Research on inquiry teaching in the social studies has concluded that it can refer to any number of approaches and is not taught consistently. The scholarship reveals that inquiry teaching, when used in the classroom, tends to overemphasize one activity — interpreting primary source documents — at the expense of engaging students in the entire process of inquiry. This article argues for engaging students by adopting an iterative approach to historical inquiry and draws on one available model to demonstrate its application. The author concludes that the widespread availability of digital primary sources has expedited teachers’ efforts to locate materials for classroom use, but that a more comprehensive approach to inquiry that includes wonder and reflection must be used in the classroom.

Key Words: Inquiry teaching, Primary sources, Teaching history, Visual literacy, Gender

Introduction

Few who teach social studies today would argue against using primary sources in teaching history. The practice widely accepted in classrooms, supported by social studies scholars, and used in standardized tests in the form of DBQ’s — or Document-Based Questions — is the most significant example of inquiry teaching in social studies. Using primary sources and other inquiry methods is meant to supplement textbooks, which give students little opportunity to make meaning on their own, as Sam Wineburg argues (1999). Textbooks give students the impression that what appears on the page is unquestionable and the way things actually were.

Inquiry teaching, or using primary sources, encourages students to construct their own understandings of the past. The research on historical inquiry demonstrates that it is one of the most engaging ways to support students’ higher order thinking skills and to develop the essential understandings and habits needed to be a citizen in a democracy (Levstik & Barton, 2001).

Historical Inquiry: An Overview

Inquiry has a long tradition in social studies and in history education. Arguably, the tradition of inquiry into history dates back to the early twentieth century. Educational philosopher John Dewey (1933; 1956) placed inquiry at the forefront of his thinking and social studies scholar Lucy Maynard Salmon encouraged the use of primary source documents in the teaching of history (Bohan, 2004). Decades later, the New Social Studies movement of the 1960s promoted an inquiry approach grounded in the structure of disciplines, which meant having students take on the roles of sociologists, historians, and anthropologists in the classroom (Bruner, 1960; Stern, 2010). Educational researchers, however, assert that inquiry teaching in the social studies can take
on any number of different meanings and never entirely caught on in practice (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Thornton, 2001).

Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik (2004; 2005) ground their definition in Dewey’s view of reflective thought, explaining that historical inquiry involves asking meaningful questions, finding information to answer the questions, drawing conclusions based on evidence, and reflecting on possible solutions (Levstik & Barton, 2005). They consider the inquiry approach to be social studies’ version of the scientific method (Barton & Levstik, 2004). While much research remains to be conducted on its advantages (Barton & Levstik, 2004), studies conducted with upper elementary students demonstrate success when using an inquiry approach (Levstik & Barton, 2005; VanSledright, 2002). Benefits of inquiry teaching in social studies include cultivating the habits of mind that are “critical to democratic life” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 189). Also, inquiry allows for diverse students to see themselves and their experiences represented in the history curriculum (Epstein, 2000; 2001; 2009).

Some of the drawbacks to the inquiry approach and offered by scholars researching historical inquiry include the time-consuming process of collecting documents and the need for students to be engaged with the entire process, not just the examination of primary sources (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This article provides a practical guide for implementing one model of inquiry in the K-12 social studies classroom through the use of one of the most extensive collections of sources online: the Library of Congress website. The inquiry process showcased in this article emphasizes the iterative nature of historical inquiry in the classroom, something that the scientific model overlooks.

Finding the Sources

In 2003, the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress began to increase its online collection and search capabilities producing high-resolution scans of its photographic prints and negatives and keying the captions into a database that is searchable through its online catalog (Natan-son, 2007). One of the first and most aggressive libraries to digitize their collections in the last several years, the Library of Congress’ educational outreach specialists have worked diligently to make the site more user-friendly and to engage teachers through its Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) initiative. The mission of the TPS program is to foster collaboration between the Library of Congress and the community to increase instructional use of the library’s digitized primary sources in classrooms around the country.

The Library of Congress online database is a treasure trove for history teachers, since the site offers so many resources in a variety of media formats: sound recordings, print sources, and images. With so many resources on one website, the process of collecting documents can become less time-consuming. Nonetheless, even with abundant resources at
one’s fingertips, one must be mindful of constructing mediated experiences for students, rather than just passing out sources and asking students to fill in interpret-the-source worksheets (Dewey, 1938; Houser, 1999). This is where adopting an inquiry framework becomes important, because it can help guide meaningful teaching and learning.

During the summer of 2008, with the support of the Library of Congress’ Teaching with Primary Sources Grant, several teachers and I explored the Library of Congress’ online database more fully by linking primary sources to inquiry teaching in secondary social studies. I met with five middle and high school teachers from a range of institutions in the Philadelphia area (urban and suburban, and charter and traditional public schools). The teachers worked by themselves developing lessons during June and July of that year. Then, at two meetings held in August, they presented the drafts of their lessons that incorporating images, US history, and inquiry methods. Each teacher critiqued and offered suggestions to the others. After the lessons were finalized, and once the school year began, the teachers reported on teaching them successfully to their students. Also, they remarked that their participation shaped their teaching by encouraging them to consider fuller, more complex inquiry methods, rather than just teaching students to interpret one primary source at a time.

Jill, for example, developed lessons on middle-class African American life in the mid-19th century. She taught the lessons at her middle school, and then to community college students, having adapted them for the economics class she was teaching. Aisha, a teacher at Constitution High School in Philadelphia, designed and taught the lessons on women during World War II that she developed as part of the grant. Lori, an elementary school teacher, developed the framework for the lessons portrayed in this article on transportation and technology. Lori’s lessons were chosen because of their originality and applicability across a wide range of grade levels, interests, and abilities.

The Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) initiative promotes the inquiry process and offers an iterative model addressing the critique in the literature that inquiry teaching in history overemphasizes interpreting primary sources at the expense of drawing students into the whole process. This model, called the Stripling Model of Inquiry (see Chart 1), is eponymously named for its designer, Barbara Stripling. There are other frameworks available to aid the teacher in focusing on inquiry. I chose this one because it is the one used by the TPS initiative and because of its circular design and emphasis on the Deweyan principle of reflection (Rodgers, 2002). The Stripling Model includes six stages: connect, wonder, investigate, construct, express, and reflect. Teachers are encouraged to have students repeat steps or return to them as the lesson progresses, hence the iterative design of the model. For the remainder of this article, I will show how the inquiry process can be used in a series of lessons by using sources from the Library of Congress website related to the topic of the introduction of the bicycle at the turn of the twentieth century.

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Wheels in Motion

Even though the bicycle may not be at the top of anyone’s list of topics to teach in history classes, it cuts across several concepts and themes in teaching U.S. history. Technological change most often is included in political and military history; therefore, it might be worthwhile to consider technological change within the scope of social history, because it includes examining the topic from a feminist framework by looking at the impact of a particular form of advanced technology on the freedom of white, middle-class women. Concepts such as change, freedom, and urbanization are part of the study of the bicycle. It is easy to get students’ interest by drawing on something they recognize and to which they can relate. The National Council for the Social Studies’ thematic strands of Time, Continuity, and Change and Science, Technology, and Society are appropriate for this particular exploration (NCSS, 1994).

Bicycles had become very popular among the middle- and upper classes of the United States and Europe by the 1890s. Historians have called the turn of the twentieth century the golden era of the bicycle, as it became an increasingly popular form of recreation. For the middle- and upper classes the bicycle was a novelty as much as it offered transportation and exercise. Over time, the development of a bike that was easier to ride — one without the huge wheel — aided its popularity in urban areas (Herlihy, 2004; Norcliffe, 2001).

For women in particular, the bicycle meant freedom to travel, but it presented challenges in terms of dress (Beard, 1933). Thus, the bicycle helped fuel dress reform efforts for women who sought greater mobility in clothing. The bicycle then enabled women more freedom and access to mobility. Public figures such as Susan B. Anthony and Frances Willard relished their bicycles and championed its usefulness in advancing women’s independence (Herlihy, 2004).

Accessing the collections at the Library of Congress online showed a wealth of images and links to historical documents to support the study of transportation, the bicycle, and its effect on society. Therefore, the focus of this series of lessons is on the theme of the study of the bicycle as a form of technological change that had an impact on middle-class men’s and women’s lives.

An Iterative Approach to Inquiry Using the Stripling Model

To introduce students to the series of lessons on bicycles, have them reflect on the first time they learned to ride a bicycle. They could share their reflections in pairs or groups. In the Stripling Model, this is an opportunity for the students to connect their lives to the content, and it is an opportunity to make the material relevant to students. This type of activity, also called an introductory performance of understanding (Tina Blythe and the Teachers and Researchers of the Teaching for Understanding Project, 1998), helps you gauge students understanding of a subject. Many students will have vivid memories of their first attempts at riding on two wheels and, by sharing with others; they help include those students who have never ridden a bike.

The next part of the lesson, which incorporates wonder, makes use of a series of images to continue the inquiry process (see Image Table, Appendix 2). Teaching with visual sources is becoming a more accepted practice in secondary high schools, but educators need to be mindful about helping students deconstruct images (Mattson, 2010; Woyshner, 2006). Begin by posting the images around the room on chart paper. Have students circulate and examine the images. As they circulate around the room, as they would an art gallery, have them record their thoughts on the chart paper. They could even be encouraged to write questions that come to mind as they look at the images. Continue until everyone has completed
the exercise. Students should revisit the posters at least a couple of times so they can read one another’s responses. Then, as a class, discuss the students’ impressions of the images. These two activities will get students thinking — wondering, really — about what they know about the topic at hand, accessing prior knowledge. It is an opportunity to address a couple of the tenets of media literacy: that messages (images in this case) have embedded values, have political, social, and economic purposes, and can be interpreted differently (Hobbs, 2005; NCSS, 2009).

The next part of the lesson and the next step in the inquiry model, investigate, involves mapping the facts of the development of the bicycle. Using a concept-web design, help the students list the key ideas, concepts, years, uses, etc., of the development of the bicycle and key issues. Be sure to include the students’ questions as well. You may also present the students’ ideas in timeline form. A modified version of the ever-popular K-W-L chart, also can be used at this juncture in the lesson. This phase in the inquiry — getting ideas of what students know about the development of the bicycle—is enriched by following the connect and wonder phases. Students should be able to generate ideas at this point, because they have had time to consider the bicycle’s importance in their lives and have looked at historical images that will give them ideas about the time period, uses of bicycles, and what the early bikes looked like and were made of.

The next part of the lesson, construct, is at the heart of historical inquiry, because it involves interpreting primary sources. In this series of lessons, the students should read two articles on the bicycle from Scribner’s Magazine, 1895, on the Library of Congress’ website, “Woman and the Bicycle” and “The Wheel of Today” (See Web-based Resources for links to both articles).

Interpreting primary sources involves a series of skills that, according to Wineburg (2010), form “a mental framework” to aid in students’ understanding. Wineburg offers six steps to interpreting primary sources. First, students consider the source of the article, meaning its author and why it was created. The next step is to contextualize, or situate the document within a particular time period and location. Following this, a close reading is done in order to consider what the author is trying to say. Then, use background knowledge, or context, to understand the document. Next, encourage students to read the silences to consider what is not being said or what has been left out. Finally, have students corroborate, an important step that goes beyond one source to read across two or more sources to look for points of agreement or disagreement (Wineburg, 2010).

These articles place the development of the bicycle in historical context and discuss how women’s lives were shaped by its development. Keeping in mind Wineburg’s (2010) six steps, have students read and discuss with their peers to support their understandings of the key concepts. They can discuss the meaning of such quotes as, “For such as disorder of the soul the sufferer can do no better than to flatten her sphere to a circle, mount it, and take to the road” (Merington, 1895, p. 703). Also, they can address such questions as, “What does the sphere mean in this context?” Discuss with students the reference to the separate spheres, or the notion that men and women were expected to participate in different spheres of activity during this time period. Men were of

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the world of work and were expected to be rational; women the home sphere and were considered emotional. This part of the lesson helps students construct their understandings of the meaning of the bicycle in early twentieth century America.

For the concluding part of the lesson, in which students have a chance to express their thoughts and ideas, have students write their own editorial of the new bicycle as though it were still 1895. What do they think of the bicycle? Who is it for? What are its uses? Of course, there are various ways to carry out the part of the express part of the inquiry cycle, so teachers may wish to modify this concluding assignment based on their own favorite writing or expressive assignments, as well as goals of their particular curricula and state standards. In so doing, this part of the inquiry cycle asks students to mimic the expressive forms that are found in the media they study.

For the reflection part of the lesson — and do remember that the process is iterative, so you may wish to return to earlier phases of the model — students and teachers can reflect on what they have learned and what gaps may remain in their understanding of the lesson at hand. This stage also is known as ongoing assessment (Blythe, et al., 1998), because it includes the students in the assessment process. Students can reflect on their own work and give feedback to one another. Reflection may take place as a discussion or in written form, such as a journal.

Conclusion

Teaching with primary sources is an important part of teaching social studies. Primary sources — now widely available on the Internet — engage students, helping them relate in personal ways to the events of the past, and promote a deeper understanding of history as a series of human events (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Library of Congress, June 2009). Too often historical inquiry stops short at teaching students to interpret primary sources devoid of context and without a repeating cycle that includes connecting their lives to the topic, wondering about it and its importance, and reflecting on what was learned and its significance.

This short lesson is just one brief illustration of an iterative process of inquiry in teaching history. Also, this lesson incorporates media literacy strategies by asking students to question the purposes and intentions of what they view and read. This particular model can be adapted to any number of topics in teaching history and can, as the research shows, help students develop higher order thinking skills and develop essential habits of mind for living in a democracy.

References


Library of Congress. (June 2009). The inquiry process handout from workshop for Teaching with Primary Sources grant recipients, Washington, DC. In author’s possession.


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**Web-Based**

Library of Congress  
[http://www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

National Council for the Social Studies  

Picturing Women: Gender, Images, and Representation in Teaching History with Primary Sources  
[http://tps.waynesburg.edu/eregion/participants.html#pa](http://tps.waynesburg.edu/eregion/participants.html#pa)

Teaching with Primary Sources, Eastern Region  
[http://tps.waynesburg.edu/eregion](http://tps.waynesburg.edu/eregion)
“The Wheel of To-Day,” Philip G. Hubert, Jr. (Scribner’s)
http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncpsbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(AFR7379-0017-88_bib))

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/quarterly/article.html

“Woman and the Bicycle,” Marguerite Merington (Scribner’s)
http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncpsbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(AFR7379-0017-89_bib)

About the Author

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Citation for this Article

## Appendix

### Relevant Web Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thumbnail Image</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Library of Congress URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>“Tire trouble, who said women weren't good mechanics?.” 190[?]</td>
<td><a href="http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ngp:@field(NUMBER+@band(ndfahult+b445))">http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ngp:@field(NUMBER+@band(ndfahult+b445))</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>“Ride a Stearns and be content.” 1896</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3g06645">http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3g06645</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>“No more messenger boys for the National Woman's Party…. Photo of Julia Obear, messenger.” 1922</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3d01841">http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3d01841</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>“Frances Benjamin Johnston… dressed as a man…. ” c. 1880-1900</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsc.04884">http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsc.04884</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>“…Sew Your Own Buttons, I'm Going for a Ride.” c. 1899</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a50886">http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a50886</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>“The “new woman” and her bicycle…” 1895</td>
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