

Getting Serious about Sourcing: Considerations for Teachers and Teacherpreneurs

Lauren McArthur Harris, Leanna Archambault, and Catharyn Shelton

Online educational marketplaces where teachers share lessons and other classroom materials have grown rapidly over the past decade. Teachers Pay Teachers (TpT) is one such example. As of August 2021, the TpT website claimed that 85% of PreK–12 U.S. teachers have used their site and that seven million teachers used the platform in the last year.¹ These numbers have increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.² With the growth of online marketplaces has also come an increase in *teacherpreneurs*—teachers who share and market resources on online marketplaces.³ These marketplaces and the new role they present teachers offer an opportunity to expand curricular voices and contributions beyond traditional textbook and curriculum publishers. This opportunity is particularly important in social studies where the goals of culturally responsive and critical pedagogy call for not just adding marginalized and oppressed voices and perspectives to the curriculum, but for *centering* them in the curriculum.⁴

However, some scholars have raised concerns regarding the quality of educator-created learning materials on sites such as TpT, Pinterest, ReadWriteThink, and ShareMyLesson.⁵ In our own investigation of TpT’s 100 best-selling eleventh grade U.S. history activities, we found an overwhelming 70% to be of overall low to moderate quality. These resources often did not include multiple historical perspectives or authentic pedagogies, such as opportunities for discussion or a focus on important themes rather than on minutiae.⁶ Another consistent issue was a lack of what we call *sourcing information* when activities included historical sources. The teacherpreneur who designed an activity may not have provided sufficient detail about authorship or contextual information for students to assess or evaluate the primary and secondary sources in the activity.

Evaluating sources and using evidence is a critical dimension of the College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. As the C3 Framework states, source analysis is a large aspect of learning through inquiry, since sources that students evaluate can become evidence for their claims and counterclaims.⁷ In their guidelines for craft-

ing critical inquiry in social studies, Ryan M. Crowley and LaGarrett J. King underscore the importance of exposing students to sources that include the perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups.⁸ Analysis of sources is also strongly tied to civic reasoning and media literacy skills.⁹ Students need to be able to assess the quality of sources they encounter to judge reliability for a specific topic or question, particularly in this era of “fake news.”¹⁰

Scholars point to particular skills that students should have in reading and analyzing sources: (a) sourcing (examining the source’s purpose and attributes such as author and date published); (b) contextualizing (placing the source in the larger historical context); (c) corroborating (comparing the source to others); and (d) close reading (reading a text multiple times for deep meaning).¹¹ In order to effectively engage in sourcing, students must have access to detailed information about the source. Sourcing information goes beyond a mere citation to providing meaningful information and context about a source that aids in its analysis.

In what follows, we first discuss how teachers should consider sourcing information, particularly when aiming to expand and center different perspectives in the social studies curriculum. We next present findings specific to sourcing information from our study of TpT U.S. history materials. We conclude by posing four “critical questions” (developed as a result of our research) that teachers should consider when creating lessons with historical sources, whether for their own classrooms or to share with other teachers.

What Sourcing Information Should be Provided?

Effective social studies teachers carefully curate sources that convey history from a variety of perspectives, and then provide rich sourcing information to accompany these sources. Students need access to details about the source such as the creator’s identity, date of creation, place of creation, and other contextual information to be able to critically evaluate the authenticity and relevance of historical sources. These

Primary Source and Sourcing Information Example



Sourcing Information: Title: “Gang of migratory carrot pullers in field. Wages: fourteen cents per crate of forty-eight bunches. Imperial Valley, California;”
Photographer: Dorothea Lange;
Created/published: February, 1939; **Context:** This photograph is one of many Dorothea Lange took chronicling migration and poverty in California during the Great Depression for the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information. **Citation:** Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-DIG-fsa-8b34913], www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8b34913/

(Public domain)

Figure 1.

details also help students understand the nuance behind the historical context of a given source, which is an important aspect of *historical thinking*.¹²

Figure 1 (Primary Source and Sourcing Information Example) is from the Library of Congress. Without the sourcing information, students would only be able to analyze limited features of the photograph. They could see that there are workers picking carrots in a field. They could approximate the date of the photograph given the cars in the background. They could also perhaps extrapolate that the work was extremely difficult given the postures of the workers.

However, with the sourcing information students learn the exact wages of the workers: fourteen cents per crate of forty-eight bunches. They learn that the photographer was Dorothea Lange and that she took the photograph as part of the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information during the Great Depression. They also learn that the photographer referred to the workers as a “gang,” which could lead to discussion about how migrant workers might have been viewed in 1939. This additional information would likely lead to a much deeper analysis of the source, even if teachers choose not to have students access all of it when they first analyze the photograph.

What Does Sourcing Information Look Like Within Popular Online Educational Marketplace History Resources?

Given the consensus on the importance of sources for analysis in history and social studies lessons, we wondered how teachers incorporated source analysis activities in history, what types of sources they used, and what types of sourcing information they included in their lessons offered on TpT. In what follows, we draw on our study of TpT history activities to first briefly summarize how historical sources were used in the activities and then to offer research-based critical questions for teachers to consider when creating or implementing lessons with historical sources.

In the study, we analyzed 88 of the 100 best-selling activities for eleventh grade U.S. history sold on TpT (we excluded 12 video guides as these were activities focused on holding students accountable for viewing an assigned film and did not lend themselves to analysis of sourcing information). We found that 56 of the 88 activities (64%) contained some sort of historical source for students to read and/or analyze. Figure 2 (on p. 262) shows the different source types by percentage.

Encyclopedia-type secondary sources consisting of informational text about a historical event were most prominent. Of

Percentage of Source Types (N = 56)

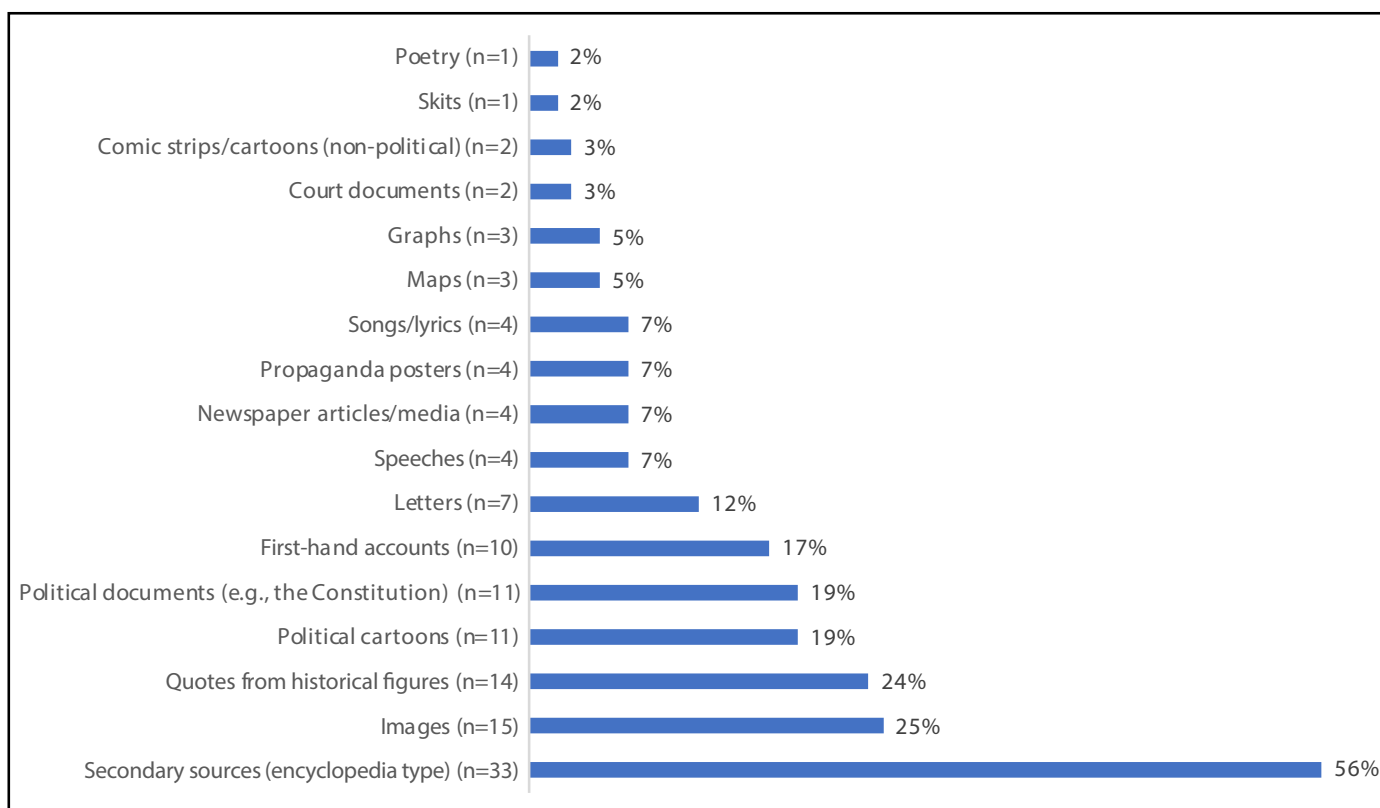


Figure 2. Because some activities contained more than one type of source, the total number of sources is greater than the number of activities, and the percentages add up to more than 100%.

particular concern was that 88% of the activities contained no citations for these secondary sources, and in only one activity did the author explicitly state that they had written the secondary source. Accordingly, it would be difficult for teachers and students to know the origins of the secondary source information in these activities. In some cases, we found outright plagiarism of online secondary sources—copyright violation was a pattern we saw repeated across many of the activities; in our larger study we found that 64% of all activities violated TpT’s copyright policy.¹³ For example, one activity focused on the Dust Bowl included an excerpt that appeared to be copied and pasted from the “How Stuff Works” website without attribution. Other types of sources in the lessons included images, quotations from historical figures, political documents, letters, first-hand accounts, and propaganda posters.

In rating the *quality* of these sources with respect to the sourcing information included, we found that activity designers were uneven in their treatment of sources.¹⁴ Figure 3 displays the average quality rankings on a scale of 1 (Poor) to 4 (Excellent) of sourcing information by source type. The three types of sources that were ranked *lowest* for sourcing all contained visual elements: maps, images such as photographs and paintings, political cartoons, and propaganda posters. For instance, propaganda posters included in the TpT activities generally included no sourcing information (e.g., no date, no

country of origin, or other contextual information), limiting the amount of analysis students would be able to do with them. On the other hand, written sources such as letters, first-hand accounts, and newspaper articles usually contained more sourcing information, including the author and often the date and contextual information.

Looking across all of the activities and sources, we found that missing access information (e.g., URL, book citation) was the most widespread problem, followed by missing dates of publication, and then missing places of publication/creation (see Figure 4). The absence of access information was a serious detriment. A teacher or student might want to go to the original online source to, for example, find contextual information or related sources. Missing sourcing information means that students are limited in their ability to fully analyze the sources, as previously mentioned.

We did find some good examples of the use of sources and sourcing information. For example, one activity on World War II had students use the SOAPSTONE (Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, Tone) acronym to frame inquiry regarding these important sourcing aspects for a wide variety of sources relevant to the lesson. Another lesson on the Harlem Renaissance contained a variety of source types from multiple perspectives and a detailed source information page. However, more often we found deficiencies in the activities

Average Quality Rating of Sourcing Information by Selected Source Types

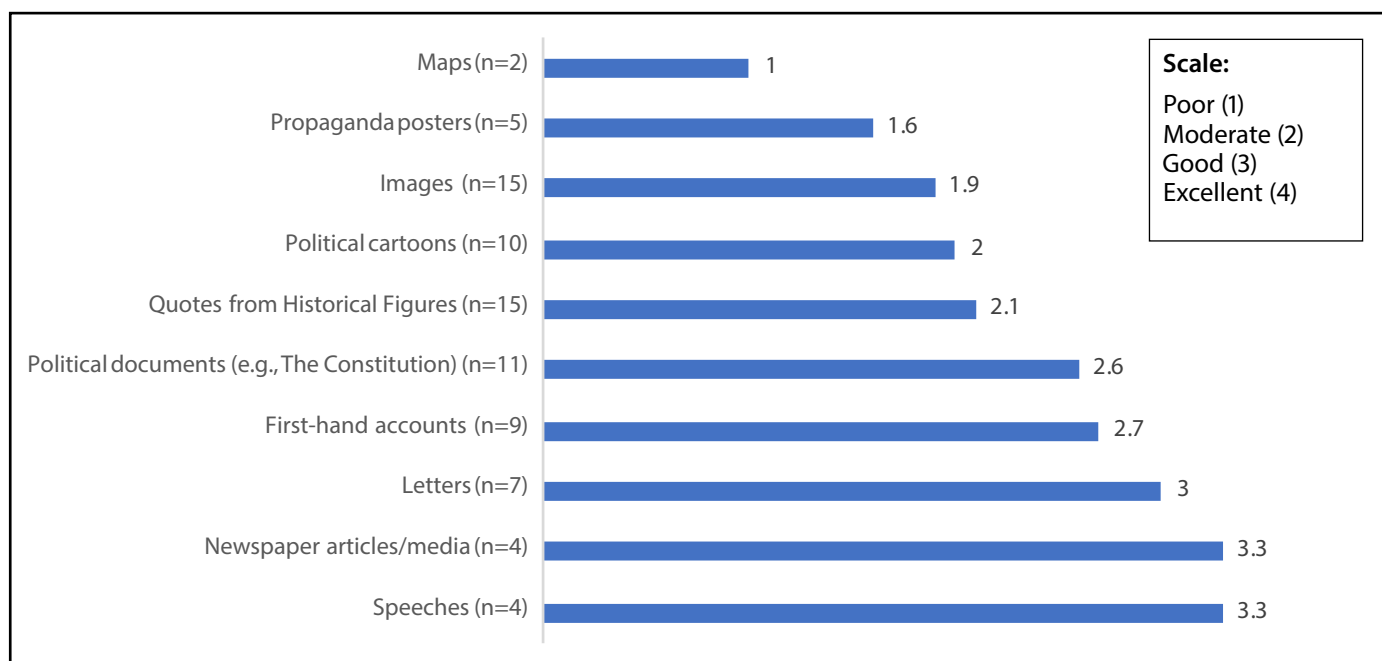


Figure 3.

Occurrences of Missing Source Information

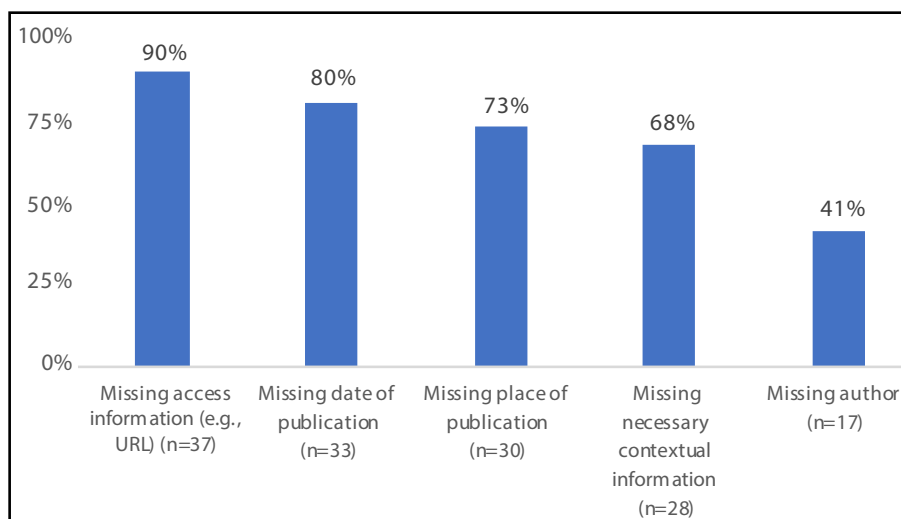


Figure 4. Forty-one activities had at least one piece of missing source information for one or more sources.

when it came to sourcing. For instance, one lesson on “creating your own plan” for Reconstruction, contained several images and political cartoons for students to analyze that included no sourcing or contextual information whatsoever. Some of the images included racist symbols and scenes that would require much more information in order for students to engage in thorough and careful analysis as well as to ensure that

students’ engagement with these potentially harmful images would be framed critically and in the relevant historical context.

What Are Critical Questions Teachers Should Consider When Creating Lessons with Historical Sources?

Drawing on our study findings, we next present four critical questions to consider

for social studies teachers who are creating lessons for their own classrooms and possibly to share with other teachers (see Figure 5 on p. 264). The critical questions could also be useful for teachers wanting to evaluate whether they should or should not download a given lesson already posted on an online educational marketplace site.

1. Is ample sourcing information included for all sources?

It is important to gather all the sourcing information possible for any sources used in lessons (see Figure 6 on p. 265 for considerations). Lessons can be structured so that students do not see all of the sourcing information at first—if, for example, the aim is for them to initially try to ascertain the date of a photograph by examining the details in it. However, by the end of the lesson, students should see all of the sourcing information. Particular care should be used when including sourcing information for images. In our study of TpT lessons, we found that visual sources tended to not include as much sourcing information as did written sources. Images that are found through Internet searches

Creating Quality Lessons with Historical Sources

Research-Based Critical Questions for Teachers

Where to start...

1. Take a close look at the sources you include in a given lesson or activity. Answer the four guiding questions below with a “yes,” “no,” or “maybe.”
2. Then, take a closer look at any questions that you answered with a “no” or “maybe.”
3. Can you revise any “no”s or “maybe”s to a “yes”? If so, get to work revising, replacing, and/or adding sources.

1. Is AMPLE SOURCING INFORMATION included for all sources?

Did you include...

- Author/artist/photographer
- Date
- Type of source (e.g., letter, book excerpt)
- Place published/created
- Contextual information
- Citation/access information (e.g., URL)

2. Will students have ENOUGH CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION to analyze the sources?

It depends on what you want students to do with the activity, but **contextual information might include:**

- ✓ Background of the author
- ✓ Why the source was created
- ✓ Historical events happening at the time

3. Do the included sources adhere to COPYRIGHT AND FAIR USE GUIDELINES?

- ✓ Familiarize yourself with copyright and fair use guidelines for teachers. A summary can be found at: <https://copyright.universityofcalifornia.edu/use/teaching.html>
- ✓ Check copyright policies on the particular sites where you find sources, and follow those policies.

4. Does the lesson include sources from UNDERREPRESENTED PERSPECTIVES?

- ✓ Do the sources reflect your students’ racial, cultural, linguistic, and gender identities, where applicable?
- ✓ Do your sources showcase diverse narratives and perspectives (e.g., do sources give voice to women, people of color, or those from non-Western European cultures)?

Figure 5. Creating Quality Lessons with Historical Sources: Four Critical Questions

(such as Google Images) often do not include much sourcing information. Instead, using source collections such as the ones included in Figure 6 can be a good place to start when searching for reliable sources. For visual sources that do not contain any sourcing information, using Google’s “reverse image search” can be helpful to trace it back to its original source.¹⁵

2. Will students have enough contextual information to analyze the sources?

An easily overlooked, but important aspect of providing good sourcing information is providing contextual information (e.g., background of the author, why the source was created, historical events happening at the time). This detailed information provides students with key elements needed to be able to fully analyze included sources. Many of the source collections in Figure 6 contain detailed contextual information for every

source. The amount of contextual information a teacher should provide will vary depending on what is available and what students are going to do with the source.

3. Do the included sources adhere to copyright and fair use guidelines?

Copyright and fair use policies can be complicated, but they are important to be aware of when using primary and secondary sources. While copyright law protects authors and creators from others taking and using their works without permission, there are some exceptions that allow use of copyright-protected materials for educational purposes. However, these fair use policies differ for materials teachers use in classrooms versus materials they sell or distribute, including on the Internet. The Library of Congress webpage on copyright details fair use policies and teacher-specific considerations.¹⁶ These policies apply

Suggestions for Source Collections with Detailed Sourcing Information

- The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu>
- Gilder Lehrman Collection: www.gilderlehrman.org/collection
- Google Arts and Culture: <https://artsandculture.google.com>
- Internet History Sourcebooks Project: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/index.asp>
- Library of Congress: www.loc.gov
- National Archives DocsTeach: www.docsteach.org/documents
- National Museum of African American History and Culture Collection: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/collection>
- National Museum of the American Indian: Native Knowledge 360 Education Initiative: <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>
- Newspaper archives such as the *New York Times*: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>
- United States Holocaust Museum Education Resources: www.ushmm.org/teach

Figure 6. Suggestions for Source Collections with Detailed Sourcing Information

not only to primary sources, but also to secondary sources such as encyclopedia-like online material. TpT provides copyright guidelines for teacherpreneurs;¹⁷ however, based on our study, many of the best-selling history resources did not follow these guidelines. When teachers carefully follow these policies, they provide good modeling for students who need to be aware of how to properly attribute sources as well.

4. Does the lesson include sources from underrepresented perspectives?

As mentioned above, there is a great opportunity for teachers to share the lessons and activities they create through online platforms, particularly to expand the voices and perspectives in social studies lessons. There is also a great opportunity for teachers to expand perspectives within their own classrooms. To enact culturally responsive pedagogies, we must engage students in perspectives that allow them to see people like themselves in the curriculum and reflect the diversity of their country and the world.¹⁸ Source selection is an important place where teachers can do this work. Where possible, teachers should consider choosing sources that represent perspectives that might not always be included in social studies courses. For example, as Leilani Sabzalian has written, the inclusion of Indigenous voices can counter the Eurocentrism that is often present in social studies curriculum.¹⁹ The National Museum of the American Indian offers historical and present-day sources that could be integrated into many different lessons and units; one example from the website is a collection of multi-media sources from a number of different tribes related to “American Indian Removal.”²⁰

Conclusion

By considering these critical questions, teachers can improve the quality of sourcing information when their classroom activities include historical sources. What remains clear is that additional detail is needed in order for students to be able to evaluate primary and secondary sources used in classroom activities. Both teachers who design lessons for their classrooms as well as teacherpreneurs who share and/or market lessons online need to pay careful attention to sourcing information, source choice, and source attribution to allow students to engage in deep analysis and important skills for media literacy and civic reasoning. 🌍

Notes

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The Korean War and Its Legacy: Teaching about Korea through Inquiry

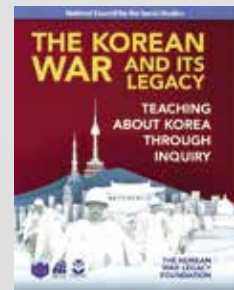
Korean War Legacy Foundation. 231 pages. 2019

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