**Teaching with Primary Sources**

Learning with primary sources can be valuable in promoting twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, communication skills, creativity and imagination, and collaboration. Primary sources spark students’ interest and encourage the students to investigate, ask questions, and connect to prior knowledge. Students demonstrate their understanding by creating something new using either technological or traditional means. They can work in groups or individually on a topic that interests them.

When encountering a primary source – be it a photograph, manuscript, poster, letter, map, or any other resource – students are taught to analyze it using the following four steps:

* Observing
* Understanding
* Connecting
* Creating

At the **observation** stage, students learn to look carefully at the primary source and develop observation skills. This stage can be built around questions such as:

* What is your first impression of the item?
* Is there a picture? What is it depicting?
* What type of writing is on the resource? What language is it written in?
* Who created it? When was it created?

Students become aware of detail and nuance – a useful skill when encountering any type of communication in their daily lives.

Once the students have made observations, they arrive at the stage of **understanding**. They can begin by asking questions that will help them to understand the meaning of the item such as:

* What is the purpose of the item?
* What was taking place during the item’s historical period?
* Are specific people or events mentioned on the item? What can you learn about them and how does your knowledge of them help you to understand the item?
* Are there any mistakes on the item? What might be the cause of the mistake?
* Was the creator trying to influence the audience, and if so, what was the creator’s agenda?

Having understood the context and content of the item, the next stage is **connecting**. The students are given an opportunity to contemplate how the item or its accompanying story connects to their lives, their family, their community, and their country. Questions directing the students’ connection with the item may include:

* Have they had a similar experience?
* How would they feel if they were experiencing the situation depicted in the item?
* Do they know anyone who was in a similar situation or has a similar item?
* What is their opinion of the item?
* What does the item mean to them?
* Are they familiar with a similar item or event in their community or country?
What is similar and what is different?

Finally, the fourth stage of the process is **creating**. After going through the stages of observing

the details, understanding the context, and creating connections to their lives, the

students can create something new which is inspired by the primary source. Ideas include:

* Updating the resource
* Creating their own version of the resource
* Reflecting on the resource or the event by writing a journal entry
* Making a game based on the resource
* Creating art inspired by the resource
* Designing an infographic or presentation explaining the topic

In their new creation students demonstrate their understanding of the primary source and their connection to it. They can share their creations with others in the school community and at home.

Working with primary sources empowers students by putting the learning in their hands. It makes the learning meaningful and encourages students to express themselves while training them to be astute consumers of information.