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Using SOURCES to Examine the American Constitution and Events Leading to Its Construction

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As 21st century social studies educators prepare their student populations for futures in college, careers, and civic life, it is essential that students know how to read, reconstruct, and interpret the past in more formalized ways (NCSS, 2010). This can be accomplished by providing students opportunities to develop questions, plan inquiries, apply disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluate sources, use evidence, and communicate conclusions (NCSS, 2013). Along these lines, the creators of the Common Core State Standards suggest that students should have opportunities to evaluate information from a diverse array of sources in order to address a question or solve a problem, cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, provide accurate summaries of sources, evaluate authors' differing points of view, challenge premises, claims, and evidence, and create a coherent understanding of an idea or event (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The acquisition of these skills enable students to expand upon understandings of historical events and time periods and provide them with various skills necessary to conduct authentic historical inquiry. These are skills that are not only necessary for being successful in the social studies classroom but, more importantly, for life after K-12 schooling (NCSS, 2013). Thus, social studies educators must develop and bolster the social studies curriculum with multiple and sustained opportunities for higher order critical thinking and source-based persuasive writing (Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013; Lindquist, 2012; Pattiz, 2004; Voelker & Armstrong, 2013). Specifically, they should integrate the use of primary and secondary sources into the teaching of social studies content and require students to develop and conduct cogent argumentation in various formats.

With only 23 percent of high school seniors being at or above the proficient level in civic knowledge and skills critical to the responsibilities of citizenship in the United States (NAEP, 2010) and almost two thirds of Americans being unable to name the three branches of federal government (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2014), there is a need for social studies educators to focus attention on the teaching of the United States Constitution and other foundational documents within our classrooms. The authors present, in this article, an approach for how social studies educators can meet many of these various demands through the use of the SOURCES framework for teaching with primary sources (LaVallee & Waring, 2015; Waring, 2014; Waring & Scheiner-Fisher, 2014; Waring & Tapia-Moreno, 2015) to provide a critical thinking and source-based learning experience focusing on the Constitution.



The Constitution and the SOURCES Framework

In order to examine the American Constitution, students were provided with a variety of primary sources to give them a deeper understanding of what the Constitution is and why it exists. Through the structure of the SOURCES framework (insert Figure 1), students were able to critically examine the past in a way that replicates methods conducted by historians and other social scientists. Lessons constructed using the SOURCES framework allow students to engage with and analyze a variety of primary and secondary sources and, from them, develop persuasive arguments. This process helps to provide them with skills vital to success in various areas of life and school.

Scrutinize the Fundamental Source

In the first stage of the SOURCES framework (Scrutinize the Fundamental Source), a teacher should select a primary source(s) at a developmentally appropriate level that most effectively conveys the content to be covered, in the unit. Students are provided with what will be referred to as the “fundamental source” and are asked to carefully scrutinize the source. The inclusion of a fundamental guiding question(s) and primary source analysis sheets can greatly increase the understanding of the content to be conveyed through the examination of this source. As scrutinizing a fundamental source should facilitate the development of a contextual mindset needed to understand an historical event, we wanted to select a source that would allow students to answer, at the conclusion of the lesson, the question, “What events led to the writing of the Constitution, and how did those events impact the content of the document?” We felt that the source that best illustrated the events of the Constitutional Convention was the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. To assist students in the analysis of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, they were provided the written document analysis worksheet from the National Archives and Records Administration (insert Figure 2). The written document analysis worksheet provided students with the opportunity to identify appropriate contextual information about the document, including determining the type of document and the unique physical characteristics of the document. Additionally, the questions with which they are provided require students to identify three important statements made by the author(s), the purpose behind why the document was written, statements that help to understand what life was like during the time the document was written, and a question left unanswered by the document.

Organize Thoughts and Understand the Context

During the second and third stages (Organize Thoughts and Understand the Context), students are asked to organize their thoughts, to be sure that they understand the context of the source they are analyzing. Oftentimes, additional resources, such as other primary sources, videos, secondary sources, and web sites, can and should be provided to help the student to broaden his or her understandings of the context and content being covered. In helping students begin to organize thoughts regarding the necessity of replacing the Articles of Confederation with the Constitution, they were provided with Washington’s letter presenting the Constitution (insert Figure 3). This letter, which was meant to establish a rationale for how the



Constitution had been constructed, was included with the original draft of the Constitution through a unanimous vote by the Congress. Washington's letter detailed how the events of the Constitutional Convention were meant to deal with the impracticality of a government that had been designed to "secure all rights of independent sovereignty to each, and yet provide for the interest and safety of all." This letter provided students an opportunity to understand many of the regional issues that the Constitutional Congress had to overcome in the creation of this seminal document, while also attempting to create a government that could stand the test of time. This contextual information allowed students to see that our country was built on the idea of discussion and compromise, rather than divine conception.

In order to fill in gaps that may have still existed, students were provided a variety of additional resources. One of the main resources was the Articles of Confederation. An analysis of the Articles of Confederation is integral to the understanding of why our Founding Fathers felt the need to reframe our government, as it allows students to see many of the weaknesses of our early society. In order to ensure that students were able to appropriately analyze the Articles of Confederation and identify the weakness of the document, students were provided an Articles of Confederation Analysis sheet (insert Figure 4). This analysis sheet guided students in the summary of each individual article and required them to propose a weakness in each article.

Another important resource that students were provided with were the Federalist Papers and essays written by Anti-Federalists. John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison wrote these Federalist Papers, under the pseudonym Publius, in order to justify the creation and adoption of the Constitution and to counter many of the fears about the creation of a strong central government. These documents provide an extremely detailed justification for why the Constitution was needed in the United States. The Anti-Federalist Papers were written by leading Anti-Federalists and provided a counter to the Federalist Papers. The analysis of both sets of documents allowed students to see a clearer divide amongst America's earliest political parties. Students were also provided with other sources, such as a graphic novel, entitled *The United States Constitution: The Graphic Adaption* (Hennessey, 2008), that detailed events both leading up to and during the Constitutional Convention. They also had access to a primary source set from the Library of Congress, children's books that detailed the events and the justifications for why the Constitution was written (see Appendix A), and websites providing information about the writing of the Constitution (see Appendix B).

Read between the lines

Now that students were able to increase their ability to understand many of the contextual issues that existed during the time period in which the Constitution was written, they were able to re-read the Constitution with a more critical eye. For the fourth stage of the SOURCES framework (Read Between the Lines), students revisited the fundamental source and "read between the lines" by looking beyond just what is presented in the source itself and considered rationale for the construction of the source and specific word choice and/or perspectives being conveyed. The ability to "read between lines" was facilitated by the conflict that students were made aware of through the Federalist Papers and the Anti-Federalist Papers.

One of the main things that students were able to walk away with, when reading the Federalist and Anti-Federalist papers, was that there was great conflict and debate about how our government



needed to be structured, in order for the United States to have continued success. Students were able to see that the debate, over whether there should be more power in a central government or with the states, was born out of a desire to protect the principles fought over during the Revolutionary War. They were also able to see that the formation of the United States government required compromise of many firmly held beliefs, in order to ensure that our nation would not fall apart in its infancy.

An additional concept that students were able to take away, from their analysis of the varied sources, was that, despite the fact that some thought the Constitution went too far and that others felt that it had not gone far enough, a large portion of the Constitutional Congress felt the need to add an explicit Bill of Rights. Students were able to gain insight into how novel these rights really were during this time period and were able to gain perspective on how monumental of an event the Constitutional Convention really was.

Corroborate and refute

During the fifth stage (Corroborate and Refute), students are asked to consider their understanding regarding the topic being covered, the fundamental question, and the fundamental source and are given the opportunity to analyze additional sources that will allow them to corroborate thoughts regarding the guiding question(s), as well as finding sources that refute current understanding. Since students had developed a deeper understanding of why the United States Constitution had been written, it was time to take a deeper look at some of the actors of the Constitutional Convention. For this next portion of their analysis, students were divided into pairs and were asked to complete character development sheets that represented the Federalists and Anti-Federalists (insert Figure 5). The character development sheets required students to identify what members of each party would be thinking, direct quotes, burdens and weaknesses for each party, what ideas were left behind, roots/history of each party, and significant events that had led to creation of each party. The completion of this character development sheet helped students to be able to answer the fundamental question, “What events led to the writing of the Constitution, and how did those events impact the content of the document?”

In each pairing, one student was asked to focus on the Federalists, and the other student on the Anti-Federalists. Students were allowed to consult any of the sources they had had previous access to and were also encouraged to visit the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, and other websites to gather additional sources. As students found supporting documents that helped them fill out their character analysis sheets, they were asked to explicitly reference each document that provided them with deeper understanding of each party. The explicit referencing of textual material helped students to fulfill many of the goals set for by the C3 Framework, Common Core State Standards, as well as state standards. The practice of these skills also helped students to build appropriate historical thinking skills, by asking them to actively construct their own understanding of why the Constitution was designed as it was.

Once students had completed their character development sheets, students were asked to compare and contrast each party. They used sources that they had collected to either support their side of the argument or to refute the argument being made by their partner. The teacher circulated through the room and monitored each student’s responses and the documents being used to support their arguments. At the culmination of the conversation, students were asked to fill out



an exit slip, referred to as shape reflections, that required them to note three points that they wanted to remember, four connections that they made, and questions that were still unanswered.

Establish a plausible narrative

The Corroborate and Refute stage should continue until a plausible and defensible argument can be made regarding the question being posed. During stage six (Establish a Plausible Narrative), students construct a narrative to answers the fundamental question. This can be done as an essay, a web site, a video, or whatever format is deemed most effective for conveying their thoughts. Rather than using a pencil and paper assessment to measure student understanding of how and why the Constitution was created, we decided to use a project-based assessment that would call for greater student analysis and involvement. We also felt that our assessment should infuse technology, as a way of trying to further engage with our digital natives.

With this in mind, students were required to create a mini-documentary that allowed them to answer the fundamental question, “What events lead to the writing of the Constitution, and how did those events impact the content of the document?” The documentaries were created using Windows Movie Maker and iMovie. Through the creation of this video, students were able to present and discuss multiple events that lead to the Constitutional Convention, show the struggle and compromise that took place during the convention, and highlight the discord that eventually lead to the writing of the Bill of Rights. Students added supporting documents, images, and other sources to synthesize their thoughts and convey their understanding of what led these individuals to construct the Constitution, as well as the effects of their decision to create a representative government.

Summarize Final Thoughts

Lastly, in stage seven (Summarize Final Thoughts), students critically analyze the steps involved in the investigation that was conducted, formalize any thoughts regarding this process, and ponder any lingering questions. In order to have students summarize their thoughts and tie the lesson to together at the end, we wanted students to explore the impact of the Constitutional Convention on today’s society. For this final assignment, students were asked to search through a newspaper, magazine, or online news outlet to find a government/political story that dealt with any of the issues that our Founding Fathers dealt with during the writing of the Constitution. The purpose of this assignment was to show students that the contemporary American government is still trying to resolve many of the same arguments that plagued the founding of our nation. This process allowed students to comprehend that, even long after decisions have been made, they can still be challenged, questioned, and interpreted in various ways.

Conclusion

An approach to teaching the American Constitution, such as the one outlined, helps students engage in a variety of critical thinking activities, challenges them to answer fundamental questions, and attain deep knowledge of content through the analysis of sources. The examination of primary sources, of this nature, allowed students to construct a more complete understanding of what took place during such an important and turbulent time in America’s past rather than leaving it to be learned through a reading of the textbook alone (Barton, 2005). The ability to



provide students with opportunities to engage in the construction of historical knowledge is paramount to making the social studies a more engaging class for our students. With the increased availability of online primary source repositories like the Library of Congress and the National Archives and Records Administration, the ease of integrating these sources into the classroom has never been easier (Lee, Doolittle, & Hicks, 2006).

Throughout the SOURCES lesson, students were given the opportunity to consider conflicting information from a variety of sources and were required to construct a unique perspective about the events that lead to the construction of the Constitution of the United States. They were able to identify multiple perspectives, explore multiple avenues of causality, and draw conclusions about how and why the Constitution was actually written. By allowing students to engage with historical content in an authentic way, teachers can help students to develop an intrinsic ability to investigate the world around them and to come to educated and supported conclusions. This constructivist attitude towards instruction can help students understand that history is a mystery for us to explore, rather than a static set of facts that we are required to memorize (Swan, 2013).

Through the utilization of the SOURCES framework, students were engaged in authentic inquiry, in a manner that is supported by the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards, and the Common Core State Standards (NCSS, 2013; NCSS, 2010; NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010). Through this process, students are able to develop 21st century skills that they will need in order to be successful both in the classrooms and in the world beyond.



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Figures

Scrutinize the Fundamental Source
Organize Thoughts
Understand the Context
Read Between the Lines
Corroborate and Refute
Establish a Plausible Narrative
Summarize Final Thoughts

Figure 1. The SOURCES Framework



Reset Form	Written Document Analysis Worksheet	Print Form
1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):	<input type="radio"/> Newspaper <input type="radio"/> Map <input type="radio"/> Advertisement <input type="radio"/> Letter <input type="radio"/> Telegram <input type="radio"/> Congressional Record <input type="radio"/> Patent <input type="radio"/> Press Release <input type="radio"/> Census Report <input type="radio"/> Memorandum <input type="radio"/> Report <input type="radio"/> Other	
2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):	<input type="checkbox"/> Interesting Letterhead <input type="checkbox"/> Notations <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten <input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp <input type="checkbox"/> Typed <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Seals	
3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:		
4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:		
	POSITION (TITLE):	
5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?		
6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)	Limit response for each question to 3 lines of text	
	A. List three things the author said that you think are important:	
	B. Why do you think this document was written?	
	C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.	
	D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.	
	E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:	
Reset Form	Designed and developed by the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408	Print Form

Figure 2: National Archives and Records Administration Written Document Analysis Sheet



September 17, 1787.

SIR:

We have now the honor to submit to the consideration of the United States in Congress assembled, that Constitution which has appeared to us the most advisable.

The friends of our country have long seen and desired that the power of making war, peace, and treaties, that of levying money, and regulating commerce, and the correspondent executive and judicial authorities, should be fully and effectually vested in the General Government of the Union; but the impropriety of delegating such extensive trust to one body of men is evident: hence results the necessity of a different organization.

It is obviously impracticable in the Federal Government of these States to secure all rights of independent sovereignty to each, and yet provide for the interest and safety of all. Individuals entering into society must give up a share of liberty to preserve the rest. The magnitude of the sacrifice must depend as well on situation and circumstance, as on the object to be obtained. It is at all times difficult to draw with precision the line between those rights which must be surrendered, and those which may be preserved; and, on the present occasion, this difficulty was increased by a difference among the several States as to their situation, extent, habits, and particular interests.

In all our deliberations on this subject, we kept steadily in our view that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety—perhaps our national existence. This important consideration, seriously and deeply impressed on our minds, led each State in the Convention to be less rigid on points of inferior magnitude than might have been otherwise expected; and thus, the Constitution which we now present is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession, which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable.

That it will meet the full and entire approbation of every State is not, perhaps, to be expected; but each will, doubtless, consider, that had her interest alone been consulted, the consequences might have been particularly disagreeable or injurious to others; that it is liable to as few exceptions as could reasonably have been expected, we hope and believe; that it may promote the lasting welfare of that Country so dear to us all, and secure her freedom and happiness, is our most ardent wish. With great respect, we have the honor to be, sir, your excellency's most obedient and humble servants. By the unanimous order of the convention.

GEO. WASHINGTON, President,
His Excellency the President of Congress.

Figure 3. Washington's letter presenting the Constitution



Name:
Date:
Period:

Articles of Confederation Graphic Organizer

In each box write the section number, a short summary, and a possible problem that could have arisen if one exists, skip Section 1.

Articles of Confederation		

Figure 4: Articles of Confederation Graphic Organizer



Character Development Sketch

What thoughts are circling in his or her head?

Memorable Quote

What does he/she need to hold on to? Who/what would be considered his/her "right-hand man?"

What is his or her weakness?

The "Roots"
What or who has helped shape

What significant events have he/she experienced

Brain

Eyes

Mouth

Right Hand

Left Hand

Achilles Heel

How does he or she see the world?

What burdens does he/she carry? What does he/she worry about?

Heart
What does he/she care most about

What has he/she "left" behind?

his/her life up to this point?

The Road – Life Line

Figure 5: Federalists and Anti-Federalists Character Development Sheets



Appendices

- Burgan, M. (2006). *The creation of the U.S. constitution* North Mankato, MN: Graphic Library.
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Appendix A: Children's Literature



Ashbrook Center at Ashland University, “Federalist-antifederalist debates,”
<<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/fed-antifed>>.

Ashbrook Center at Ashland University, “Summary and text of the federalist papers,”
<<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/ratification/timeline-federalist>>.

Bill of Rights Institute, “Play Games,” <<http://billofrightsinstitute.org/resources/student-resources/play-games>>.

Constitution Center, “The constitution,” <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/our-government/the-constitutionconstitutioncenter.org>>.

Mindflash, “The 10-minute guide to the constitution,” <<http://visual.ly/10-minute-guide-us-constitution>>.

Pearson Education, Inc., “The Constitution of the United States,”
<http://www.phschool.com/curriculum_support/interactive_constitution>.

Usconstitution.net, “Constitutional topic: due process,”
<http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_duep.html>.

Appendix B: Web Resources