

# Teaching Grade 4-12 Social Studies Using Digital Libraries & Primary Sources



a place of mind

UBC Library

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## Summary

Our aim with this research project is to understand grade 4-12 teachers' attitudes & practices toward the usage of digital primary sources **in the classroom**, and the barriers that prevent this.

By focusing on digital primary source tools provided by academic institutions, we hope to **identify possible design improvements** that make the tools more appropriate for use in social studies classrooms by addressing teachers' wants and needs.

We assessed educators' knowledge and usage of existing online tools in the classroom through **surveys, task simulations, and interviews**. We also evaluated a number of tools that already exist online to identify strong and weak points. We found generally positive attitudes toward the tools, and a willingness to put tools to greater use to enhance students' abilities to engage in historical thinking.

## The Motivation

How can grade 4-12 teachers use digital primary sources to engage students in Historical Thinking (1)?

Because UBC Library itself offers **Open Collections**, a platform that allows free access to the University's digital holdings, we believe this study can help UBC Library enhance Open Collections in ways that advance UBC's values of Advancing and Sharing Knowledge and supporting Public Interest.

UBC Library offers over 200,000 digitized items, many of which are primary sources, and which have major potential to support students in developing skills in Historical Inquiry (2).

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“If students are **really into a lesson**, they start asking questions and I need to find answers. I want to find them **quickly and easily.**”

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## Teacher Feedback

### A Multi-Modal Approach

We engaged with Grade 4-12 teachers through a survey, a simulated task scenario (STS), and a post-scenario interview. While the survey allowed revealed current attitudes and behaviours toward teaching with digital primary sources, the STS and interview processes allowed us to observe and interrogate teachers' information-seeking behaviours and are highlighted below.

### Simulated Task Scenario

Following an electronic survey sent to teachers across British Columbia, ten teachers volunteered to participate in the STS. They were provided with a scenario that instructed them to use UBC's Open Collections to develop a lesson plan related to British Columbia's history. All participants were active Social Studies teachers for grades 8 through 12 located in British Columbia. Screen capturing software was used to record their completion of the task, and participants were encouraged to provide their trains of thought while participating.

### Interviews

Following the STS, participants were asked to give their impressions on using the platform:

- to develop lesson plans and activities
- to locate and select primary sources
- as a tool for education development generally

Participants were also asked what changes they felt would help make Open Collections an appropriate tool for the classroom, rather than as a research tool for an academic institution.

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“When you're teaching four classes & have 120 students' work to mark, you're just surviving.  
**Good-quality lessons come when you have time to develop them.**

I wish the powers that be would understand that.”

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## Tool Evaluation

### An Adapted SECTIONS Model

Through surveys, interviews, and literature reviews, we identified eighteen online digital library and primary-source tools designed for use in schools.

We used a modified version of the SECTIONS model (3) to assess the tools. While the model was originally developed to aid in the selection of media for educational use, we modified the criteria for tool evaluation, as follows:

- **Students** – Does this develop transferrable skills?  
Open to communities outside of class?
- **Ease of Use** – Is this easy to learn for students?  
Is this easy to learn for teachers?
- **Cost** – Are the costs minimal or do the benefits outweigh the costs?
- **Teaching** – Does this support Historical Thinking?  
Does this facilitate assessment?
- **Interactivity** – Does this facilitate interactions between peers?
- **Organizational Value** – Does this create new burdens on the organization?
- **Novelty** – Does this provide a new experience?  
Has it been used in education before?
- **Speed/Security** – Is it stable? Is it secure? Does it protect students' privacy?

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“With more exposure to Open Collections, **I'd be more likely to come back.** Knowing that these resources are there can lead to **finding other materials to use in the classroom** as well.”

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## Initial Findings

Although the data-gathering portion of our study is complete, we are still analyzing the data. There are a number of preliminary findings worth mentioning, however:

### Teacher Feedback

The teachers who participated in the STS and interviews were consistently excited about using Open Collections. Although they were concerned that the interface is not very teacher- or student-friendly, they feel that Professional Development opportunities could address those shortcomings.

The quotes across the bottom of this poster are taken from our interviews with teachers, and are representative of the views expressed.

### Tool Evaluation

- Out of the 18 tools identified, all but one were free.
- Most tools were easy to use, but lacked significant interactivity.
- 8 tools had a major privacy or security flaw.

## References

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Our work takes place on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.