

Library of Congress
Report on Classroom Results with Primary Sources
May 2023

The Premise

One World Education partners with schools to teach students to research and write persuasive essays on social justice topics. We were drawn to the opportunity to partner with The Library of Congress to help students enrich their arguments with primary sources. One World had seen a few examples of students drawing on historical research to support their arguments, and often, it was the most compelling part of their essay. Our goal for the One World-Library of Congress partnership was to develop lessons that teachers could use to help students achieve this goal. We also wanted to be a conduit for exposing English and Social Studies teachers to the Library of Congress database. Our theory was that if teachers interacted with LOC's materials with clear instructions and an end-use, they would be likely to use the materials in other projects as well.

The Process

To enlist partners in this work, we reached out to our teacher network of 35 and obtained interest from three high schools: two at admissions-only DCPS schools and one at a general-admission charter school. We then met with the teachers individually to ascertain the best way to integrate our work into theirs. All three teachers reported that they were at different stages of their One World work, so we decided to create one lesson plan that would serve as a foundation and adapt it to the three different situations. While it meant that a focus group with teachers would be less feasible (the first teacher finished three months before the final teacher), the staggered schedule enabled us to do an iterative process of lesson design, using what we learned from each previous lesson to inform the next.

We designed the foundation lesson to work as follows: First, students would identify how a sample student essay used a primary source to strengthen the argument. Our rationale was that seeing this technique used authentically would motivate students to do the same. We found a great example of this in a recent One World student's essay advocating for abortion rights to be handled at the state level, rather than the federal level. The student pointed out how Mississippi hadn't ratified the abolition of slavery until 2013, proving that states could be unreliable actors in safeguarding their citizens' rights. We believed that if a student saw this striking piece of essentially historical information in an essay on a contemporary topic, they would be moved to include similar information.

As a further way of paving the path to students' own primary source exploration, we wanted students to identify how they would use an archival document if *they* were the ones writing the essay. We found a rich source in the Library of Congress archives, The Safe Drinking Water Amendment of 1993, and created an activity that asked students to imagine they were writing a persuasive essay about access to safe drinking water in 2023.

After igniting students' excitement about the importance of primary source documents, the lesson turned students' attention to the Library of Congress search engine. We created some instructions to help students search and modified the Library of Congress's own Primary Source

Analysis Tool to help students observe, reflect, and question what they found. The final step was for them to consider how to use their findings as vital evidence for their arguments.

What We Learned at Each School

Our first stop was Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, a longtime One World partner whose students have written many prize-winning essays on social justice topics for the One World Challenge, our annual competition. When the Library of Congress partnership began, students had already finished their One World essays for the year. However, when the teacher learned of the opportunity for the LOC partnership, she said she was interested in requiring primary source documents in future years. She also wanted to gauge her students' abilities in accessing, analyzing, and applying primary source material.

Students had strong visceral reactions to the historical information shared in the warm-up activities: "This isn't a typo?" one of them asked, about the essay on abortion. "Mississippi abolished slavery in the *twenty-first century*?" And when we asked students, "How did the historical information about slavery support the author's point about abortion?" They immediately understood. One wrote, "Even though the example was about Mississippi not abolishing slavery until the twenty-first century, the author used the example to show how state governments might not have the same integrity as the [federal] government." In response to the question, "How would you use information from the Clean Water Act of 1993 to support an essay about safe drinking water?" students were quick to select the phrase from the Act such as, "Safe drinking water is essential to the protection of public health" to point out that Congress itself had declared the importance of safe drinking water, 30 years ago. They agreed that that evidence, taken from the Library of Congress would be more convincing to a reader than recent research.

With that level of buy-in, it was exciting to then turn students over to the Library of Congress search engine. When they scrolled to this part in the lesson, students actually ignored the instructions of their teacher to explore the website!

Several students found material that supported their topics. One, whose topic was critical race theory, wrote in answer to an "Observe" question, "I noticed early 1900's interviews. I didn't expect so many photos or videos on the topic," and for "Question," "Who came up with critical race theory? Why did it gain popularity?" Clearly, he found that his topic stretched further back into history than he had realized.

For other students, however, the search engine caused significant struggles. Despite our tip sheet, students had a tendency to treat the search engine like Google and use full sentences or questions rather than keywords. Some encountered school firewalls and blocked resources. Others ran into confusion when they encountered legal documents. Some students experienced a website crash; one student hit a series of errors and was discouraged. The enthusiasm had been strong, and the students we supported one-on-one were able to find materials that connected with their topics, but it took a lot of adult scaffolding to get them there. In the end, the teacher declared it a success, noting that she was excited to include Library of Congress sources as an extension for her future One World essays. She also shared the hope of

attending a Library of Congress Thursday night event with students, saying, “The pandemic got us off our groove in exploring what’s here and free in DC, and I want to get them back on track.”

For our next school, McKinley Tech, we revised the lesson with two priorities in mind: First, we shortened the warm-up activities to provide more time for using the search engine. Second, since students at the first school seemed not to have internalized the tips for searching, we made a Screencastify video that showed the recursive process of undertaking the search. Our hope was that students would be more likely to take the tips to heart if they saw it modeled for them.

Our second iteration of the lesson was successful in many ways. Shortening the warm-up activity did indeed provide more time for students to use the search engine. Some great research findings included information about the origins of basketball, as a way of talking about the exploitation of Black athletes. However, when the teacher tried to show how the source worked, the website glitched for her on the “we are experiencing technical difficulties” page, and when it eventually loaded, it did so slowly. Many students found mainly newspaper articles, but those would often be only tangentially related to the topic and it was hard for students to find their topic on a given page. When students did find articles, it wasn’t always clear to them where they could find citation information. In short, the teacher said that she would be interested in requiring at least one source from the Library of Congress with this assignment, but with the technical level of the materials and the time frame, it didn’t seem like a good option.

For our final iteration of the lesson, we adapted the lesson so students could focus on analyzing primary sources rather than struggling to find them (we decided that our inquiry into that process would come later.) This also fit the 10th grade History class at Capital City Public Charter School because they weren’t doing a One World essay at the time. They also happened to be familiar with the Library of Congress search engine from a previous unit. In the lesson we adapted, they were skilled at analyzing how a DC map accessed via Library of Congress could be used for their essays about redlining. Absent the struggles of accessing the material (they had one topic and we provided material for them), One World was able to learn that the shortened lesson and more focused analysis sheet worked well in a classroom setting. The teacher reported in our follow-up conversation, “Students were familiar with and excited to use Library of Congress resources! After the exercise was completed, several students explained how motivated they were to use LOC resources in multiple classrooms to complete their assignments. It was great to see!”

One World remains excited to steer high school classes toward Library of Congress resources to enrich their persuasive writing. Troubles with the search engine sparked us to consider gathering feedback from students as a way of supporting LOC’s work with future students. In-School Program Manager developed [this tool](#) that students could use to share feedback with One World asynchronously, so that we could amalgamate it and share it with the Library of Congress so they can provide guidance in supporting students. In the meantime, we have a strong lesson in using primary sources for contemporary topics, an improved “Observe, Reflect, Question” worksheet, and a Screencastify video that can support other teachers in this work.