

# Virtual Museums: Primary Source Evidence for Elementary Classrooms

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One of the curricular competencies in the new British Columbia Social Studies curriculum is based on the historical thinking concept of primary source evidence.<sup>5</sup> However, most of us think of primary sources in terms of primary (e.g., letter), secondary (e.g., article), and tertiary (e.g., textbook) sources and what can be inferred from them. The challenge for elementary teachers is that this focus on different levels of sources and credibility does not really appear until grade 7. Up until that point we are left with competencies similar to: “ask questions, make inferences, and draw conclusions about the content and features of different types of sources (evidence)” (Grade 2). How is this different from teaching about questions and inferences in English Language Arts? How are we supposed to teach this in an age-appropriate way? What kinds of resources should we be using? How can we teach this in an engaging way?

At the primary level (K-3), the best primary source evidence to use are photographs, interviews, and videos to ensure that reading levels are not a challenge. There are two things we want to emphasize:

- First, what can we learn from this source? If we look at a picture of a teacher and group of children outside of a residential school, what do we notice? None of the kids are smiling. All of the students are dressed the same with even the same hair cuts. Compare that with a picture of your own class. What is similar? What is different? What does that teach us about residential schools?
- Second, how much can we trust this source? To illustrate this, have students in your class randomly given a name of another student. Their task is to draw a picture of them. Then place all of the pictures, without names, in front of everyone. How easy is it to match them to the real person? Compare that with taking a picture of everyone in class and matching them up. The same can be done with interviews. If we want to learn about what it is like to be a principal, do we interview our teacher, our parents/guardians, or our principal? We will learn more from the principal. We can refer to this as firsthand knowledge. If we want to learn about what life was like in the 1940s, we want to interview someone who was alive in the 1940s rather than someone who was not alive then. This introduces students to the idea that there is value in learning from someone’s direct experience.

At the intermediate level (4-6), we can build on what was done in the primary grades by introducing the language of primary and secondary sources. They also work more at applying what they have learned to sources with more text-based content. At this point, it can be valuable to have students experience creating their own primary and secondary source information. For example, students can write about an experience that they themselves had. They can then interview someone and write about what that person experienced. What are the differences? What challenges are there? What considerations need to be made when making assumptions from primary and secondary sources?

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<sup>5</sup> “Primary Source Evidence,” *The Historical Thinking Project*, <http://historicalthinking.ca/primary-source-evidence>.

My favourite type of primary source evidence, for all elementary grades, is the virtual museum. With budgets the way they are, we often are not able to take our students to all the places we would like (hence the benefits of Google Earth), nor are we able to bring in everything we would like. Virtual museums are a digital collection of pictures, interviews, videos, and maps of mostly primary source evidence. I live in the Fraser Valley on S'olh Temexw, land of the Stó:lō Nation, and my favourite virtual museum is the Sq'ewlets: A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Community in the Fraser Valley.<sup>6</sup> Archaeologists and researchers from Simon Fraser University worked with the Sq'ewlets Peoples to create a digital collection of photographs, artifacts, traditional (Sxwōxwiyám) and family or ancestor (Sqwélqwel) stories, and maps. The videos and stories are told by Sq'ewlets Peoples and Elders, with voice threads to demonstrate proper pronunciations. Rather than having others talk about the Sq'ewlets Peoples, you hear from community members themselves. This represents a collection of visual and auditory primary source evidence that can be used in the classroom.

The Virtual Museums of Canada provide a number of different topics to access; however, it is important to remember that not all virtual museums are equal.<sup>7</sup> The best virtual museums...

- Include many pictures, photographs, and video footage. Be careful of virtual museums that are too text-heavy. This makes them little more than a digital textbook. You want students to be able to interact with the museum in a variety of ways, not just through reading.
- Recognize the importance of using authentic voices. As the Sq'ewlets museum demonstrates, the community members speak for themselves. In the case of virtual museums that represent events from long ago, do they bring in voices from today that share the same heritage? Does their resource list reference firsthand sources? For example, the virtual museum for the Japanese Canadian Pioneers of Lake Country reference the specific local families that contributed to the museum, along with their pictures and stories.<sup>8</sup>
- Include example lessons or activities for classroom use.
- Make it easy for students to navigate through the site independently. This involves having a site map, a menu bar for easy scrolling, clear titles and organization, minimal reliance on text, and identifiable icons.
- Include hyperlinks to larger museum collections.

Virtual museums work well as a hook for starting units (given the pictures and videos). They can also be used for pairs of students to compare and contrast different images (followed by a sharing out). For older grades virtual museums can support independent research projects, as well as an analysis of text resources (e.g., Did they get it right?). I have also used virtual museums to assist students in creating their own "museum exhibit." These types of activities give students the opportunity to not only work with and learn from primary source evidence, but learn to value the knowledge that can be gleaned from firsthand experience, authentic voices, and accurate images.

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<sup>6</sup> "Sq'ewlets: A Stó:lō-Coast Salish Community," *The Virtual Museum of Canada*, <http://www.digitalsqewlets.ca/index-eng.php>.

<sup>7</sup> *The Virtual Museum of Canada*, <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/>.

<sup>8</sup> "The Japanese Canadian Pioneers of Lake Country, British Columbia. 1899-1939," *Community Stories*, [https://www.communitystories.ca/v1/pm\\_v2.php?id=exhibit\\_home&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000781](https://www.communitystories.ca/v1/pm_v2.php?id=exhibit_home&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000781).