Contextualizing the Canon of Primary Sources: Examining a Critical Thinking Pedagogy in School Survey History Courses

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Abstract: History education has moved away from traditional textbook teaching by adding analysis of primary source materials to classroom instruction and standardized testing. However, canons of primary sources tend to lead students into traditional textbook interpretations of historical events. Two options are available to address this issue. Either, minimally, canonized primary sources must be subjected to nonstandard interpretation or, maximally, the canon of primary sources must be supplemented/supplanted by inclusion of sources/voices suppressed in traditional historical accounts.

Social studies courses in the twenty-first century encourage students to engage in genuine historical research with the analysis of primary source documents. The examination of primary sources is presented as both an extension of conventional textbook learning and an evolution of history instruction for school students. Students are taught to consider the author of the source, the time and circumstances of publication, the intended audience, and the author's purpose. By contrast, in traditional textbook learning, students are told what happened in the past. The material is presented from a *faux neutral* perspective and is grounded in a positivistic, objective-truth-of-the-matter approach to history. Freire (1993) would describe this as knowledge holders banking information into students. Traditional textbook organization of historical developments assumes there is one true history with the textbook providing the essential facts to arrive at that truth. While textbooks were traditionally positioned as apolitical and absent of any agenda, these assumptions have been challenged in the past few decades. Influential education researchers from Ladson-Billings (1995) to Banks and Banks (2010) and Apple (2019) have written about problematic textbooks in teaching and encouraged teachers to plan humanities lessons beyond textbook content.

Traditional textbook approaches to teaching history have recently been counterbalanced by inclusion of critical evaluation of primary sources. For instance, New York State history exams (NYSED, 2022) and national history exams (collegeboard.org) now include primary source analysis as a tested area. The New York State Global History and Geography Regents exam and United States History and Government Regents exam debuted new versions in June 2019 and June 2023, respectively. In the free response sections of the updated exams, prompts ask students to evaluate primary source documents. For example, the January 2020 Global History Regents Exam included in Part II text from a 1989 speech by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The accompanying writing prompt asked for response to the following item: "Based on this excerpt, explain how the audience affects what Mikhail Gorbachev includes in his speech" (NYSED, 2022). In the June 2023 US History Regents Exam Part II displayed an engraving by Paul Revere depicting the 1770 Boston Massacre in which British soldiers killed several colonists among a crowd of Americans confronting the Redcoats. The accompanying task for students was: "Analyze Document 1 [Revere's etching] and explain how audience, or purpose, or bias, or point of view affects this document's use as a reliable source of evidence" (NYSED, 2022). These sorts of items on the tests illustrate how a direct focus on skillful document sourcing is now included in these high stakes assessments.

As a result of changes to the tests, reading primary sources and considering author's point of view and the audience for which the primary source was originally written have been emphasized in New York high school social studies classes in order to prepare students for statewide exams. The intention of this pedagogical practice is to introduce students to genuine historical research, in which they consider the complex factors surrounding a primary source as they make sense of its meaning in a holistic way. In professional historical research, the goal of document sourcing is for historians to arrive at a meaningful conclusion based on wide consideration of evidence and, more recently, also to consider their own positionality's impact on their conclusions.

In survey history courses and exams, primary source analysis is touted as developing critical historical thinking via engagement in the coursework. Yet important questions arise for students and teachers from this new practice. Are students genuinely permitted to analyze these documents and arrive at their own conclusions? Do they consider the collection of documents themselves as a representation of societal values, cultures, and power struggles? How do the collections of documents lend themselves to particular viewpoints and conclusions? If these considerations are absent from instruction, then students might be disingenuously imitating the work of historians because they are still being steered toward predetermined conclusions crafted long before these primary sources were placed on their desks in, say, second period US History class. This is problematic because students are learning and teachers are teaching under the potentially invalid assumption that they are performing authentic historical research. One invalidating consideration about the primary sources accompanying survey history courses is they often align with a traditional narrative across topics and units. For example, textbook history says the disenfranchisement of women was solved through the 19th amendment (1920). So, documents from the Seneca Falls Convention (Stanton,1848) are commonly included for study as a primary source in survey United States history courses to cast the 19th Amendment as the fruit of ideas first put forward in the mid-1800s, giving the false impression that women's rights are a settled issue in US history and American society.

Research has shown that not only high school but elementary school global and United States history survey courses are still tied to a master narrative and western perspective (Apple, 2019; Dozono, 2020; Schmidt, 2012). I, too, have conducted curricular studies on the order of events and trajectory of historical developments that reveal in survey history courses a tendency to favor an all's-well-with-America perspective (Newman, 2023). Primary sources are often plugged into curriculum spaces to bolster the traditional narrative. For example, in a survey US history course students across the United States will most certainly read the Declaration of Independence (Jefferson, 1776) and the Monroe Doctrine (1823), as they do in New York State (New York State Grades 9-12 Social Studies Framework, 2016). They might read President McKinley's justification for war with the Philippines (1899) or Andrew Carnegie's commentary on philanthropy (1900). They would then examine the author's point of view in these documents. McKinley was concerned about US trade interests in Asia. Jefferson wanted to legitimize the North American revolution. Carnegie was intent on spreading his fortune to help others. The audiences might be considered as well. For McKinley, for example, these audiences included the merchants and plantation owning US colonists in the Philippines interested in profiting from independence from Spain, the Spanish monarchy who just lost their South American colonies, and pro-imperialists in America intent on spreading US power after The Spanish-American War of 1898.

However, these sourcing practices must be contextualized within broader historiographic concerns. Because a large part of the discipline of history, especially as it is expressed in school curriculum, has already been cobbled together from historical artifacts and documents approved by the literate elite, the illiterate or oppressed voices of the past have disappeared or, rather, been made to disappear from the historical record. The canon of literate voices is unbalanced and students should be reminded of that reality as they engage in analysis of written primary sources. According to Villaverde et al. (2006, p. 325), "those who have suffered the most may not have left written records — the bread and butter of traditional historiographical source material." Therefore, the analysis of original sources is still a narrow study of pre-approved past voices and traditional perspectives on them.

When teaching a primary source document, when choosing to spend time analyzing the intentions and impacts of an individual's words in the past and in the present, educators communicate a clear, yet unspoken message: the authors of the primary sources mattered and still matter. They were and are still worthy of our time and intellectual energy in the classroom. There are a finite number of instructional days in a school year and the process of including primary sources must be selective. When the curriculum emphasizes the practice of primary document analysis, educators and curriculum writers must be mindful of any imbalance in the canon of documents. Villaverde et al. (2006, p. 326) warned their readers, "historians will often unconsciously embrace the perspective of those who left written records." Therefore, an integral part of this pedagogy should be conversations with students about this imbalance, and how highlighted groups were not more talented or valuable than groups who are absent from the curriculum-approved collections of written primary sources. These conversations can even lead to invitations for students to share their ideas on the search for expanded sources.

In the analysis of primary sources, students need to know the *collection* in and of itself is a form of historiography. The canon represents a complex intersection between favoritism towards the literate elite who have for thousands of years recorded in written form their thoughts and perspectives and the intentions of the historians and political forces that shaped the selection of documents chronicling historical developments to form, as we know it, a history of the United States. Brown & Au (2014, p. 374) emphasized that a small group of people "struggled and deliberated over the concerns of curriculum… [people] who were able to attend meetings throughout the 20th century or be part of an academia based intellectual project." DeMarrais & Lapan (2004, p. 33) also articulated a fundamental historiographic principle when they observed, "there is no history until historians tell it, and it is the way in which they tell it that becomes what we know of as history." The essential primary source documents from the Declaration of Independence and Stephen Douglas' campaign speeches (1860) to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" speech (1941) and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech (1963), have all already been categorized and chronologized to create the narrative that is embedded in high school social studies courses. Critical evaluation of the *collection* of primary sources can be an opportunity to disrupt this canon or at least bring awareness to its existence as a nonobjective assemblage, and call into question conclusions that have already been drawn from it.

Another factor to consider when critiquing the social studies pedagogy of primary sources is the content of included documents. Are the primary sources from marginalized groups only those that either highlight the plight of the marginalized group or acknowledge a corrective action from the dominant group? Are the bulk of primary source documents from the dominant group those that emphasize progress for that group, while other groups remain invisible? If primary source

documents are woven together to meet a prefabricated narrative defending the hegemony of a dominant culture, then students are being misled with inauthentic historiographical practices. In the future, it is my hope, as a high school history educator and social studies curriculum researcher, that teachers, curriculum developers, history education preparation programs, and state education departments will critically examine not just the folks now shining in primary source spotlights but equally investigate the invisible folks now relegated to the shadows of history curricula. As educators and researchers, we can infuse classroom conversations with criticism of the canon of typically provided primary sources. We can pledge to find primary source documents that enrich and disrupt traditional history curricula. We can engage in more documentation of oral histories to elevate hidden voices and normalize evidence from diverse sources, as suggested in Villaverde et al. (2006).

For example, coverture was an early American cultural practice that denied women a wide variety of social, political, and economic rights upon marriage. The social custom had roots in British Common Law where, according to coverture, a married woman's legal, financial, and political identities were subsumed under her husband's (Downey, et al., 2023). Coverture transferred a woman's civic identity to her husband at marriage. The practice found its way into the American legal system in 1805 when the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in the case of Martin v. Massachusetts set the legal precedent that a US married woman did not have separate, formal, political citizenship apart from her husband's. The Massachusetts high court overturned a lower court decision to uphold the property rights of a widow whose lands had been confiscated (Kerber, 1992). The justices ruled that laws covering retention of family property did not, in the absence of a will from the deceased husband, extend beyond the custom of "*femes-covert*." The decision put women in the paradoxical position of being citizens without having any civic obligations to perform (Kerber, 1999).

Coverture has never been resolved through a constitutional amendment and in states like New York, for example, this topic is absent in the survey US history curriculum (New York State Grades 9-12 Social Studies Framework, 2016). Despite the topic's curricular invisibility, there is a plethora of early American primary source documents written by married women oppressed from coverture laws. Other primary sources exist that were written by those who would uphold and maintain the system (Hart & McDaniel, 2023; New York Historical Society Museum and Library, n.d.). Women confronted the repression from coverture and challenged the practice in a variety of newspaper publications from the 19th and 20th centuries (White, 1921). These primary source documents are not usually included alongside other documents celebrated as highlights of the early 20th century, such as speeches from oil industry leaders or books from progressive muckrakers. Their absence is problematic because they provide important clues into the struggles of women beyond suffrage, and, equally important, into the power of the patriarchy in oppressing women, silencing their dissent, and shaping the dynamics of the American family (Holton, 1994; Harris, 2010; Case, 2014; Field & Syrett, 2020).

Paternalism is the logic behind coverture; and paternalism of any sort creates the same paradox for democracy created by coverture: citizenship without civic duties. Attempts to protect populations perceived to be vulnerable often end up as systems of control, policing, and surveillance based on stereotype-infused understandings of the populations put under state protection. The logic of coverture and the limits it places on full membership in the constitutional community of American citizens lies at the heart of the harms still regularly suffered by women, the poor, people of color, and pregnant people enmeshed in the health and social welfare systems

of the US. (Downey, et al., 2023, Kerber, 2012). Perhaps, however, of greatest interest for development of a critical US History curriculum among school-age Americans and their teachers is the paradoxical nature of children's citizenship. As Elizabeth Cohen (2005, p. 221) observes:

> Paternalist policies dictate that children be represented politically by their parents, leaving them as or more vulnerable and excluded from private life as women were under coverture. Lacking independent representation or a voice in politics, children and their interests often fail to be understood because the adults who do represent them conflate, or substitute, their own views for those of children. Compounding this damage is the tendency for democratic societies to view children not as an ever-present segment of the populace, but rather as future adults. This encourages disregard for children's interests. Until democratic societies establish a better-defined and comprehensive citizenship for children, along with methods for representation that are sensitive to the special political circumstances faced by children, young people will remain ill-governed and neglected by democratic politics.

What would a curriculum of children's citizenship look like? What might students contribute to creation of a Children's Rights Amendment to the US Constitution? What would a kids' in-school constitutional convention add to the power and validity of their education? Would teachers have the support and courage to teach a curriculum composed completely of questions rather than settled answers? (Dunlop & Venens, 2019; Parkhouse, 2018).

In either case, however, whether dealing with traditionally approved aspects of American history or exploring relatively uncharted territory in our nation's past, sourcing documents is not a practice that invokes a value free history, because a value free history cannot exist. History educators are moving away from textbook only instruction, and this is important to facilitating history pedagogy and curricula that confront the complexities of the past. However, the master narrative in social studies curricula is strong (Dozono, 2020; Schmidt, 2012; Newman 2023). The dominant perspective persists, but educators cannot operate under the preposterous assumption that primary source analysis taught in a vacuum corrects problematically celebrationist histories or frees students from prefabricated conclusions.

Educators can think of the journey toward a more culturally relevant, multi-perspective education as a work in progress (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The critical analysis of primary source documents is just the beginning of evolving pedagogical practices to reject a dominant perspective, infuse contextualization of the primary source collection, continue the search for documents from hidden voices, invite student-derived conclusions, and encourage collaboration between researchers, teachers, and students for a more inclusive canon of primary source documents. For example, students should be exploring who the audience was for primary source documents written by women advocating for peace, such as Jeanette Rankin (Jeanette Rankin Peace Center, n.d.), or the purpose of Pauli Murray writing about racial and gender oppression with the term *Jane Crow* (Murray and Eastwood, 1965).

Yet even primary source documents that serve as giants in the field of historical understanding included in the canon of documents to be evaluated by students who will consider the author's point of view and audience must be subjected to the same sort of criticality applied to less familiar readings. Educators and curriculum writers should confront the fact that

conclusions from these documents are well established in the literature. And, concurrently, these conclusions have impacted state-building, social/economic systems, and more. For example, the Declaration of Independence is a staple document in United States History courses; but

> The problem with the typical conclusion about Jefferson's iconic work sowing the seeds of a moral and enlightened nation is not in the conclusion itself, but rather in how it is presented, *which is as a foregone conclusion, and as the only conclusion.* A different conclusion is that in claiming humans as property, enslaving them, and profiting off their humanity, Jefferson excluded them from enlightenment principles and redefined what it meant to be both human and equal…. This alternative conclusion is more radical, not in its interpretation of the events but in the extent to which it disrupts the master narrative of an exceptional United States built on Enlightenment ideology, progress, and democracy (Newman, 2023, p. 69, italics in original).

If we as curriculum researchers, administrators, and humanities teachers, plan for students to engage in genuine historiography by contextualizing primary sources, then we need to be extra careful when examining the pillar documents of our nation's story, the archives that have already been written about, reviewed, analyzed, and interpreted countless numbers of times. These documents are positioned as cornerstones of United States history or world history curricula, and they enter our lesson plans and classrooms with the weight of those accepted explications. In order genuinely to engage students with these documents, we must, at the very least, acknowledge their previous interpretations and the results of those interpretations. By verbalizing their weight and their impact on historical developments, we can, alternatively and simultaneously, permit students to confront the original interpretations and assumptions from these documents, and possibly, critically reconsider the systems that have been built by them. When students evaluate the intersection of a document's content with author's point of view, or a document's content with its intended audience, it is essential for educators to create an open space with multiple possibilities of making meaning, for students to be made aware of previous conclusions yet still engage in historical research to develop their own interpretations from their study of the primary sources. What we can do at the very most is develop curriculum of as yet unresolved issues in US history and American life to bring to the forefront of attention voices we know to be long unheard because they are still being ignored.

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