

DELIBERATE Sourcing Approach for Context-based Analysis

Using primary sources can offer an opportunity to address and model historical thinking and facets of other domain-specific knowledge in a thorough and deliberate manner not available through many modes of instruction.

As both a means to direct student learning and as a method of discourse, thoughtful deliberation requires that we consider a number of factors. The *DELIBERATE* approach places emphasis on:



Definitions and distinctions between the types of terms used with students. In our hurry to get to the “beef” of what we want students to learn, we often overlook the need for a rational and forthright development of definitional understanding. Through taking some to discuss and construct an understanding of the terminology, we not only form a sound basis for comprehending the domain-specific content (e.g., history, science, math, etc.), but also substantially improve students’ chances for comprehending text they will read. Though not all-inclusive, a short list would certainly contain such basic terminology as *primary source* and *secondary source*, and some examples of each.

Elaboration of details and clues that can be sleuthed from a source. Addressing the need to elaborate on a source dictates that we dissect the item as thoroughly as possible. This initially might involve making a determination as to the type of source (see prior section), or if it does not fit, even establishing a classification in which it can comfortably reside. That does not mean the we have to be “correct.” It means we establish some of the order that is necessary for further systematic analysis. It also means we have made assumptions—perfectly acceptable if we can explain what we’ve based those assumptions on. Clues and often minute details about a source can provide that basis. For example, we can infer a great deal from the type of type of processing used for an original photograph. The expressions of people in the photograph tell us a great deal about the situation or setting in which the source was created. Sometimes, as in the case of the former, the additional information is available as an accompaniment to the source (see the inclusion of the phrase “silver gelatin print” in the caption of the sources described in [Types of Primary Sources](#)). Sometimes, as the case of the latter, we are simply undergoing a careful and thorough analysis of the source itself, and asking the questions that arise.

Limitations of sources, their creators, and our ability to guarantee or validate our assumptions. There are many elaborations—truth be told, most—that we cannot tell about a source with complete certainty. Students should be aware of this, not to detract from the experience, but to ensure an epistemological grounding (see Epistemology below). We cannot, for example, tell with absolute certainty the temperature of an event based on a photograph, and we certainly cannot go so far as to assume the sounds of the event or the voice cadence of a person in a photograph. The person who created the source had limitations as well—type of equipment and tools available to create the source, availability of resources (often sources were acquired in investigations that were “on the sly,” so to speak), and often even sheer ability or bias (see below) of the creator. Finally, we tend to have access mainly to sources to which we are “allowed.” These often include government-archived documents that have been graciously contributed (to the Library of Congress, for instance). Though there really is not (we hope) intentional censoring in the works, we are still experiencing limitations.

Intent or purpose of the source. Often these sources were created for a purpose. Sometimes there is an ulterior motive behind even the contribution of the sources to an archive. Sometimes the intent or purpose lies with the individual creator, and sometimes the creator was employed or used by an organization to create the source. The discussion and deliberate analysis of the background and context of a source—its setting, the people involved, the political landscape—all lead to clues as to motive. Often these clues are available in other sources related to the same context (e.g., placards, promotional brochures, and billboards urging citizens to take some stance and action, for example). Sometimes, of course, there will be no clear “intent.” Some sources are simply incidental or even accidental.

Bias. The need to address is similar to “intent,” only usually more personal or societal in nature. Bias impacts a source in insidious ways, and in ways in which even the creator is often unaware. Many sources from the abolitionist movement, or even the Civil Rights movement, represent easily recognizable examples of bias. Clues regarding bias are typically easier to spot and more difficult to prove than those that indicate intent. Though they greatly impact the validity of the factual data available in a source, they also greatly contribute to our understanding of the context in a very human sense. In other words, with bias (and other tenets of source analysis as well), a failure to render evidence on the one hand often becomes a source’s strongest feature on the other hand. For additional information, see the Bias Rule in [Teaching with Source Documents: Creating Meaning Through Historical Source Document Analysis](#).

Epistemology. It is not possible to think historically—or scientifically or mathematically, for that matter—without placing due emphasis on the philosophies inherent in that thinking. Students will have questions regarding the origins, methods, and extent of human knowledge regarding any event, the past in general, and/or any source that is exposed for analysis. Count on it and use it. It takes time, but it brings meaning to deliberation that nothing else can.

Reading. As discussed in [A Critical Link: Teaching for Reading Comprehension and Historical Thinking](#) (see [Teaching with Source Documents: Creating Meaning Through Historical Source Document Analysis](#)) and in more detail in [Reading Comprehension and Historical Thinking: Classroom Realities in Building a Context Connection](#), establishing a connection and addressing the need for learning to read and reading to learn is essential. Source documents can be revealing and instructional in so many ways that address the need and create opportunity out of potential roadblocks.

Associations between various sources. For every seminal source (the primary source that is the central initiator or focal point of a sourcing exercise), there are numerous—sometimes thousands—of sources that contain information that is related to the central source, or at least to the context of that source. These other sources allow us to draw comparisons and therefore verify information and substantiate the evidence we've gleaned and assumptions we've made regarding the original source. Multiple sources allow us to construct multiple models based on the various possible permutations when the sources are taken as a collective whole. They allow us to consider a variety of viewpoints, and to get a better perspective regarding issues such as intent and bias. They are essentially of two types of sources that help to either challenge or corroborate the seminal source document—*second-order* and *third-order* (*first-order* often used to refer to the seminal source document). Second-order sources are other primary sources—typically provided by the teacher—that inform our analysis of the seminal source. Third-order sources consist of additional references and information that students obtain through additional reading or research. Instructionally, an important key in effectively capitalizing on this aspect of sourcing lies in determining the point at which students have enough sources to make the particular experience well-rounded, yet not so much that it is not time-effective or interferes with other important learning. Sometimes it helps to work with students to choose a plan for drilling down into the source pool (e.g., clustered about one event or person, linear or chronologically to show change and continuity in a topic or phenomena, or scattered to obtain a sampling from which inferences can be made).

Time. The time in which the source document was created provides information that allows us to further contextualize the source by obtaining information directly related to that time. Events corresponding to the same time and place provide contextual clues about culture as well as human perspectives prevalent at the time the source was created, as well the information we need to compare and contrast with other sources from the same time period but very different locations or settings. For additional information, see the Time and Place Rule in [Teaching with Source Documents: Creating Meaning Through Historical Source Document Analysis](#).

Extensional needs. Working with sources provides an exceptional opportunity to extend students' learning through additional domain-specific research as well as through question generation, essay construction, and communication in the form of presentations. Consider as well the opportunity to tie source materials in with instructional units that focus on issues and the evidence-collection, analysis, and decision-making exercises that comprise such units.

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.



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