

Provoking Inquiry: The Use of Primary Sources in the Primary Social Studies Classroom

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Abstract

Primary sources of information are often used by teachers to spark curiosity about the past, develop multiple perspectives and foster critical thinking in students. This article focuses on how and why primary sources can be used to create inquiry-based, student-centered learning experiences in the primary social studies curriculum. It demonstrates how primary students can use the modified See, Think, Wonder approach to draw well-reasoned inferences about the past corroborated by evidence from primary sources of information.

Introduction

Many social studies teachers are aware of the immense educational value of primary sources of information. When used effectively, original source documents in the form of letters, personal diaries or photographs of historical artefacts can enhance students' engagement (Bober, 2019), arouse their interest by helping them visualise the past (Levstik & Barton, 2015) and develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives to historical narratives (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012). They can also be used in inquiry-based learning experiences to develop critical thinking in students (Barton, 2018). These benefits are aligned with the goals of the

Primary Social Studies Syllabus which seeks to develop every child to become "an informed citizen" capable of critically evaluating information, considering multiple perspectives and exercising discernment in formulating well-reasoned conclusions (MOE, 2012, p 2).

Despite the obvious benefits and clear alignment to the goals of primary social studies education, it is not uncommon to find teachers shying away from using primary sources in the classroom, preferring to rely on the textbook to achieve curriculum outcomes. Even when primary sources are being used, they are mostly used to substantiate textbook narratives. Teachers' hesitance to use primary sources in the classroom can be attributed to two key reasons: a lack of familiarity with using primary sources as a pedagogical tool (Berson & Berson, 2014) and the perception that it places high demands on students' cognitive resources (Blow, 1990).

With this context in mind, this article will explore how primary sources can be easily utilised to create inquiry-based, student-centred learning experiences to engage Primary Five students learning about ancient civilisations. The discussion of this approach will hopefully encourage more teachers to tap on this powerful but underutilised pedagogical tool to enrich and excite young learners in the social studies

classroom.

This article will start by clarifying what exactly is a primary source. It will then proceed to describe the Reading like a Historian approach and the See, Think, Wonder approach, which were applied to teach students how to formulate well-reasoned inferences corroborated by evidence drawn from primary sources, following which, this article will find out how primary sources of information have impacted student learning and teaching practice before concluding with the key considerations of using original documents in primary social studies teaching.

Is That a Primary or Secondary Source?

Sources of information are often categorised as primary or secondary. A primary source is defined as an item that serves as direct evidence concerning the topic or time period being studied (Bober, 2019). Examples include architectural plans, photographs, letters and articles of clothing created during that point in time. Secondary sources, on the other hand, can be seen as interpretations or distillations of information gleaned from analysing primary sources (Stebbins, 2006). Examples include textbooks, biographies and newspaper articles.

The problem with defining sources of information in this manner is that many teachers often do not realise that all sources can either be primary or secondary, depending on *the context* and *the questions that are asked*. Take, for example, a painting on the Singapore “Sook Ching” (肃清 or purge through cleansing) massacre created by an artist who did not live through the Japanese Occupation. If it is used as a source of information on the painter, this painting would be a primary source – it provides direct information regarding the

person who created it. However, if it is used as a source of information on the Japanese Occupation, then it would be a secondary source, since the painting was created long after the event and the person who created the painting did not directly experience it. Simply put, this idea of duality is inherent in all sources of information and their status shifts between primary and secondary, depending on how they are interrogated.

Pedagogical Approaches for Using Primary Sources

From our survey of the literature, we identified two key approaches, namely Reading like a Historian and See, Think, Wonder, frequently employed by history and social studies teachers interested in unpacking curriculum outcomes using primary sources of information.

The Reading like a Historian approach was designed by Wineburg, Martin and Monte-Sano (2013) from the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) to teach students how to investigate key historical questions using a four-step process to interrogate primary documents. The first two steps focus on *sourcing* and *contextualising* whereby students will identify basic information about the sources pertaining to the author, their intentions and the text’s purpose, before placing these sources in a historical context. Once students have developed a functional understanding of the different sources, they will proceed to *close reading* to hone in on the details of what they are reading. Finally, students will *corroborate* their inferences by drawing evidence from the primary sources to determine points of agreement or disagreement.

While the Reading like a Historian approach is an extremely well-designed and comprehensive approach that systematically guides students through the

historical inquiry process, it is unsuitable for replication in its entirety for the primary social studies classroom. The complex and rigorous stages and transitions inherent in the approach will most likely be far too difficult for the normal, average primary school student encountering primary documents for the first time. It may be better to use a less complex approach such as the See, Think, Wonder approach to teach students how to engage in primary source analysis.

The See, Think, Wonder approach is a more age appropriate approach commonly used across different subject disciplines. It originated from Harvard's Project Zero as one of its Visible Thinking approaches. This three-step approach developed by Ritchhart, Church and Morrison (2011) begins by asking students to list down their observations in as much detail as possible by stating what they *see* in a primary source, following which, students are encouraged to *think* about, make connections or develop layers of tentative interpretations from examining the primary document. Finally, students are asked to *wonder* about what they have seen or thought about by asking broader questions that consider the significance of big ideas raised by the primary source.

Research Study

Despite the suitability of the See, Think, Wonder approach for primary students, our Professional Learning Communities (PLC) group after careful deliberation eventually decided to infuse elements from the Reading like a Historian approach into the See, Think, Wonder approach to create inquiry-based, student-centred learning lessons to engage Primary Five students learning about ancient civilisations. Based on our observations, the See, Think, Wonder approach tends to focus on a *single* source to teach students to *think* about what

their observation might be. The Reading Like a Historian approach, on the other hand, goes a step further by teaching students the importance of supporting an inference using evidence from *more than a single* source.

As a team, we agreed that corroboration was an important skill that students should acquire. We, therefore, modified the See, Think, Wonder approach such that students were exposed to *multiple* carefully curated *primary sources* that not only '*spoke*' to the overarching inquiry question, but also '*spoke*' to each other. In doing so, we taught students to *think* about corroborating information from multiple primary sources to formulate well-reasoned inferences.

In broad brushstrokes, the study comprised two lessons designed around the use of primary sources. The first lesson was built around a set of receipts gathered from a teacher, where students had to take on the role of junior historians by constructing evidence-based interpretations corroborated by information from the different receipts in order to uncover the identity of the owner. In the second lesson, students had to draw upon the historical thinking skills that they picked up in the previous lesson to analyse ancient Sumerian artefacts using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach. Both lessons were also differentiated to cater to the different readiness levels of students in each class.

The following two questions framed our research study:

1. What were the learning experiences of students who have been exposed to learning with primary documents?
2. What were teachers' experiences in using the modified See, Think,

Wonder approach to teach primary sources?

To answer our first research question, we involved 76 Primary Five mainstream students from two classes. The first class comprised 40 HP (High Performing) students, while the second class was made up of 36 LP (Low Performing) students, thereby allowing our PLC group to verify if primary sources of information could be suitably applied to students on both ends of the learning spectrum. At the end of both lessons, students had to complete a short survey to help our PLC group get a quick sense of their learning experiences.

To paint a more nuanced portrait of students' learning experiences, a focus group discussion was held. It consisted of fifteen students who shared with us their thoughts and feelings about learning with primary sources, and the benefits of using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach in their study of ancient Sumer. These fifteen students were made up of eight HP and seven LP students of both genders, and they were selected based on their responses in the open-ended questions in the survey.

To answer the second research question, we interviewed the two teachers who taught both classes to find out more about the potentials and limitations of using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach to introduce primary source analysis in the primary social studies classroom. These two teachers were chosen because of their many years of experience teaching the upper primary social studies curriculum.

Lesson 1 – Analysing Receipts

Our PLC group designed the first lesson with two specific intentions in mind. First, we wanted the lesson to be built around a primary source that students were familiar with and could easily relate to. Second, we

wanted to teach students how to analyse primary sources in a fun and non-intimidating way, before introducing them to historical artefacts in the second lesson. To achieve the above goals, we decided to move away from the social studies curriculum and design the first lesson such that the focus was placed on sparking joy and developing the historical thinking skills of corroborating evidence and creating evidence-based interpretations.

The main inquiry question that framed the first lesson was “***What can we learn about the owner of these receipts?***” To get students excited about primary source analysis, we revealed to them that the receipts belonged to a teacher teaching the Primary Five level, before presenting them with the challenge of identifying the teacher. The receipts featured the teacher engaging in a variety of different activities, such as grocery shopping at NTUC FairPrice, dining at restaurants and shopping at Popular bookstores. In addition, to cater to the different readiness levels of students, those from the HP class were given receipts containing a longer list of purchases, while students from the LP class received receipts featuring fewer items or services.

At the start of the lesson, our PLC group guided students to *wonder* about the broad categories of information (e.g. marital status, location of home, religion and ethnicity) that would help them to uncover the identity of the teacher. Following that, we got students to examine the receipts and describe what they *see*, before providing examples and non-examples to demonstrate how to corroborate evidence from two or more receipts to *think* of well-reasoned inferences. Students were subsequently divided into groups of four to complete an A3 sized worksheet.

The discussions that took place during the lesson were particularly rich. During

their small-group discussions, it was common to find students challenging one another's assumptions by asking interesting and relevant questions such as *"Why would someone who lives in Orchard Road have three grocery receipts from an NTUC Fairprice in Ang Mo Kio?"* and *"Is it really fair to say that this person has a sweet tooth just because he bought one packet of gummy bears? How do we know for sure that he bought it for himself?"* Even during the class discussion led by the teacher to collate findings, groups continued to challenge one another to validate inferences using evidence from multiple sources and ask thoughtful questions that challenged underlying assumptions.

Lesson 2 – Ancient Sumer

In the second lesson, students were introduced to the main inquiry question *"What was life like in ancient Sumer?"*, following which, they were divided into groups of four and given pictures of historical artefacts (see Figures 1 and 2) containing information that could be confirmed by more than one picture source. They had to analyse these historical artefacts and record their findings on the A3 sized worksheet featuring the modified See, Think, Wonder approach (see Figure 3). Under the *Think* column, students were specifically reminded to write down their

inferences and back them up using evidence from two or more sources to ensure validity.

Given the complex primary sources used, we also differentiated the lesson by content. HP students were given four sources. Only groups that displayed higher readiness level were given the Standard of Ur picture to work on. LP students were given two sources, the stone statues of a Sumerian priest and Sumerian worshipper, and only groups that displayed a higher readiness level were given more pictures of Sumerian artefacts to examine.

In general, we observed that students were highly engaged during the lesson. They were not only eager to examine the pictures of historical artefact but were also able to derive logical interpretations corroborated by evidence from different sources. For example, some students concluded that ancient Sumerians had a form of writing based on the inscriptions found on the Code of Ur-Nammu and the pair of cuneiform earrings, while others concluded that some form of religion existed based on the stone statues of the priest-king and worshippers. These inferences led students to *wonder* about broader questions that pushed beyond their interpretations such as, *"How did Sumerians ensure a fair trial?"* and *"Who did the Sumerians worship?"*

Figure 1: From Left to Right, Code of Ur-Nammu (Schoyen Collection, 2019), Stone Statues of Sumerian Priest-King (Lewandowski, 1994) and Stone Statue of a Sumerian Worshipper (Liebieghaus Museum, 2019)



Figure 2: From Left to Right, Standard of Ur (Colins, 2015) and A Pair of Cuneiform Earrings (Amin, 2017)

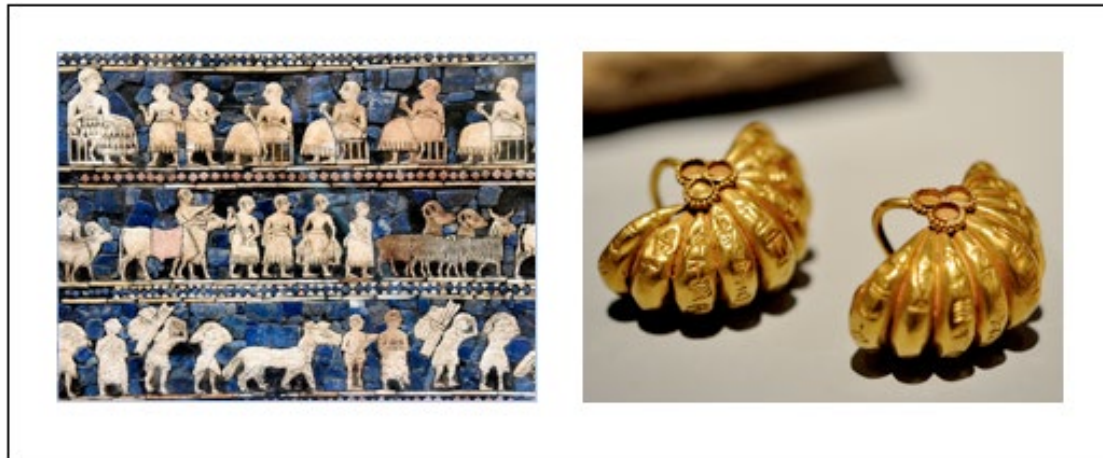


Figure 3: See, Think, Wonder Worksheet Completed by Students

Inquiry Question: What was life like in ancient Sumer?

Group Members: Sarah, Jackson, Kyon, Zi Ting Date: 9-8-19

Analyse the 4 sources and answer the inquiry question above by filling in the table found below.

See	Think	Wonder
- What do you see that strikes you? - Look at the colours, patterns and designs	- What do you think you can infer from the sources? - State evidence to supports your inferences	- What do you wonder? - Wonder about big ideas
- The intricate designs of the sculptures and the earrings. - The material - stone - that is used to create the sculptures and the tablets. - The strict rules that that the Sumerians have imposed. - There were sculptures of priests and worshippers. - They used shekels as a form of currency. - The Standard of Ur is hollow. - The designs on the Standard of Ur. - The material of the designs on the box. - The language on the tablet.	- They were good craftsmen as they could make intricate designs without machines. - Stone was probably a common material and they used it commonly (both sculptures were made of stone). - They were probably law-abiding people as they feared the punishment of their crimes (laws 1 and 2's consequence: execution). - The Sumerians likely had a religion and a deity (they had priests and worshippers). - Shekels probably inspired modern civilizations to print money (they are both). - It is hollow as it is a box. - They like carved it onto the box. - They are made of shell, limestone and lapis lazuli. - They are carved onto the tablet.	- What tools did they use to create the designs? - Where did they find the stone to make sculptures? - Why did they have such strict laws? (Did they commit crimes before the laws were created?) - Who did they worship? And how did they worship? - How did the shekels look like? And what were they made of? - What did it once contain? - Do the designs tell a story? And how did they carve it onto the box? - How did they mine these materials? - How is it pronounced? And how many letters are there?

Research Findings from Students

At the end of both lessons, students were required to complete a Student Feedback Survey. From the survey results, 91% of students found lessons built around primary sources highly engaging, while 80% of students felt that the modified See, Think, Wonder approach helped them critically analyse the sources that they were given. A focus group made up of 15 students from both classes also shared with us their learning experiences, and how primary sources and the use of the See, Think, Wonder approach benefitted them. Below were the top three key benefits identified by students.

Vivid Learning Experiences

By and large, the biggest benefit of learning with primary sources of information was that it provided vivid learning experiences that made social studies lessons fun and engaging for students. More specifically, many students shared that handling authentic materials such as receipts and photographs helped “*bring the past to life*”, allowing them to “*learn more about the lives of ordinary Sumerians*”. Indeed, primary sources often create a whole new layer of learning by providing students the opportunity to live vicariously in the past (Conklin, 2013).

A surprisingly large number of students also shared that they appreciated the fact that there was a conscious effort to shift away from traditional textbook instruction. One student eloquently shared his views by saying, “*Most teachers teach in a way that is catered to verbal-linguistic learners. They forget that many of us are visual learners and we just learn better when we see pictures.*” Indeed, research has found that the use of pictorial primary sources allows teachers to reach a wider spectrum of learners with different learning styles in

the primary social studies classroom (Murphy, 2010).

Critical Thinking Skills

At the same time, many students shared that analysing primary sources using the See, Think, Wonder approach helped them pick up “*critical thinking skills*”. Students commented that the lessons we conceptualised went beyond just teaching them how to draw inferences and learning to explain the coherence of their reasoning. It has helped them to become sharply aware that an inference, no matter how well-reasoned, lacks reliability if it is only validated by a single source. It has to be “*supported by evidence from different places*” before it can be deemed trustworthy. It is even more heartening to note that some students found the skill of corroborating information applicable across different contexts, expressing that the lessons made them realise the importance of “*cross-checking the information found in one web site against other web sites to see if it can be trusted.*”

Students also pointed out that working cooperatively in small groups to analyse primary sources of information taught them to critically question their own thinking. They explained that the open-ended nature of the task meant that they not only had to “*constantly think about whether the views of their group members make sense*”, they also had to extensively rationalise and re-examine their own thinking to check for assumptions. This invariably fostered intellectual humility because they recognised that they had to be “*prepared to leave their own opinions behind*” when they could not adequately back them up with evidence.

Self-directed Learning

Another significant benefit highlighted

by students was that analysing primary sources using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach generated a variety of intriguing questions that motivated them to independently search for answers. Students expressed that they were *“very frustrated”* when primary sources, the textbook and teachers could not provide them with the answers to the questions that they came up with. Ironically, it was this same frustration that made students accountable for their own learning, leading them to search for answers by browsing the Internet and visiting the school library.

While it is encouraging to see survey results indicating that 71% of students have taken it upon themselves to independently search for answers to their own questions, it is equally important to consider the feedback from those who indicated otherwise. The significant bulk of survey respondents who made up the 29% were HP students, and nearly all of them shared that the non-examinable nature of social studies was the main reason why they refuse to invest additional time or energy to conduct independent research outside school.

Research Findings from Teachers

After the completion of both lessons, our PLC group interviewed both teachers. In general, the feedback on using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach to introduce primary sources of information was largely positive. Below were the two key benefits and one area of consideration gathered from interviewing both teachers.

Skills Development

Both teachers shared that the introduction of primary source documents using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach helped shift the focus from teaching content to developing important 21st century skills and proficiencies. Unlike

textbook instruction where knowledge flows in a unidirectional manner from teacher to student, using original source documents to teach content means that the amount of knowledge students acquires directly depends on how well they are able to analyse primary sources. Simply put, the use of primary sources as a key pedagogical approach *“compels teachers to shift the focus from teaching content to equipping students with the skills to critically analyse, evaluate and communicate findings.”* The modified See, Think, Wonder approach is especially useful because it provides an explicit structure to help students and teachers *“systematically approach primary source analysis.”* This is beneficial because learning in an information saturated 21st century world is becoming *“increasingly dependent on our ability to understand, analyse and evaluate complex information”*.

Student Engagement

The open-ended nature of primary source analysis was another key benefit that was highlighted by both teachers during the interviews. They observed that students were *“more engaged”* and displayed *“more confidence”* because there were *“no right or wrong answers”*. And because there were no set answers the focus was placed on whether *“different groups of students were able to justify their inferences”* in a cogent manner by drawing upon evidence from different sources. Consequently, this created a collaborative atmosphere in the classroom, where students felt safe enough to *“challenge their classmates’ assumptions”* and *“build on one another’s ideas”*.

Teacher Facilitation

At this juncture, it is also important to point out that both teachers felt that primary source analysis is *“a double-edged sword”* for two reasons. First, it requires *“a skilled*

facilitator” who is able to “*think on the spot, logically reason through students’ responses and ask questions to probe or guide their thinking*”. A teacher who has not been formally trained in social studies or does not have a humanities background may find it “*very daunting*” to work with primary sources of information. Second, both teachers also found the introduction of primary sources using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach a very “*humbling experience*”. Despite their best efforts at trying to pre-empt as many questions as possible, they were still astounded by the depth of imagination and curiosity exhibited by students when they wrote down their questions in the *wonder* column. Some of the questions generated by students included “*How did shekels look like?*”, “*How were women treated in ancient Sumer?*” and “*Were there lawyers? How did ancient Sumerians ensure a fair trial?*” While these were indeed valid questions raised by students, both teachers were not able to provide immediate answers to them.

Discussion

For our PLC group, this study has largely demonstrated that with the right amount of scaffolding and appropriate approach, primary school students from both ends of the learning spectrum not only enjoy but are fully capable of engaging in primary source analysis. That being said, there are a number of considerations that all primary school teachers should be aware of when utilising primary sources in their own classrooms.

First, primary source analysis is not a linear process. The modified See, Think, Wonder approach may present students with a systematic pathway with a distinct start, middle and end, but many students may choose to analyse primary sources in a non-sequential manner. It is, therefore,

important for teachers to keep an open mind and recognise that the act of thinking is never linear, but often messy. And just because students are not progressing the way the teacher predicts does not mean that they are wrong. Furthermore, the approach may help draw students’ attention to specific aspects of a primary source, but it will not determine what they may or may not see. In such situations, the teacher must be mentally prepared to assess if such unanticipated learning is leading to meaningful learning outcomes or whether it requires on-the-spot correction. It is important that teachers honour the fact that it is through the development of different and unique interpretations that students forge meaningful, personal connections to primary sources and what they are learning.

Second, it is important at this juncture to clarify that primary sources of information are not better than secondary sources. While it may be more interesting to work with primary sources, it can also be confusing given that it is raw, unfiltered historical information. Social studies teachers can consider using a mix of primary and secondary sources when using the modified See, Think, Wonder approach. The introduction of secondary sources can help students better understand the more perplexing aspects of primary sources (Brooks, Aris & Perry, 1993) while primary sources can add dimension and depth to the understanding students gain from interacting with secondary sources (Bober, 2019).

Third, teachers who are not social studies trained or do not come from a humanities background could adhere to the following two key principles when introducing primary sources in class. One, primary source analysis is not exclusive to historians or social studies teachers. Teachers draw all sorts of inferences about their students on daily basis. For instance,

we may reasonably conclude that a child lacks parental supervision because he has poor school attendance, and even when he does attend school, he comes looking dishevelled and without lunch money. Similarly, primary source analysis is simply about closely examining original source documents to gather information to derive logical, reasonable deductions. Two, it would be helpful for teachers working with primary sources of information to recognise that ideas are relative in nature (Eyerdam, 2003). It is important for teachers to learn to listen and consider other points of views, while recognising that they are not expected to be the sole source of knowledge. In working with primary sources, teachers should be actively co-constructing knowledge with students.

Fourth, our PLC team realised that we could have made more meaningful use of the questions that students came up with in the *wonder* column. While we may have been largely successful in getting students to derive well-reasoned evidence-based interpretations from analysing multiple primary sources, we should have assigned each group of students to research for the answers to these questions and conducted a third lesson to get them to present their findings. Teachers are so used to asking questions to stimulate inquiry that we sometimes forget that inquiry is a two-way process. It is just as important to take a vigorous and genuine interest in listening to what our students have to say. When we do that, we show them that what they think and feel matters, that they are part of the conversation and that they are integral to effective classroom learning (Ritchhart, 2015).

Last, the heavy use of online resources by students to supplement their own learning is another area that is worth considering. During the focus group discussion, nearly all students shared that

they relied on internet sources to provide answers to the questions that they generated. Given that the Internet is rife with misinformation and disinformation, it is difficult to know for sure that students can critically access, analyse and evaluate online information. Against this backdrop, how social studies teachers can look to new literacies of online reading comprehension to equip students with the skills to thrive in an information-saturated online landscape is an area that warrants further investigation.

Conclusion

While the use of primary sources is a useful pedagogical tool to introduce to students the basics of historical thinking in the primary social studies classroom in a fun and engaging way, its effectiveness ultimately hinges on the kind of primary sources selected and the way the teacher tailors these sources to meet the different learning profiles of students. Just like any other teaching resources, the use of primary sources of information may be more suitable in the teaching of some social studies units as compared to others. Simply put, the use of primary sources must be carefully selected and appropriately applied in order to truly add value and meaning to students' learning.

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