

Teaching Difficult Topics with Primary Sources

Lee Ann Potter

Recently, my husband was watching a program on television about the Manhattan Project. It featured historical footage and information about the work that led to the development of the first atomic bombs, their use, the immediate aftermath, and the end of World War II. My 11-year old son came into the room and started watching it with him. I was nearby, and was not sure I really wanted him to watch it, but because he is in middle school now, and almost the same age that I was when I first read *Hiroshima* by John Hersey, I didn't object. But then, my eight-year-old daughter entered the room and asked what was on the TV. Almost instinctively I said to her, "It is a grown-up program. Let's go to your room and play a game." Of course, my response made her even more curious about the program and why I did not want her to watch it. So, I promised that she would learn all about it one day and explained that the images might scare her, especially right before bedtime. Fortunately my explanation was enough, and we left the room together.

I thought about this episode quite a bit as I prepared for this special "Teaching Difficult Topics with Primary Sources" issue. And when I told my education colleagues at the National Archives about the incident, it led to a great discussion about what makes certain subjects "difficult" or "challenging" to teach, whether or not we should teach them, and if so, at what point in our students' development.

First, we brainstormed an extensive list of "difficult" topics. It included racism, violence, genocide, bullying, gangs, abuse (physical, emotional, and substance), slavery, suffering, hatred, terrorism, war, disease, loss, addiction, and more.

Then, we discussed what makes these topics "difficult." We wondered, is it because they make us emotionally uncomfortable? Is it because we don't know how our students will react, or whether they are cognitively

and emotionally ready? Is it because we want to protect our students? Is it because we fear what administrators, parents, and members of our community will think or do? Is it because some subjects force us to confront humanity at its worst? Or, is it because we know our students will ask questions that we can't answer?

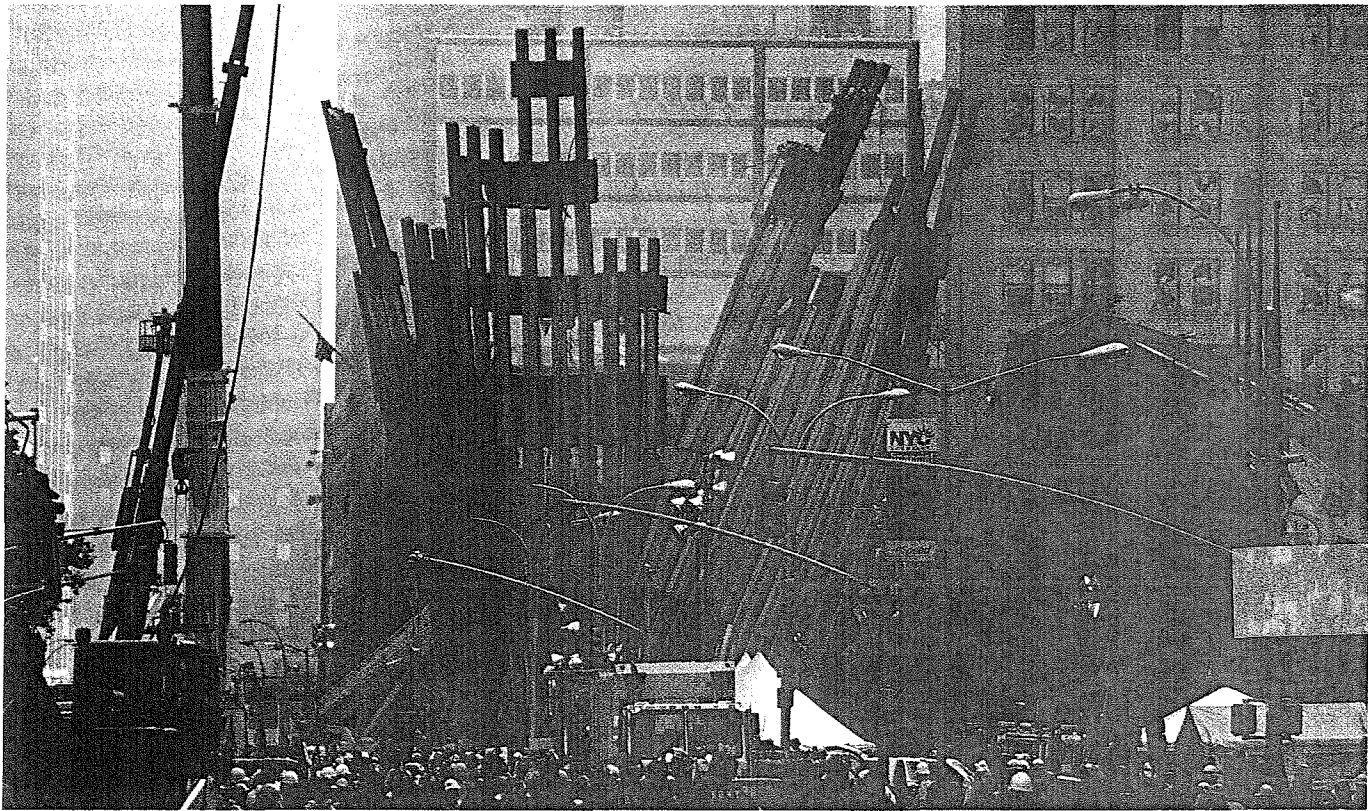
Most likely, we concluded, the difficulty is caused by a combination of these factors. But we agreed that by confronting them with students, in the safety of a classroom through thoughtfully constructed lessons (ones that take into consideration our students' ages and levels of maturity, as well as their experiences and abilities), we may minimize the discomfort and fear that they prompt. Such lessons can also provide students with the tools and skills they will need to address other difficulties they encounter throughout their lives. And by dealing with

difficult topics together, we demonstrate to our students that by talking about problems, we can begin to solve them.

In order to construct lessons thoughtfully, we need to include multiple methods and materials. Primary sources, in a variety of media, can serve as useful starting points and rich components of such lessons.

Benefits of Primary Sources

Primary sources can serve as points of entry into challenging subjects that not only get a conversation started, but also allow our students to draw important conclusions. For example, analysis of a photograph taken on September 14, 2001, of the remains of the World Trade Center at ground zero in New York City could serve this purpose (see p.285). Particularly for students who are not old enough to remember the events and emotions of 9/11, an image such as this—one whose focal point is the twisted metal and blown-out windows of the buildings' remains—illustrates the destruction caused by the terrorist attack. And showing students such an image would, no doubt, lead to a conversation about it. But a closer examination of the photo also reveals dozens of people, mostly in hard hats, and many wearing firefighting uniforms. Their presence in the image shows commitment and resilience in contrast to the devastation—illustrating that sometimes, out of the worst can come the best.



Seeing this contrast in an image may inspire students to look for and recognize similar dichotomies as they study or confront other difficult topics.

Primary sources allow us to discover important details about horrific events of the past, especially the often-overlooked human response. For example, history textbooks make reference to shocking events of the past, but rarely do they provide insight into what people living at the time, who may not have been directly involved with the events, thought about those events—or what actions they took in response. Documents can help reveal those perspectives and actions. Some may surprise our students and prompt them to confront the poignancy and significance of the collective human experience. For example, in November 1938, less than a week after Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass,” during which synagogues, homes, and Jewish-owned businesses across Germany were plundered and destroyed by the Nazis, 36 American writers sent a telegram to President Franklin Roosevelt

(see p. 286). In three pages, they expressed outrage and asked the president to sever trade relations and declare an embargo on all “Nazi German goods.” Their telegram was just one of hundreds of telegrams and letters sent to U.S. government officials at the time expressing similar feelings of anger and dismay. Sharing such a document with students—and allowing it to serve as a catalyst for a research project on the writers, or on Kristallnacht, or on the role of public opinion, or the actions of the federal government—may encourage students to think about the role that they, themselves, might play in reacting to a distant tragedy in their lifetime.

Just as primary sources can uncover little known facts and different perspectives, they can also help students to consider the origins of prejudice and stereotypes. A two-page letter from an American soldier named Wayne serving in France during World War I to his “folks,” exposes a great deal about his personal experience (see p. 287). The July 1918 letter also reveals much about the larger conflict in which he was a

participant—from machine guns to rations; from the Red Cross to the Marines; from the front lines to the trenches; from illness to death. Not only did he offer a detailed eyewitness description of war and its atrocities, but in his letter, Wayne made broad generalizations about the Marines; he referred to German soldiers as “Huns” and a single German soldier as “Fritz”; and he derogatorily recalled an incident involving an Irishman. Considered in a classroom discussion, each of these references offers students an opportunity to analyze how this soldier’s personal experience may have contributed to his biases.

Primary sources allow us to confront ghastly topics that feed contemporary fears with the benefit of a buffer created by the passage of time. For example, in an eight-page letter written to the Continental Congress on December 4, 1775, General George Washington passed along information he received from a sailor (see p. 289). It was believed that British General William Howe was sending people out from Boston

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT

WASHN DC

THIS APPEAL COMES TO YOU FROM THIRTY SIX AMERICAN WRITERS. WE FEEL WE NO LONGER HAVE ANY RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT, WE FEEL THAT THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AND THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT HAVE NO RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT, WHILE A GERMAN GOVERNMENT CELEBRATES EACH OF ITS SHOCKING VICTORIES IN THE INTERNATIONAL FIELD BY THE INCREASINGLY INHUMAN OPPRESSION OF THOSE WHOSE ONLY CRIME IS THAT THEY ARE AT THAT GOVERNMENT'S MERCY.

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THIRTY FIVE YEARS AGO A HORRIFIED AMERICA ROSE TO ITS FEET TO PROTEST AGAINST THE KISHINEV POGROMS IN TSARIST RUSSIA. GOD HELP US IF WE HAVE GROWN SO INDIFFERENT TO HUMAN SUFFERING THAT WE CANNOT RISE NOW IN PROTEST AGAINST THE POGROMS IN NAZI GERMANY. WE DO NOT BELIEVE WE HAVE GROWN SO INDIFFERENT AND WE DO NOT THINK THE WORLD SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO THINK WE HAVE. WE FEEL THAT IT IS DEEPLY IMMORAL FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE TO CONTINUE HAVING ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH A GOVERNMENT THAT AVOWEDLY USES MASS MURDER TO SOLVE ITS ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. WE ASK YOU TO SEVER TRADE RELATIONS WITH NAZI GERMANY, TO DECLARE

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AN EMBARGO ON ALL NAZI GERMAN GOODS, SIGNED

NEWTON ARVIN PEARL BUCK S N BEHRMAN NORAH BENJAMIN VAN WYCK BROOKS
JOHN CHAMBERLIN ALAN CAMPBELL MARC CONNELLY ROBERT CANTWELL PAUL DE
KRUIF MAJOR GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT EDNA FERBER MARJORIE FISHER
JOHN GUNTHER DASHIELL HAMMETT SIDNEY HOWARD LILLIAN HELLMAN
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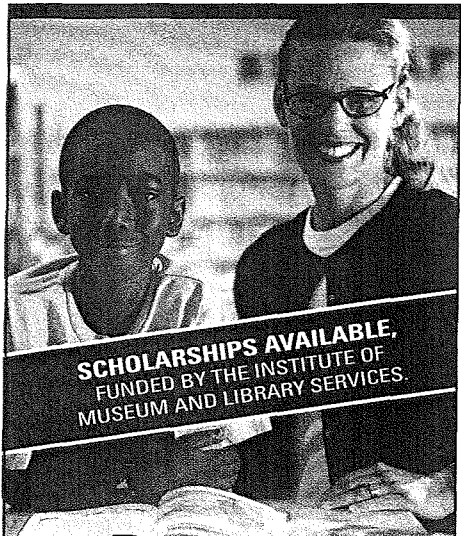
It hadn't occurred to him that his rifle was anything but a handle for his bayonet.

The food was bad, water was scarce, the men got sick but kept on fighting. In 18 days I had three cups of lukewarm coffee. We prayed for relief but it never came. On the 19th day we received some canned apricots and jam from the Red Cross. There was about one-half can per man and it was a Godsend. It would bring tears to your eyes if you could have seen the way it was received by the men. Dirty, strained and tired, their throats raw from shell smoke, after 18 days of canned beef and shell fire, the ration of jam and apricots meant more to them than their soul's salvation. Back in the towns they would growl like bears at a busted bank or the quality of the beer, but take them upon the line, work them day and night under shell fire, on bum food for a month, and you never heard a word. They will get tired and strained and swear like the devil, but growl or shirk when called to duty, they don't, these Marines.

The last ten days we were in, it quieted down a bit. They got hot food up to us and we managed pretty well. I lost about everything I took up there, including my diary. That was the only thing I missed, for I had kept it faithfully all these months. I will write again in a day or so.

Love to all.

Wayne.



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DIFFICULT TOPICS *from page 285*

who had been deliberately infected with smallpox so that they might pass on the disease to Americans in the surrounding area. Washington believed this to be a form of what we today call bioterrorism. When I shared this letter with a group of high school students, a few said that although there is nothing less inhumane about bioterrorism in the eighteenth century, knowing that Washington and his contemporaries faced this threat somehow makes the same issue in the twentyfirst century less threatening.

The students' reaction reflected the most powerful intrinsic values of primary sources—they provide us with evidence that each generation confronts issues similar to those faced by preceding generations and remind us that we are not alone. 

LEE ANN POTTER directs Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. She serves as the "Teaching with Documents" feature editor. All of the documents featured in this article can be reproduced in any quantity. For additional information about the education programs of the National Archives, please visit www.archives.gov/nae.

**Partial Transcription of George Washington's
Letter of December 4, 1775**

[By recent information from Boston, General Howe] is going to send out a number of the inhabitants in order it is thought to make more room for his expected reinforcements. There is one part of the information that I can hardly give credit to—a sailor says that a number of these coming out have been inoculated with design of spreading the smallpox through the country and camp. I have communicated this to the general camp and recommended their attention thereto.

They are arming one of the Transports in Boston with which they mean to decoy some of our armed vessels, as we are apprized of their design, I hope they will be disappointed.

My best respects wait on the Gentlemen in Congress and I am your most humble and obedient servant, —G Washington

Note about the Documents

All of the documents featured in this article are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration and are available online at www.DocsTeach.org. Simply do a key word search on the site using the NARA identifier numbers.

The photograph of ground zero on September 14, 2001, comes from Collection GWB-WHPO: Records of the White House Photo Office of the George W. Bush Administration, George W. Bush Library (NLGWB), Lewisville, TX (NARA Identifier 5997300).

The telegram from 36 American writers to Franklin Roosevelt, November 16, 1938, comes from Telegrams from US Consulates and Embassy in Germany, decimal file 862.4016/1841, Records of the Department of State; Record Group 59.

The letter from Wayne, July 1, 1918, comes from Historical Decimal File 33.6, 5th Marines; Records of the American Expeditionary Forces (World War I), Record Group 120.

The Letter from General George Washington to John Hancock, President of Congress, December 4, 1775, signature page (NARA identifier 824626); Series: Letters from General George Washington, 1775-1784; Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, 1765-1821; Record Group 360.