Teaching Inquiry with Primary Sources
by Barbara Stripling

Why is inquiry important for student learning?
Inquiry is a process of active learning that is driven by questioning and critical thinking. The understandings that students develop through inquiry are deeper and longer lasting than any pre-packaged knowledge delivered by teachers to students.

Inquiry-based learning follows a process that progresses through phases, but is recursive and reflective throughout. The six phases and their thought processes are detailed in this diagram:

Why should primary sources be used for inquiry?
By their very nature, primary sources engage students in inquiry. First, they transform the learning process by provoking critical thinking: questioning; making inferences; interpreting different points of view; using critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate; drawing conclusions; and pulling together disparate pieces of evidence to think conceptually.

Second, primary sources engage students both emotionally and personally because the sources represent authentic voices and images. Students connect to the people who produced or were subjects of the primary sources as they rarely, if ever, connect to textbooks and other secondary sources. Finally, the conflicting nature of primary sources helps students see the complexity of issues and recognize the importance of context for credible interpretation. This multiple-perspective approach is particularly important for historical inquiry.

How can primary sources be used during the phases of inquiry?
Primary sources effectively support learning throughout the inquiry process when educators select appropriate sources, teach students essential thinking skills, and carefully structure learning experiences. A brief example will illustrate the use of primary sources. An American History teacher and school librarian have collaborated to develop a unit on immigration from 1850 to 1950, focusing on the essential question of: How does society’s treatment of minority groups during a crisis reveal deeply embedded societal attitudes and values?

Connect: Primary sources can be used during the initial phase of inquiry to open students’ minds to the possibility of interpreting and questioning an information source, in contrast to secondary sources that shut off questioning because they appear to be authoritative and complete. At the beginning of the unit, students are presented with two to three brief documents that reveal conflicting points of view about the treatment of Chinese immigrants in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

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<th>Connect Phase of Inquiry</th>
<th>Guidelines for Selecting Primary Sources</th>
<th>Skills &amp; Strategies to Teach</th>
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<tr>
<td>Find primary sources that:</td>
<td>• Connect to major theme or concept</td>
<td>Show students how to:</td>
<td>• Lack of context &amp; background knowledge makes interpretation of primary sources difficult</td>
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<td>• Represent alternative perspectives</td>
<td>• Present conflicting evidence</td>
<td>• Identify prior knowledge and misconceptions</td>
<td>• Students without clear conceptual focus may see primary sources as disconnected bits of information</td>
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<td>• Identify point of view and its effect on information presented</td>
<td>• Students may develop misinterpretations based on their limited prior exposure</td>
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<td>• Use concept mapping to develop framework of overall themes, major concepts</td>
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Wonder: Students should develop focus questions to guide their inquiry investigations. In the sample unit, students are provoked to ask probing questions when they see published and official documents that advocate for equitable treatment of the Chinese after the earthquake and other published documents advocating for the removal and exclusion of the Chinese.

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| Find primary sources that: | • Contain provocative or conflicting images and texts  
• Represent major facets of overall topic or theme  
• Provide enough detail to invite interpretation, provoke questions | Show students how to:  
• Develop focus questions at different levels of thought that lead to manageable investigations  
• Connect focus questions to larger theme or essential question | Be aware that:  
• Students tend to use primary sources as illustrations only, without probing deeper into their meaning  
• Students tend to be enticed by graphic images and might ignore relevant text-based sources |

Investigate: Students will use a combination of primary and secondary sources to pursue their questions in depth. To help students locate high-quality digital primary sources from multiple perspectives, teachers and librarians may want to provide the URLs for specific digital collections or sources as well as guide students to find their own sources.

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| Find primary sources that:  
• Represent a variety of formats  
• Offer different perspectives  
• Provide in-depth information on relevant topics and questions  
• Are appropriate for students’ reading levels  
• Allow students to corroborate evidence | Show students how to:  
• Determine the authority, purpose, point of view, and accuracy of sources  
• Corroborate evidence by using multiple sources  
• Take notes on main ideas and supporting evidence  
• Make inferences  
• Interpret evidence | Be aware that:  
• Students’ lack of content knowledge makes valid interpretation of primary sources difficult; teachers must carefully scaffold this thinking process |

Construct: This phase is probably the most difficult for both teachers and students because it involves teaching students to organize and draw conclusions from information they have found, to confront conflicting ideas and form their own evidence-based opinions, and to be ready to take a stand and defend it. Students’ conclusions should relate to the essential question of the inquiry unit. Educators may want to model how to form an argument by taking a previously studied primary source and analyzing it with the class, not for content, but for the development of a line of thinking with corroborating evidence. An editorial, a political speech or debate, a documentary film, a photo essay or collection of photos around a theme would work well.

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| Find primary sources that:  
• Connect to essential question and theme  
• Represent a point of view with supporting evidence  
• Show explicit development of a line of thinking  
• Represent a variety of formats | Show students how to:  
• Organize information into main ideas and supporting evidence  
• Compare evidence for alternative viewpoints  
• Draw conclusions and forming opinions based on evidence | Be aware that:  
• Students may have limited experience with drawing valid conclusions or forming evidence-based opinions; they will need support and modeling of the thinking processes involved |

Express: The Express phase is essential to inquiry learning because, when students develop a product to demonstrate their new understandings and share with others, they solidify their own learning. Students should know how they will be expected to demonstrate their learning at the beginning of any inquiry-based assignment so that they can find appropriate evidence as they conduct their investigations. For example, producing a feature article for a class magazine will require both images and text.
Express (cont):
Students will be more motivated and engaged throughout the inquiry experience if they are assigned relevant and creative products, like conducting a mock Oprah Winfrey interview, producing an article for an electronic magazine, or developing a political ad campaign. Teachers and librarians can select primary sources from today, like television footage, web site articles and campaign posters, as authentic examples.

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<td>Find primary sources that:</td>
<td>• Represent a variety of formats, if appropriate</td>
<td>• Think creatively to generate an original approach to develop a final product</td>
<td>Be aware that:</td>
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<td>• Include authentic examples* of the format that students are expected to produce</td>
<td>• Employ writing, speaking, and visualizing skills appropriate for developing an inquiry-based product</td>
<td>• Research has shown that students must be taught the skills needed for creating products (especially those involving technology) or they will ignore content learning and focus on production only</td>
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<td>• Connect to the types of communication that students recognize and relate to</td>
<td>• Use technology to create a final product</td>
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Reflect: Reflection is embedded throughout the inquiry process, but it is especially important at the end of a learning experience for students to think about what they have learned about the topic or idea and about inquiry itself. Although there are predictable points during inquiry at which students tend to become frustrated or unsure, students will benefit from analyzing their own challenges and successes. Inquiry is a cycle. Each inquiry experience should lead students to ask themselves some final reflective questions that propel them into further inquiry:

◊ What new questions do I now want to answer about the topic or idea?
◊ What inquiry skills do I need to work on to improve my next project?

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<td>Find primary sources that:</td>
<td>• Models of exemplary work (either student-created products or real-world examples)</td>
<td>• Reflective questioning</td>
<td>Be aware that:</td>
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<td>• Peer consultation and feedback of a grade. Even students who have received a high grade should reflect on their process and product and set goals for future inquiry</td>
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What final tips help teachers and librarians use primary sources successfully for inquiry-based teaching and learning?
Primary sources play an increasingly important role in inquiry because of the expansion of digitization and the development of valuable digital collections like those available from the Library of Congress. To successfully use primary sources in inquiry:

◊ Focus the inquiry experience on big ideas and themes;
◊ Frame the learning experience with an inquiry process;
◊ Explicitly teach and scaffold the critical thinking and information skills of inquiry;
◊ Confront students with both conflicting and corroborating evidence; and
◊ Engage students in locating and interpreting primary sources on their own.

Using primary sources during inquiry-based learning empowers students to develop deep understandings of academic content and a portfolio of thinking strategies and skills that are essential for lifelong learning.

Barbara Stripling is the former president of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and current Director of Library Services for the New York City School Library System. Her previously published work about inquiry-based teaching and learning includes: