

# **Dead Documents Resurrected: Using a Tablet PC with Primary Source Materials**

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**Abstract:** With a multitude of primary resource materials now available on the Internet, people are able to access rich content to aid in their understanding of trends, events, and relationships across recorded history. However, understanding the content and making meaning from it is often still a struggle. Primary source documents, intrinsically powerful in many ways, are still static materials, often from times and places relatively foreign to many of our K-12 learners. In order for learners to make optimal meaning from these documents they need to do more than passively read them; they should also have an opportunity to interact with them through writing and communication with peers and teachers. The journaling features typically available for use with the newly emerging Tablet PC technology can allow teachers to use best practices in reading comprehension instruction to have their students interact with rich primary source document content. This short paper will focus on how the Tablet PC can be used as a tool to facilitate this interaction between the learners and primary source documents.

## **Primary Sources and Content Area Literacy**

A primary struggle with teaching social studies is getting the average student engaged with the learning. Let's face it, unless you have a passion for history, it usually amounts to little more than a collection of dates, people and places that you were forced to memorize. Unless you were able to make some personal connection history was, and still is, relatively meaningless to you. The first author of this paper teaches a social studies methods course for early childhood, elementary and middle school majors. Through anecdotal observation it is evident that most of the students loath history and display little interest in teaching history unless they have to. This seems probably due to their experiences as K-12 students. Traditional teaching of history has focused on memorization of facts with little time spent on the relationships between people, cultures, time, attitudes, values and emotions. Students have been presented others' interpretations of history and have not been given the opportunity to analyze and evaluate historical documents to construct their own understanding of history. Conversely, the use of primary sources as a tool for teaching history gives students the opportunity to be actively engaged in their learning and to construct their own knowledge. Godleski, et al. (2003) defines primary sources as:

...original records created at the time historical events occurred or well after events in the form of memoirs and oral histories. Primary sources may include letters, manuscripts, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, interviews, memoirs, documents produced by government agencies such as Congress or the Office of the President, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, research data, and objects or artifacts such as works of art or ancient roads, buildings, tools, and weapons. These sources serve as the raw material to interpret the past, and when they are used along with previous interpretations by historians, they provide the resources necessary for historical research (§ 2).

Schamel (1998) states that students are fascinated by primary sources “because they are real and personal; history is humanized through them” (p. vii). He continues by stating these records of historical events “reflect the personal, social, political, or economic views of the participants who created the sources” (p. vii). Primary sources are not interpreted by historians or scholars as they are in secondary sources such as the all too familiar text book. This allows students to apply their own “biases, created by their own personal situations and the social environments in which they live. As students use these sources, therefore, they realize that history exists through interpretation – and tentative interpretation at that” (Schamel, p. vii).

Samuel Wineburg (as cited in Drake, 2002) identifies two key concepts of historical thinking: sourcing heuristics and corroboration heuristics. Sourcing heuristics include questioning the author’s credentials, motivation and participation in the event as well as determining the original audience of the document. Using sourcing heuristics forces students to identify their own views on an event but, more importantly, forces them to distinguish their views from the author’s and take into account such things as the culture, attitudes, values and emotions of the time period of the event. Corroboration heuristics enables students to compare information from several documents, potentially looking at an event from multiple first hand experiences and perspectives.

Using primary sources in this manner forces students to use higher-order literacy skills. For optimal learning experiences, students must go beyond “reading the lines and reading between the lines” (decoding words and comprehending their basic message) and get to “reading *beyond* the lines.” This step is crucial because it is in reading and thinking beyond the lines that reading the lines and between the lines have their real value (c.f. Thomas, 2001; Thomas, in press). Reading primary documents is an ideal example of reading in a content field. Manzo, Manzo, and Thomas (2005) discuss a three phase approach to teaching content area literacy: helping students *into* their reading and learning through advanced guidance activities; providing scaffolding to help students *through* their reading and learning; and providing interactive structures to help students move *beyond* the basic acquisition of the knowledge at hand, and to an application, analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation of it.

Weaving Wineburg’s heuristics (as cited in Drake, 2002) and Manzo, Manzo and Thomas’ (2005) three-phase approach to content area literacy creates an easily implemented model for using primary sources to teach history. Applying sourcing heuristics helps students *into* their reading by setting the stage as well as provides scaffolding *through* their reading. Activities *beyond* the reading, such as applying corroboration heuristics, allow students to construct their own knowledge of the historical event.

In the past, the use of primary resources was limited due to physical constraints. An item archived in Washington DC was difficult to obtain by classrooms outside the region. These students were typically left to analyze a poor copy or only have access to someone else’s interpretation of the document. Now that most schools have internet access and primary sources are readily available on the web, students have new access to these documents at their finger tips. Primary source documents even in this form, however intrinsically powerful in many ways, are still static materials, often from times and places relatively foreign to many of our K-12 learners. In order for learners to make optimal meaning from these documents they need to do more than passively read them; they should also have an opportunity to interact with them through writing and communication with peers and teachers. The journaling features typically available for use with the newly emerging Tablet PC technology can allow teachers to use best practices in reading comprehension instruction to have their students interact with rich primary source document content.

## **Tablet PC Technology**

As described by Thomas, King, and Cetinguc (2004) and Thomas (in press), a Tablet PC is an emerging new hybrid of a laptop computer, a book or magazine, a digital media screen, and a pad of paper and pen. Most Tablet PC’s have a keyboard and screen that are like those of a typical small laptop computer, with a similar price range (approximately \$1700-\$3000). Tablet PC’s run with a Windows XP platform, connect to the internet in standard fashion (including dial up, high-speed, or wireless), and allow for the normal installation of typical software applications. In these ways, a Tablet PC is a regular PC laptop. However, the hard drive is usually

contained in the screen, and the screen detaches (or rotates) to essentially become a fully-functional portable PC with a screen on which the user can write by hand, using a normal-sized and normal-feeling digital pen. As Microsoft describes the Tablet PC, it is powerful, mobile, and versatile (Microsoft, 2002). The features specific to the Tablet PC offer a variety of benefits. With it, a user can control the Tablet PC using the digital pen; create and save handwritten documents (text and drawings); save, search, and review handwritten documents; convert handwritten notes into text for use in other applications; annotate documents imported from other applications; and dictate text or control the computer using voice (depending on the software installed). “Specially designed for mobile computer users who rely on a combination of notebook PCs, planners, spiral notebooks, handheld devices, and sticky notes to complete their work, Tablet PC is one of the most powerful tools for being as productive as possible away from your desk. Tablet PC advances mobile computing to a new level of interaction and productivity—all in one lightweight solution” (Microsoft, 2002).

## Primary Sources on the Tablet PC

The journaling program on a Tablet PC allows the user to import an artifact such as a web page or image and interact with the artifact on a computer in natural way. The artifact is no longer a static document; it is now dynamic or alive. The user can write on the document, highlight passages, and link to other documents, among other activities. These can afford a teacher the opportunity to implement proven reading strategies such as a Comprehension Monitoring System (Smith & Dauer, 1984) or About-Point (Martin, Lorton, Blanc, & Evans, 1977); for a complete description of these and other effective strategies see Manzo, Manzo and Thomas (2005).

Traditionally students read a document, make notes on a piece of paper, return to the document and continue. Doing this repeatedly, students may lose focus and motivation to make connections. Notes may become incoherent after time because students lose the connection between their notes and their interpretation and the primary sources. Using the Tablet PC, students can read and search the document and make their own notes and interpretations right on the document, improving time-on-task and improving meaning-making. Not only are students able to make mental and physical connections between their thoughts and the primary sources, but the Tablet PC enables students to make physical connections (hyperlinks) between the primary sources, their notes, other documents and web sites.

The Tablet PC has the potential to take a static piece of history with little or no meaning for students and create a dynamic set of documents partially “owned” by the students. This ownership has the potential to enable students to become more actively engaged in their learning and to think as a historian thinks (applying sourcing heuristics and corroboration heuristics) to read *beyond* the lines.

## Primary Source Depositories

American Memory – <http://memory.loc.gov>

Digital history - <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/>

EuroDocs - <http://library.byu.edu/~rdh/eurodocs/>

The Avalon Project - <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>

Making of America - <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moagrp/>

Repositories of Primary Sources - <http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html>

California State University Sacramento – History primary sources on the web –

<http://www.csus.edu/hist/site/research.htm>

The National Security Archive - <http://www.hfni.gsehd.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>

Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project - <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/>

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