TEACHING WITH ONLINE PRIMARY SOURCES: DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

DOCSTEACH.GOV FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Over the last 20 years, digital scanning technology and the Internet have combined to provide educators with access to a huge volume of primary source material. The National Archives' Archival Research Catalog (ARC) alone contains over 150,000 digital images of documents, photographs, maps, and other records (http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/). This treasure trove is a wonderful resource although in some ways frustratingly rich.

Teachers in need of a good, teachable document probably do not have time to wade through an electronic mountain of digitally scanned primary sources. If they have found a primary source, they might be stuck on how to use it in the classroom. The National Archives' new website DocsTeach (http://docsteach.org/) offers a solution. It combines a large, growing, but easily searchable database of over 4,000 of the Archives' most teachable documents with a dynamic set of interactive activity-building tools. The primary sources contain historical content, and the interactive tools offer a means of developing students' historical and critical thinking skills.

DocsTeach contains sources on a wide array of topics, ranging from Revolutionary War era political cartoons to film footage of the 1963 civil rights march on Washington. Students learning about the Westward expansion of the United States can read messages from President Thomas Jefferson to Congress regarding the Louisiana Purchase. Maps of the area demonstrate just how large an area this comprised. Teachers constructing a lesson plan on the Fugitive Slave Act can use court filings of slave owners seeking their escaped slaves. These documents could be paired with the treason indictment of 38 Christiana, Pennsylvania, residents who sought to prevent one such capture. Learning activities focused on immigration can make use of National Archives' photographs of immigrants arriving at Ellis and Angel Islands. DocsTeach also includes motion pictures and audio content on topics ranging from D-Day to the Nixon-Kennedy debates to the Camp David peace summit.

DocsTeach also provides an array of seven interactive tools to assist teachers in using the website's collection of primary sources: *Finding a Sequence, Focusing on Details, Interpreting Data, Making Connections, Mapping History, Seeing the Big Picture,* and *Weighing the Evidence*. As their titles suggest, these tools give students the opportunity to practice historical thinking skills. The National Archives' education staff has developed learning activities to demonstrate each of these seven tools in action, and continues to create more. Teachers can use any of these, modify them to meet their classroom needs, or create their own from scratch.

One activity, titled *We the People* (http://docsteach.org/activities/68/detail), for example, asks students to pay close attention to a pair of primary sources' details and to understand them in context through the *Focusing on Details* tool (http://docsteach.org/tools/focusing-on-details). Activities created with this tool can be used to get the class warmed up, to introduce students to a topic, to pose a historical problem or question to students, to get students to focus critically on a document or set of documents, or to introduce or reinforce document analysis techniques. The *We the People* activity asks students to compare a draft and final version of the U.S. Constitution. The activity features digital copies of the two documents side-by-side on the computer screen. The draft begins, "We the people of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia . . . ." The final versions reads simply, "We the people of the United States . . . ."

Students then consider three discussion-developing questions:

- What is the difference between the opening of the draft and the final version?
- What is the significance of changing the wording?
- How does this change reflect the thinking of the Founders during the Constitutional Convention?

After the discussion, students move to the activity's conclusion screen and respond to the following questions via e-mail to their teacher using the incorporated electronic form:

- Imagine you are a delegate sent to the Constitutional Convention.
  - Which Preamble would you have supported?
  - Why?

We the People provides students with an opportunity to see the development in the thoughts of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Focusing on the details of their language reveals the delegates' movement away from a decentralized government based on the Articles of Confederation to a relatively centralized government based on the new Constitution.

While this activity might match a teacher's needs exactly, it can also be used as a starting point. Any and all of its components can be modified—from the questions asked to the documents used, to the chronological period covered. Other pairs of documents could be used to teach a different topic. For example, find the two versions of the Thirteenth Amendment in the DocsTeach database (http://docsteach.org.documents). The first, passed by Congress on March 2, 1861, but not ratified by the states, would have forbidden any constitutional amendments that would have abolished or "interfered" with slavery. The second version, passed by

Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified by a sufficient number of state legislatures, abolished slavery. An examination of the details of these two documents could produce a fruitful classroom discussion. Alternatively, a single compelling document or photograph on any topic could be used to similar effect.

The *Weighing the Evidence* tool on DocsTeach helps students understand how to "scaffold" evidence in order to arrive at conclusions. A teacher can present opposing historical interpretations within a *Weighing the Evidence* activity and direct students to choose which interpretation they believe each document supports. Students weigh each document in light of all of the existent evidence and place it on an interactive scale. Textual documents, photographs, or even audio or video clips can be given full weight by placing them to the extreme right or left of the scale, more or less weight than other evidence based on scale placement, or no weight at all by placing the document in the center. In doing so, students see a visual representation of where the evidence lies in relation to a historical interpretation. Or a teacher can leave the historical interpretations at either end of the scale blank for students to fill in. In this case, students analyze each document in the activity and come up with two possible historical conclusions that the evidence might suggest, and place documents on the scale.
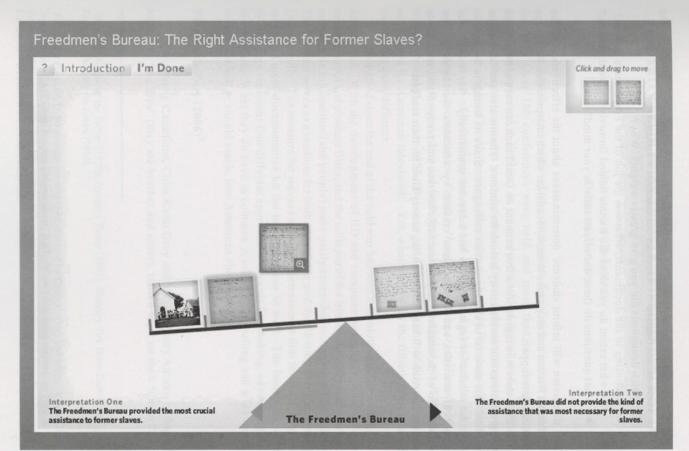
The activity *How Effective Were the Efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau?* (http://docsteach.org/activities/28/detail) tasks students with evaluating how helpful the Freedmen's Bureau was to newly freed slaves. Students examine seven documents and determine which of the following two interpretations each supports:

1. The Freedmen's Bureau was effective in providing for the wants and needs of formerly enslaved persons.
2. The Freedmen's Bureau was ineffective in providing for the wants and needs of formerly enslaved persons.

These interpretations are on opposite sides of a fulcrum (see image on next page).

One of the documents is a labor contract arranged by the Freedmen's Bureau between formerly enslaved Truss Hall and Robert McKenzie of Robeson County, North Carolina. The contract stipulates that Hall will "obey all lawful commands as he use [sic] to when a slave." Students would decide which interpretation this "contract" best supports and then electronically move the document to one side of the scale. Another document ready for students' placement is a report by a teacher working at a Freedmen's Bureau school in Arkansas. Students would similarly examine this record and determine which interpretation it best supports.

After making determinations for each document, students electronically respond to their teacher indicating how much "weight" they gave to each document. They also respond to follow-up questions in preparation for a class discussion. These questions are:

Freedmen's Bureau: The Right Assistance for Former Slaves?

Click and drag to move

Interpretation One
The Freedmen's Bureau provided the most crucial assistance to former slaves.

The Freedmen's Bureau

Interpretation Two
The Freedmen's Bureau did not provide the kind of assistance that was most necessary for former slaves.

- Which documents did you place on the side of "effective"? Which on the side of "ineffective"? Which in the center? Why?
- Which documents did you give greater weight? Why?
- According to the documents, what was the job of the Freedmen's Bureau? To what extent do you think the Bureau helped formerly enslaved persons?
- What questions do these documents raise in your mind?

Class discussion will inform students' determinations about the effectiveness of the Freedmen's Bureau and may cause them to reconsider which interpretation they judge the documents support.

Educators who register for a free account on DocsTeach can save activities and even group them into multi-activity lessons for students. The site also enables them to "publish" this material to share with their colleagues. Since its launch in September 2010, the number of registered users has increased dramatically. So, too, has the number of activities and lesson plans created by educators worldwide. This combination of thousands of highly teachable sources and ready-to-use, modifiable teaching materials will help teachers bring history alive for their students.