

Using Primary Sources: A Strategy to Promote the Teaching of Civilization to Algerian Students of English

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Abstract

Bound by a shared belief, teaching experience sustains that Algerian university teachers of civilization (American or British) are at their wits' end trying to apply university teaching approaches as “magic” formulas hoping to remedy the problem of how to get their students involved in the aforementioned discipline that has earned a bad name for itself. The discipline in question is regarded by students as boring, monotonous and concerned only with rote memory. Students of English feel that they are forced to mug up facts that have to be regurgitated at the time of the exams or tests. In this regard, what method should teachers adopt to help students enjoy, imbibe, and digest the lectures contents? This paper discussed the feasibility of integrating primary sources in the teaching of civilization, a strategy that most of us rarely, if not never, apply despite the online availability of various digitized primary sources formats. The paper exposed and explained the advantages of modeling and experimenting with this strategy that eventually helps in the maturation of students as future researchers and the enhancement of their critical thinking skills. The hypothesis was highlighted by a case study that proved the efficacy of using primary sources in the teaching of civilization. The outcome showed how learners become highly motivated by engaging themselves progressively and hence shifting from passive and listless dependents to active and curious autonomous learners of English .

Keywords: autonomous learners, civilization teaching, critical thinking skills, primary sources, university teaching approaches

One of the current teaching methods that is gaining popularity and attracting larger following is the use of ordinary or digital primary sources in class. Primary sources are simply the order of the day. Nonetheless, the academic misconception of the Algerian students of English is characterized by their mind that is unfortunately embedded with the archaic belief that the teacher is the major and most reliable source of knowledge in learning civilization and accumulating information that is issued by the teacher. Reacting to this enduring erroneous vision, there is an effective but ignored approach that may largely contribute to enhancing the students' activity so that they become involved in civilization learning. The main objective of this paper then is to convince students to study civilization through primary documents and familiarize themselves with to improve their research skills. Indeed, at the end of their university education they are expected to already be able to understand the specificity of civilization - "knowledge by traces". It is essential for them to develop their learning capacities to understand civilization and eventually give meaning to this discipline.

Shifting from Unmotivated to Motivated Mind

The course of American/British civilization as a discipline with its different components is complex but may seem futile in the eyes of the Algerian students of English. This is an area that most of them reject willingly on the basis that this discipline is most of the time perceived negatively. The students almost collectively are not motivated to get involved in their civilization lectures and "they thought of them, by and large, as a waste of time" (Veccia *vi*). They are more inclined to stick to the present and the future at the expense of the past. Considering this tendency, the present paper focuses on how to make civilization a more attractive and more accessible field to students who are completely unmotivated as far as "research adventure" is concerned. Civilization is no longer described as an isolated discipline which allows students to assimilate historical/cultural achievements and increase their knowledge in the field of language proficiency. In addition, academic maturation of our students should be fostered by an independent learning and when mastering the respective steps of primary sources such as reading, exploring, interpreting and analyzing, there is no doubt students will successfully develop their critical thinking and writing skills and thus detach themselves from the archaic method of relying on teachers all the time. After all, the use of primary sources by students becomes one of the most efficient ways to get students involved in active learning and initiate them towards the complex field of research.

Distinguishing between a Primary Source and a Secondary Source

To be successful in using primary sources in the classroom, teachers have to begin with a deep understanding of what primary and secondary sources are. As primary and secondary sources are introduced to students, instructional opportunities that allow them to discern the similarities and differences between the two types of sources have to be created besides other opportunities to discuss perspectives, bias, and context. As the teacher and his students work toward a complete comprehension of what primary and secondary sources mean, there should be the opportunity to also discuss vital records and ephemera. These kinds of personal primary sources are frequently overlooked by teachers but make for interesting parts of discussion.

There are written or unwritten sources that provide information about the past. There are primary sources and secondary sources. By definition a primary source is any document/object, created or produced during the period the researcher is investigating. The primary source is basically defined as that material "which is written or produced in the time period students are

investigating.... [It] provides first-hand accounts about a person or event” (Pierce 3). The primary source is directly related to a topic by time or participation. As a first-hand evidence or eyewitness account of an event, the primary source tells about the event without adding any interpretation from a later time. It is used as evidence for theories or when one wants to gain timely perspectives on a subject. It reflects an individual or a one-sided point of view of the participant/recorder. It also reflects the attitudes of the time period in which it was written or produced. It includes an original information or explanation. This definition applies to a primary source available on the Internet. There are various types of primary sources such as advertisements, autobiographies, artifacts, court files, diaries/ephemera, letters, manuscripts, memoirs, memoranda, newspapers, novels, personal interviews, opinion polls, photographs, reports, speeches, and testimony. The list is long but not exhaustive. By contrast, a secondary source is any document containing descriptive or analytical data on primary documents and is created after the period under investigation. Experts even go far by viewing this type of sources as “corruptions of the originals and are prone to successive layers of error and bias (Barton 746). The secondary source is characterized by its interpretation, evaluation, or analysis of the primary source. It can be viewed as part of a conversation about a topic. It is used when one wants to see what others have already discussed. It can be a good place to collect background information or explore what subtopics have already been studied on a given topic. Books, artist’s impressions, blogs, textbooks, encyclopedias, reviews, lectures, and documentaries belong to this type of source.

Yet, caution should be taken: We should not fall into the trap of thinking that a primary source is better than a secondary source because it was created ‘at the time’. There is no rule about which type of source is better. It depends on what we are looking for in the source and how it is used.

A source’s classification as a primary or secondary can change depending on the topic that we are studying. For example, if we are writing about how news is reported on the Internet and the website like BBC.co.uk can be considered a primary source, we are studying news on the Internet and BBC.co.uk represents the object we are studying. However, if we are writing about Margaret Thatcher’s political legacy and we find an article on BBC.co.uk that analyzes it, the article would be considered a secondary source and since we are studying politics, an article on BBC about it is a step or move from the object that we are studying.

Primary Source Documents and Visual Literacy

Usually we, as teachers, overwhelm our students with printed materials (handouts of scholarly articles, book chapters) to be absorbed. The traditional way of giving them lectures allows them a very limited time to react to the covered topic. They simply stagnate in their over-simplistic understanding instead of acquiring complex ideas by encouraging them to do their own activities. Civilization as a discipline should be taught in “the form of problems, trends, movements, interrelationships, processes, but not periods”. It is not fair to see this discipline, taught as inquiry into the past, to provide the student with ready-made approaches and solutions to contemporary problems” (Krug 42). Teaching has changed overtime as it has become more structured and thus gives students more time to get prepared. Primary source documents are used to develop observation and analysis capabilities. They are devoted to the analysis of materials based on objective and deductive observation, and recording facts. Besides being the basis of historical research, primary sources are “widely used in undergraduate teaching as a way to introduce students to voices from the past” (Dobson and Ziemann).

Literature Review

The all-encompassing trends of literature suggest that the use of primary sources can develop students' understanding of civilization while shaping their critical thinking. Educators agree that the student can acquire an appropriate and positive experience of learning when he is exposed to primary sources. To make this practice easier, teachers of course rely on accessible technology in their classrooms. Finally if the available literature makes aspects of the use of primary sources positive, various educators maintain that the use of primary sources can result in efficiency. To confirm these findings, it is important to explore the ways primary sources are used in teaching civilization. In the literature review, recent studies on classrooms adopting primary sources are closely examined.

Serious research development to encourage the use of primary sources in civilization is taking place through works such as Veccia's, *Uncovering our History: Teaching with Primary Sources* in which she explains well that "Primary sources can provide the framework for spirited classroom discussions, debates, and projects that will engage students in memorable ways" (2). Students were asked to do activities while analyzing pictures, videoclips, and documents gathered and brought by the teacher. When students discover how primary sources give evidence of the past upon which hypothesis is formed, they get involved in the motivating process that largely contribute to their gradual shift from passive to active learners. Another effective strategy for using primary source materials is to develop a packet of primary source documents or artifacts that revolves around a single theme, topic, or historical era. In other words, the teacher would collect a range of primary sources concerning, for instance, the *New Deal*. Students would then compare and contrast documents in government, economics, and contemporary world issues in this packet to understand more fully the historical and political context and repercussions of the *New Deal* (Shiveley and Vanfossen 40). The work puts emphasis on primary source document analysis that is believed to provide students an opportunity to connect with civilization in a more autonomous and individual active manner. The civilization course is supposed to enhance the student's curiosity as he voluntarily becomes a major factor in this action research.

As their principal system of methodology, researchers examined sample student work and analyzed their responses and reflections. The previously cited works share a common ground by endorsing the concept that primary source usage provides students with a more positive and effective learning experience.

In addition to historical analysis and interpretation skills, researchers remarked that working with primary sources in civilization encompasses several other benefits. Susan L. Meo explains in her article "In their Own Eyes': Using Journals with Primary Sources with College Students" that using primary sources allows students to see civilization as an ongoing process of constructing the past, rather than a fixed body of knowledge. She accentuated three important thinking skills over the civilization course and required from her students to show civilization understanding - the ability to "identify the basic elements of the narrative structure (the characters' situation, sequence of events, their causes and their outcomes)". Students were expected to identify the author's perspective and evaluate his/her credibility and authority. In this way students developed their historical analysis and interpretation skills, and received practice in "detecting bias, weighing evidence, and evaluating arguments" (336).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present case study was to investigate the impact of teaching civilization with primary sources in the classroom and to measure the implications for the students' development of historical/cultural perspective taking, understanding and approach.

A primary source represents an effective tool that helps both to develop the student understanding of historical/cultural events and expand his awareness of people who were part of these events. Reading newspaper articles written during a particular era, or studying personal letters, diaries, or memos written by historical figures, analyzing ads, political cartoons, and government documents from times past, the whole may create an enjoyable, exciting, and informative environment for most students learning civilization. At this level, the paper hypothesizes that helping students to discover how enjoyable, exciting, and interesting the subjects can be, will improve their comprehension, as well as their participation in the classroom environment.

The studied question in this action research, therefore, is to find out if students understood information and enjoyed studying civilization more when they studied with primary sources as opposed to relying on secondary sources. In this paper, civilization refers to the "interpretive, constructive, analytic, and dialogic process—a discipline concerned with both knowledge of the past and the acts of constructing that knowledge" (Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cottone, and Allen).

Methodology

The use of primary sources as an essential component of civilization curriculum is clearly expanding in today's education institutions mainly universities. It is important for teachers to explore and understand the effectiveness of primary sources as a teaching tool of civilization. The objective of this paper is to assess the effectiveness of using primary sources and how they affect student's understanding of civilization.

Research Questions

The core research question was: How is the student's understanding of civilization affected by the use of primary sources? In this case understanding civilization is defined as the ability to explain the meaning of an historical/cultural event or concept. Students must be able to interiorize the relevance of important historical/cultural events and concepts. The major advantages from taking part in the research were the teacher's willingness or unwillingness to use primary sources and if this teaching strategy was valuable or not to a students learning.

Data

The study was conducted with Master's students in the department of Letters and English Language. The participant population consisted of 34 Master's students who took British civilization. There were more females than males enrolled in the class. The sample lesson concerned the "Scramble for Africa". As the study required the incorporation of primary sources in the British civilization course guidelines and as it was the first experience at the department level, the teacher limited the number of used primary sources so that the participants would be slowly attracted to freely express their opinion on this new tool of learning.

The research process started with surveying students after the given lesson where primary sources were used and the students' academic responses to the lesson were documented. In the following stage the focus group who took the lesson using primary sources was interviewed. Finally the collected data was analyzed. In the participants' survey, three simple questions were

asked to evaluate their degree of interest in the lecture. An area for the participant is added to rate the lesson in comparison to other ones that were not based on primary sources. In the student interview, the aim was to find out how the student viewed the inclusion of primary sources in civilization lessons.

In the next part the data analysis and the obtained results are discussed. The data analysis shows how the focus group of students considered and reacted to learning civilization with primary sources. Analysis is equally concerned with teacher's use of primary sources and demonstrates his ideas on the beneficial sides when such material is integrated into civilization lessons.

Presentation of Results

The study found that the use of primary sources in civilization teaching had a profound influence when students were provided with background information and stimulate discussion about the studied material.

The research was based on two essential questions that needed answers to measure the importance of primary sources in civilization teaching: 1) How do students delineate their current civilization class, knowing that the class is designed around primary sources, and 2) what thinking skills do students in the study have?

The study revealed that 31 of the 34 Master's students who took part in the survey thought their current class was different from the ones they had taken before. Two factors shaped their opinion: The integration of primary sources for the first time in a more intensive way, and autonomous learning in small groups. It is also remarked that 28 students in the study significantly strengthened their civilization lesson comprehension in comparison with the rest of lessons taken in other courses which were not structured around primary sources. 27 students in the study said they liked civilization more after taking their current class where primary sources were a center. Four students were reticent and admitted that they needed more time and 3 students preferred to keep the old method based on the teacher's explanation and insisted on handouts.

As an answer to the second question on thinking skills acquisition by Master's students, it was noticed that these students were skilful to observe details from primary source documents, add extra information to the documents in hand, debate causes and consequences related to the documents, make their own connections, and bring evidence to support their thinking about the documents. Combined with the expressed level of motivation, it appears from this study results that the majority of the focus group was overwhelmingly in favor of the practice and its expansion to all courses on condition they become habituated to the novel strategy.

The last task of students was to hand in their own written summary of the lesson to evaluate their comprehension degree. If students mentioned specific information from the primary sources in their summary, 4 students based their conclusions on information that was not available in the document, confirming their lack of understanding of primary sources. Twenty-eight showed an understanding. However, to progressively develop this understanding, students need adequate scaffolding, familiarity with a topic, background information, and class discussions to help them investigate primary sources.

The study was based on three analysis models: Observe, reflect, and question. During the observe phase, students were asked to identify and notice details. Basic questions were asked like describe what students see, read or hear. What they noticed first or what they noticed that they could not explain. In the reflect phase the students were asked to form a hypothesis and test it

out. So they might ask probing questions such as who do they think created this sort of source and why? How do they think the source was created? What tools were used and where do they think the source came from: place and time? Finally in the third phase of the analysis process, the question phase is where students asked questions that helped them clarify what they were analyzing and what they were researching and could be asked the question what they were still wondering about which might lead to more observations. The whole process is identifiable through its six 'Es': Engage, explore, explain, extend, and evaluate.

Discussion and Interpretation

The results obtained from the student interest survey are highly promising in that they clarify what types of primary sources they are able to explore. It is remarked that students preferred to be taught a civilization topic employing primary source images, political cartoons, or posters rather than the one relying on primary source newspaper articles, speeches, or other long texts. They believed that long text primary sources fostered the least discussion among students, which might have restrained their interest in studying those subjects.

Students were in fact attracted to primary sources according to their types. For instance, the majority preferred to explore photographs, political cartoons, and posters because they were convinced that this material generated lively, fun, substantive discussion. It should be taken into account that civilization teaching has always been based on the teacher's explanation, verbatim note-copying, and old-new handouts, a traditional way that allows only some students to successfully grasp information, while a large portion of them were absent-minded and visibly bored by it. However, those same students adopted a completely different behavior by becoming lively and showing deep interest when they got involved in the discussion or analysis of primary source pictures. This evidence mirrors the fact that that for visual learners, integrating such primary source material into civilization teaching turned many of the participants from civilization despisers into civilization enthusiasts. The positive change did not only affect participants who were reluctant to classical lecturing and note-taking or copying but the whole student focus group who admitted that it was the first time they experienced primary source-based teaching during which this action research created a favorable learning environment that kept them provisionally far from the boring routine of a non-stop dictation from the teacher's notes and handouts reading.

The results of this study corroborate those previously achieved by teachers on primary sources use in the civilization course. The obtained positive results from the present case study support the idea of expanding the incorporation of primary sources into civilization lessons to finally initiate our students to get involved instead of keeping them isolated from any contact with the real world of autonomous research.

The primary source materials are found to be an effective but ignored teaching tool that provides students with direct access to a period of one or more individuals, or a specific event/s, encourages them to be in the heart of the matter and establish links between history and human experiences. This type of tool leads to further research since each piece is in itself a 'snapshot' that reflects a slice of life or history.

When teachers use primary sources they are really able to engage students and get them excited about learning. When teachers facilitate the analysis of primary sources with students, they are helping them build knowledge through a profound degree of content comprehension. Primary sources allow students to acquire a deeper understanding of civilization as a discipline in

addition to a more favorable and valuable learning experience. Consequently, students have a free but unexploited means to develop higher-level critical thinking skills and historical empathy.

Historical documents such as letters, text, files, papers, drawings, articles and other pieces of information left behind by those who have left this world, are real treasures for civilization research. Students should learn to read primary sources. But reading a source to find out evidence and reading it to find information requires two different approaches. Books in the field of civilization are usually used to look for information. Primary sources can be read differently. To use them well, they should be placed in their historical context and make assumptions to better understand what was happening when they were created.

Starting a civilization lesson with a primary source image is a powerful way to introduce a topic and it is oftentimes less threatening to the student who struggle with reading fluency and comprehension. Last when the teacher uses primary sources he encourages the student to think creatively and critically. However, it remains necessary to provide adequate background so the student can successfully decode the document. Ideal as it may appear, it is not wise to try to teach a survey of civilization entirely from primary sources (Musbach 31).

Conclusion

From this research, our intention becomes manifest testifying that relying on primary sources in the civilization classroom can be very effective if they are used properly. We fully adhere to Christine Compston's remarks that at its simplest level, a primary source provides students with information about the past for the purpose of making civilization alive and offers them the opportunity to explore "a firsthand account of a noteworthy event, a handwritten draft of a famous speech, a well-worn tool, a letter to a loved friend, a photograph of a family gathering, the business records of a colonial artisan, the notes leading to an important invention or scientific discovery" witnessing that civilization "is about real people and the events that shaped their lives, as well as the actions individuals took that shaped events"(4).

The critical use of primary source documents offers students an opportunity that is characterized by "the comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions based on information from multiple perspectives" (qtd. in Patterson, Lucas, and Kithinji 68) and thus allows him to understand the human side of history/culture. For instance, when teachers of civilization adopt the use of primary sources: images, photographs and prints, they are helping students build visual literacy skills.

Without background, the student will not grasp the meaning of much that he will read. While he may be willing to do some research to understand a document, he will give up if the document is too complex. Ultimately, the time is ripe to widely adopt this teaching strategy especially when such sources are digitally available free of charge waiting for teachers and students alike to explore them. Primary source documents inclusion in teaching civilization is highly advantageous. The most prominent advantage of the strategy is the way in which the student is engaged to learn, shape, and enhance his critical thinking about civilization and its basic components history and culture.

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