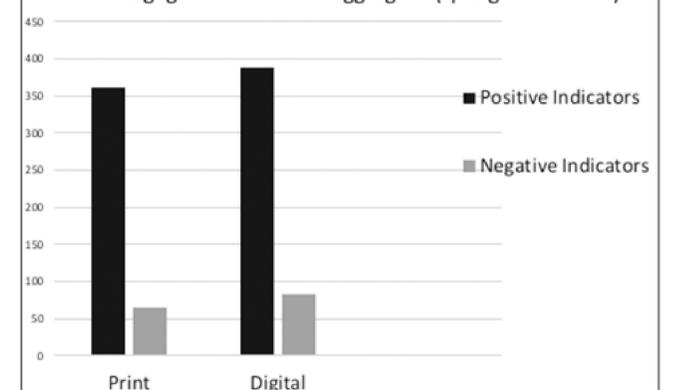


Figure 3. Results comparing engagement with print versus digitized primary sources, aggregate from the spring 2018 and fall 2018 semesters.  
 Press & Meiman, 2020

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Student engagement can help predict academic outcomes as well as likelihood of substance use and delinquency (Wang & Degol, 2014)
- Students are more engaged when tasks challenge them and involve authentic problem solving (Wang & Degol, 2014)
- There is no evidence that traditional “textbook & lecture” instructional methods engage students, especially lower achieving students (Malkmus, 2010).
- Students investigating history for themselves through primary sources become more emotionally connected to the content, increasing engagement (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012)
- The importance of primary sources in social studies has grown since 1973, when the AP US History Exam first included a Document Based Question (DBQ) featuring primary document analysis (Kajon, 2021).
- Surveys revealed most educators agree that primary source analysis is essential and more rewarding than textbook work (Malkmus, 2010).
- Multiple small-scale studies have shown that the integration of primary sources in secondary classes did increase student engagement, both reported by students and observed by the teacher (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011), (Nelson, 2016), (Kajon, 2021), (Hill, 2019).
- In one study primary sources helped 86% of students have more interest in the content. Also, students of color could relate much better to people in primary sources, increasing engagement (Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2011).