

# There Was a Great Collision in the Stock Market: Middle School Students, Online Primary Sources, and Historical Sense Making

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*Students now have online access to rich collections of unmediated primary historical sources. This paper describes the results of an exploratory study of eighth-grade students and their use of online primary sources as part of an oral history unit on family farming. To understand connections between historical and present farming issues, the students analyzed photographs from the Depression-era Farm Service Administration photograph collection and wrote multigenerational family stories based on these images. Their work was analyzed for patterns in*

## Troubles with Textbooks

There are a number of sound justifications for the use of primary sources in the K–12 setting. One argument is that a dependence on textbooks can compromise student learning. McKeown and Beck (1994) observed that teachers often assign textbook readings without contradicting student assumptions that the textbooks are objective and omniscient conveyers of these events. Textbook accounts also typically fail to represent uncertainty in historical problems and may not completely know the facts or may partly reconstruct them from indirect sources; in addition, controversy may exist, meaning that textbooks may tell different versions of the same sequence of events (Britt et al. 1994).

McKeown and Beck (1994) noted another problem with textbooks and student learning, which is that their authors often assume students have more prior knowledge than they actually do. Students' lack of adequate context results in a shallow understanding of the historical phenomena. McKeown and Beck (1994) draw on Kintsch's (1986) distinction between learners' ability to recall "textbase" information as opposed to their ability to form a "situation model" of events. In other words, students may learn enough from reading a text to reproduce what they have read, but they have not learned in such a way that they can use the information from the text to interpret or reconstruct it (Kintsch 1986). In addition, many textbooks are often not engaging and suggest no voice in the way trade books do. But textbooks are traditionally at the center of the classroom curriculum, endowing them with an undeniable authority and a "beyond reproach" objectivity (McKeown and Beck 1994). Students are unaware of the role of the historian or the textbook as interpreters of historical fact, rather than mere relaters of memory. Garner and Gillingham (1998) commented that textbooks are seldom read selectively in schools, that instead a start-to-finish treatment is more common. They described the "textbook-as-tyrant trap," where the curriculum and pace are driven by the book in a transmission model of teaching.

In studying historical problem solving methods and skills, Wineburg (1991) asked high school students and professional historians to look at a range of conflicting written and pictorial sources about a single historical event and construct the true history. The students gave most credence to the version of history supplied by the textbook, in contrast to the historians who were immediately inclined to examine the credibility of the sources, whether primary or secondary,

These researchers noted that aside from the information that is contained in a primary source document, the reader must look at the subtext—the other attributes that affect the meaning and significance of the document. Subtext elements include the author’s identity, date of publication, and whether the document is private or public, official or unofficial, refereed or not. For a photographic image, the viewer needs to add intended audience, the purpose of the photographer, any possibility of staging, and so on. Their research points to a progression in the development of historical thinking. Student comprehension proceeds from sequential thinking (i.e., “first this happened, then this happened, then this happened”) to a more robust view of historical events that takes into account the simultaneity and complexity of historical processes. With experience, coaching, and domain knowledge, students can learn to contextualize, scrutinize the nature of a source, and use a broader common sense.

## The Importance of Personal-Social Context

Levstik and Barton (1996) did not think that Wineburg’s (1991) expert versus novice paradigm, in which he compared the document evaluation strategies of historians and students, was very useful. They were more interested in the cognitive processes students use to make sense of history, which they found generally involve the mediation of a student’s social context. Personal history, family background, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity may be just as important factors for historical sense making as prior schooling. Fasulo, Girardet, and Pontecorvo (1998) observed that the nine-year-old children in their study defined Viking artifacts in terms of themselves, overlaying their own perspectives and sensibilities on the past. These behaviors confirmed that personal experience effects the way we see the past and determine what is significant. Yet the children also recognized the Vikings’ place in time. Revealing a presupposition that the passage of time is equal to progress in civilization, they expressed appreciation for what the Vikings were “already” able to do (Fasulo, Girardet, and Pontecorvo 1998). The children created bridges between personal perspectives and historical perspectives.

Greene (1994) found that novice historians are also more skilled at writing problem-based essays requiring synthesis of a finite amount of information than traditional history reports based on extensive content knowledge. This difference is due to students’ lack of disciplinary knowledge, leaving them better positioned to write analytically by drawing on a finite collection of resources and personal experiences. Therefore, he recommends that educators “...give students occasions to write informally as a means for helping them to explore their ideas and for acquiring new knowledge” (Greene 1994, 166). This use of writing as a technique for learning content knowledge adds to the repertoire of strategies for teaching history.

## Use of the Arts in Learning History

Since children are concrete thinkers, relating strongly to material culture and the personal-social context, it can be argued that history instruction should include artifacts that can be seen (Levstik and Barton, 1996). But how can children then articulate their understanding of the artifacts and other historical information they are exposed to? One constructive way is through the arts. K–12 teachers have long employed the arts in teaching social studies and language arts subjects (Henry 1995). Researchers have validated the learning outcomes of this practice. Epstein (1994) notes that “...by representing history and other conceptions of knowledge through paintings, poems, stories, or songs, students can communicate the lifelike qualities of human experience” (136).

Levstik and Barton (1996) found evidence to suggest that some students remember historical information better through art experiences because of repeated practice and multiple performances, as in the case of drama. They argue that learning through the arts provides children with a context in which they are active problem solvers. Furthermore, story telling, or narrative, has a powerful influence on historical thinking and can be accomplished through reading and writing historical fiction and nonfiction (Levstik and Barton 2001).

At upper levels, however, use of the arts in the teaching of history is not as common, often seen as less academically rigorous. But we do know that various other implementations of constructivist learning, such as historical simulation exercises, can be powerful motivators and effective learning tools (Zola and Ioannidou 2000). Equally significant, for those students who are not as adept at traditional forms of assessment such as multiple choice tests and essays, "...stories or songs enable them to succeed in representing what they have come to know through forms they have the talent to manipulate well" (Epstein 1994, 140). The arts provide these students with an alternative method to demonstrate their historical understanding and competence.

Primary sources, in combination with artistic representation, have been shown to be valuable tools in helping students situate historical social context. What happens when online primary sources are used in inquiry-based classrooms? In transmission-based instruction, teachers can easily update their lessons by integrating primary source materials into PowerPoint presentations rather than passing an artifact or a book around the classroom during lectures. But what happens when students are asked to search an electronic archive and select their own primary sources for interpretation? Are they able to draw appropriate inferences and connect the threads of evidence they uncover? Can they use creative modes of expression to communicate their understanding of



1. What is happening in this picture?
2. What are the circumstances this photo represents?
3. How are the people dressed? (Be specific in your descriptions.)
4. What can you observe from the expressions on their faces, posture, position in the photo, etc.?
5. Describe the setting. What do you notice about the room (furniture, walls, etc.)?
6. Is there anything interesting or surprising about the situation in the photo? Given what you know about the era, how might you explain it?

The questions in the visual analysis portion of the assignment prompted two different types of thinking: questions 1, 3, and 5 called for straightforward, observation-based description. Questions 2, 4, and 6 led the students to analyze and interpret what they observed. One purpose of these questions was to hone students' visual literacy skills by directing them to carefully read the photograph as a piece of primary historical evidence. That process was modeled and practiced during class. Another purpose of the questions was to help structure student thinking as a way of preparing them to conceptualize a bigger picture. They needed to think deeply and analytically about the photograph before launching into the creative writing portion of the assignment. Their task for the story was to invent plausible, causal relationships that would take place from the time of the photo to the present. In a sense, the students were supplied with an out-of-context artifact, then were charged with supplying a meaningful, historically appropriate context for it.

In their stories, which had to be at least two pages long, the student pairs were to address how the person in the photograph survived the Depression, indicate if (and how) the next generation(s) stayed on the farm, and describe how the legacy of the farm stayed (or did not stay) with the succeeding generations. They were given two class days to work on their stories, and were allowed to use out-of-class time as well. The actual assignment parameters were quite open ended. Students were not required to include a specified number of historic facts or events in their stories. Instead,

readings from which they could select, including news articles, tables of statistics, short fiction, and trade publications. Exposure to the breadth of the FSA–OWI collection was another way to supply students with multiple perspectives. Searching the photograph collection exposed them to contemporary visual records, adding further dimension to their knowledge base and giving them the means to formulate a robust situation model. At the same time, they would have control over





half of the sentence meets the description requirement; the second half of the sentence interprets and illustrates. The reader can visualize just how baggy the shirt is.

Students sometimes went beyond interpretation, leaping to conclusions or embellishing in some way, as in this example: “The little boy looks sort of lost and spacey in this picture. He is also kind of hiding, perhaps from reality.” This type of description may be a characteristic of adolescents’ ability to consider a great deal of information, but still need experience and practice to use it (Wigfield, Eccles, and Pintrich 1996). The academically gifted students in our sample were no different in this regard. In general, student descriptive skills ranged from being very flat

None of the subjects in the picture are looking at the camera. Film was fairly expensive in those days, so this kind of surprised me. But it probably makes sense, since the photographer is trying to capture normal farming life during the Depression.

Here is another example of students, who are accustomed to smiling for the camera, inserting their own sensibilities into the historical scene. If these contemporary student writers were the participants in this scene, they would likely try to support the photographer's intent of capturing normal farming life during the Depression and not pose. But the cost of the film most likely had no actual import for the subjects of the photo, who were probably never going to see the results. It does seem significant, however, that the students had an awareness that the presence of the photographer might influence the situation. With some coaching or classroom discussion, the students might note that the photographer was a stranger to the household, perhaps representing outside authority, and that his subjects might have been reluctant to make eye contact with an outsider.

Other student groups recognized and wondered about extremely subtle cues:

What is surprising in this picture is the contrast between the family's appearance and the house and conditions that they live in. I think a logical explanation for this is that although the family is not very wealthy, ultimately judging from their house, they want to look their best for the government representative.

And they further speculate:

There is a fire insurance banner oning





photograph was a concrete catalyst that sparked better attention to detail when describing the Depression period. The students had no visual prompt to help them ground the later periods of the story with realistic detail. In addition, more in-class time was spent learning about the Depression period than the modern period. The major source of information about modern farming up to this point had been the assigned readings, and the students had not yet conducted their interviews with actual farmers. This would suggest that students learned more from the teacher-led instruction than they did from the independent reading. It might also indicate that the visual images left more of an impression on the students than did the texts.

Other narrative lapses may be due to naïveté. In one story, the authors described a fifty-six-year-old mother and a sixty-year-old father who have five children ranging in age from four to sixteen. In another, a mother, described by the students to be in her late fifties, has a three-year-old. Old mothers were a common theme, perhaps because many of the women in the pictures look old by modern standards. Sometimes students simply did not seem to be thinking through the task with care. In one story, a journey to California took five years, from the beginning to the end of World War II. A character in another story fell in love September 10, 1937. By September 13 he had invited his paramour to for dinner “quite a few times now,” and asked her to marry hi

the students who were not otherwise the best performers on traditional academic tasks seemed to particularly excel in this atmosphere of artistic creativity.

One powerful way some students demonstrated a sense of perspective was by incorporating the photo session into the narrative, also done in some of the visual analysis exercises:

In a family photograph taken by a man named Lee Russell in May of 1938, you can see disappointment in the faces of my dad's family.

The boy stood by his grandmother, at the doorway, facing the photographer. The woman wanted to show others what is (sic) was like living in a shack town. After shooting a few pictures on the big, clumsy camera, the photographer thanked them and went away. He

was embarrassed. Plus, the photo was a poor quality. The boy was the only one who was not embarrassed.

The photo was a poor quality. The boy was the only one who was not embarrassed.

There are several possible reasons students chose to use humor in their writing. Some may have used it to give themselves psychological distance from the seriousness of the topic. On the other hand, humor may have been used as a device to help students feel more connected to the events, yet still have control over them. The two musical examples above could be interpreted as student-connected intertext, in which the writers import elements from other media with which they are familiar. The use of humor may simply reflect classroom culture, since the task was grounded in a literary endeavor rather than a historical one. The parameters of the story assignment were an invitation to invent, not simply report or even analyze data as in traditional assignments. It might even be said that the students were able to take advantage of a delicious opportunity to share an inside joke. In these safe circumstances, the teacher knew that they were fooling and they knew that she knew they knew. This behavior may be another demonstration of development in perspective taking (Selman 1980).

With the modern generation segments of the stories, the students seemed to feel even freer to invent, again perhaps because they had no other visual cue to anchor the narrative. In one story, a daughter becomes an internationally regarded conservationist. In another, the daughter travels to the Persian Gulf as a lieutenant. Some fabrications were written at the expense of plausibility. One story tells of a son who gets married in 1964 to a woman who turns out to be an animal rights activist and convinces him to quit pig farming, then to quit farming altogether. The couple goes on to form an organization called the “Animal Rights Society, National,” also known as ARSN. This playfulness probably made the assignment more enjoyable and engaging for many students, and gave them a chance to exhibit their cleverness. An advanced sense of humor is a common characteristic of gifted students (Holt and Willard-Holt 1995). Other explanations not considered here might also account for the imaginative spin present in the stories.

There were also plenty of examples of unintentional humor, due to typing and grammatical errors or to simple naïveté. One pair of students intended a serious title for their photograph: “Life for a Tenant Farmer’s Family Living in Oklahoma During the Depression in a Nutshell.” Other bloopers would qualify for any teacher’s list of favorite student mistakes: “Especially nobody would want to buy our desecrated farm”; “The depression and dust bowel had hit his family hard”; “In a few years the meat they sell from the cattle flourishes”; “They disclosed Ralph from his inheritance.” As mentioned earlier, requiring second drafts or having students proofread each other’s stories would have eliminated many of these gaffes.

A more unfortunate consequence of the open-ended nature of the story-writing task was that some students either became sloppy in their attention to important detail or lapsed into heavy melodrama. There was often a fine line between clever humor and silliness:

Eventually, she died of a massive heart attack when her grandson asked if he could borrow five dollars.

Alexis had gone to jail for grand theft auto.

Pa came home. Alone. Pa was not injured but was shaken up about my brothers’ deaths. He quickly got back to work, but Ma was grief-stricken. She stopped eating and eventually starved to death.

The tendency toward melodrama could be considered developmental, reflecting students' lack of life experience. These writing examples bear a resemblance to other mass media fare, such as television soap operas or Hollywood movies, that models students might imitate when they write about experiences vastly different from their own. Their cinematic story lines could also signify a need early adolescents might have to oversimplify complex or unsettling phenomena, minimizing the impact on their own comfort levels—just as the use of humor does.

The stories that were written in a realistic, almost documentary style were probably also the most historically correct. This modern farmer's story is steeped in realism:

If it wasn't for my w g19.76ob,(s)1(tx(e w)-21 )Tj Td n5(i)-6(esmr)3(l)-22v oro to oveo teaheb0( or)3(



- x With instruction, the students were able to successfully navigate this online archive and make selections that met the historical criteria of the assignment. However, in their analyses, the students tended to view the artifacts from the vantage point of their personal experiences and contemporary time frame, indicating a need for further classroom modeling and discussion.
- x The students enjoyed creative writing as a technique for learning history. But their efforts needed guidance. Without sufficient background knowledge and directed feedback, they often masked the gaps in their knowledge by inserting unrelated information or inappropriate writing devices such as melodrama. However, devices like humor and irony should be explored as a means of increasing motivation and engagement.

As with any new teaching unit, we learned what we would do differently the next time. Most importantly, the students needed a more structured framework around which to build their stories. As novice historians, their knowledge was too incomplete to be able to write with sufficient credibility. Merely requiring the students to bring the generations up to the present time was inadequate. The stories needed more points of historical contact and a structure that would propel the narrative toward some sort of closure. In our teacher-expert roles, we could have provided prompts—a list of government programs, historical events and phenomena, such as dust storms—

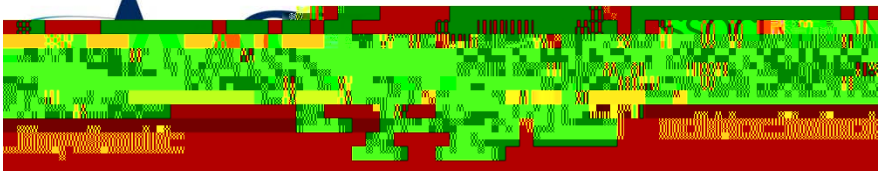


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