

Listen Up! Collaboration Using 20th Century Audiovisual Primary Sources

Feature



by Connie Williams, February 2016

In my car, I have several channels I can listen to, so when the current song isn't to my liking, I just jump between them until I discover a song I love. While channel surfing the other day, I realized that I was moving from era to era as I switched from the '60s channel (Beatles) to the 1950s (Elvis), 1970s (Crosby, Stills & Nash) and then to the "classics" channel where I heard Billie Holliday and Sinatra...and then up to the 1980s for Green Day...then back to a bit of in-car singing with Carole King. Because I've been thinking a great deal about primary sources lately, it hit me that I had just listened to decade after decade of American history: war, revolution, peace, disenchantment, and frenzy. I hate to admit it, but my childhood and teen years are now a part of the primary source record—and this music is a testament to the great connection music has in our lives, as it reflects and comments upon events happening at the time of its creation.

We often think of primary sources as documents: letters, diaries, brochures, ledgers, and other written documents. But primary sources encompass many of life's artifacts including not just written documents but also speeches as they were given, songs as they were played or sung, movies as they were shown, dances as they were performed, and tools as they were used. Because we want to help students make a real connection with the past, we can often entice them with music, stories, artifacts, photographs, or movies.

World history teacher Jamil Dawsari, Petaluma High School (CA), has honed in on that thought and created a project centered on World War I using music, spoken word, and sound effects. Students generate a research question related to the war and then aggregate diaries, songs, stories, and other primary source material and present it to the class. A student may choose to capture, for example, the words a young American soldier sent home, a song about longing to be home again, and a diary of a young woman waiting for her lover to come home. Students record the words, mix it creatively with the music, and include sound effects (bombs exploding, cars, etc.) to create an audio story that answers a question such as, "What was it like to be 18 and at war?" While the "goal was to have students use historically accurate music, sound effects, and primary source material such as diaries and letters to complete their assignment," Dawsari discovered that "although students were able to discern the correct primary source material such as letters and diaries, when it came to using sound effects or vetting the music from the time period, they weren't as concerned with historical accuracy as they were with creating the setting and the feeling that it would engender." This led students to pop in noises from later periods such as airplanes from World War II.

Our task is set before us: to help our students not only identify the facts of history but to also understand the context of history. We can direct them to sites that will offer the facts, as well as the opportunities to make some critical decisions about how to place artifacts within an authentic context. This is especially important considering that students have grown up watching movies that purport to tell history, but actually highlight 'story' over historical authenticity. If we help to define a context by looking closely at the sources that come from a particular time and place, such as the trenches in World War I, students can better articulate the difference between the story and the reality.

Audio and visual artifacts are useful in a variety of ways: listening to speeches allows us to participate more fully in the experience of a time period in order to better understand what people standing in the cold of winter during a presidential inauguration or participating in the heat of a battle must have felt. Dancing to the music of the 1920s or 1950s gives us not only the music, but the sense of how people moved, how comfortable they were in their own skin, and how much fun they had when they could just "let go." Compare those dances to a waltz from the 1800s. Ask your students, what is the difference between the fiddle of the country dance and the violin of the stately ballroom? We could watch a 1950s dance show in history class and then, in collaboration with the physical education teacher, attempt to master the dance ourselves. As teachers, we can send students out on the web to research World War I, but if we provide them with directions to the sites that have the collections they might need, they will spend less time searching and more time listening, watching, and deciding which artifacts will fit the bill for their chosen project topic.

Here are some creative ways we can use audio and visual resources:

1. Have students listen to several radio shows then make their own show utilizing non-electronic sound effects. Writing the show, scripting it, making authentic sound effects, and presenting it allows students not only to take a step back in history, but also to use important skills.

EQ: How can I authentically represent this time period through audio-visual primary sources?

2. Listening to speeches can provide insight into an era, a topic under investigation, or determining a point of view. If, for example, we want to get a sense of what was going on in 1963, we could listen to the following from that year:

It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color.—John F. Kennedy
(<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfkcivilrights.htm>)

Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever—George Wallace (<http://www.radiodiaries.org/segregation-now-segregation-forever-the-speech-that-changed-american-politics/>)

I have a dream—Martin Luther King, Junior (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>)

These three speeches can begin a conversation. Consider using the Circle of Viewpoints to "unpack" these speeches. Collaborate with teachers to have students search for speeches that work together to make a Circle of Viewpoints with each student group given a topic. Taking it a step further, students can take on one of the viewpoints and further research it thus creating a larger conversation that could be used perhaps for Socratic Seminar discussion or debate.

Use a clip from one of the speeches and add it to your lecture or let students investigate several to produce a mashup that they can place into a video they create. The video should include segue segments that tie the speeches together into a cohesive statement, theme, or argument in order to answer an essential question.

3. Choose an issue (e.g. Civil Rights, war, terrorism, economy) and follow it through several elections using presidential campaign speeches and/or television commercials to identify the theme. In which years was this topic important—how can you tell that it was important?

EQ: How has the face of terrorism evolved or changed over time?

What were the most prevalent persuasive techniques used throughout the years? Where, in your opinion, was it most effective? Create a timeline that shows how persuasive techniques changed through the years as technology became more sophisticated.

EQ: How has propaganda played a role in history?

Using television commercials from a certain decade, have students choose and watch a series of commercials and ask them, "What was important to people in this decade based on what products were being sold to them?" Students can share through discussion or through a presentation of the evidence.

EQ: How have television commercials captured a picture of our culture?

Though it is now possible to watch television and movies on devices without the commercials, for generations of television-loving kids, commercials are/have been a large part of their cultural experience. Advertisements come in all shapes and sizes selling us personal grooming items, clothing, automobiles, medicine, food, and even political candidates. Take a look at the resources below and get creative with all the ways you can use these fabulous artifacts of the 20th century.

Here are some sites that can get them started:

- **Signals Alpha** <http://www.signalalpha.com>

This site has historical audio and video covering major events in U.S. history. It includes larger sections on World War II and the Cold War, but don't miss the wide selection of "old time radio." The selections of audio are unique and offer compelling topics such as Babe Ruth's speech at Yankee Stadium in 1948, the audio of the *Sputnik* launch, and a government public service announcement encouraging home canning as a way to help save food during World War II. A ten-minute film gives viewers a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the making of radio shows and their sound effects which could be an excellent entrée to any project you assign that uses Foley techniques. (For an example go to <https://www.videomaker.com/article/c9/3186-homemade-sound-effects-with-big-budget-impact/>)

- **Historical Voices—audio/video** <http://www.historicalvoices.org/>

This site has a digital collection of some of the earliest voices recorded such as William Jennings Bryan, Thomas Edison, and William Taft.

- **The Online Speech Bank** <http://www.americanrhetoric.com>

This website has a database with over 5,000 full text audio and video "speeches, sermons, legal proceedings, lectures, debates, interviews, other recorded media events, and a declaration or two." It also lists the top 100 Speeches as well as some of the best movie speeches that you will love to quote.

- **Radio Diaries** <http://www.radiodiaries.org>

The folks behind this site have been giving people tape recorders and working with them "to report on their own lives and histories." The stories cover events that we may have known about—e.g., Civil Rights—but they also include the stories of people who were present but whom we'd never meet in a history book. People like Claudette Colvin who, like Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat on the bus months before Rosa became a symbol of the Civil Rights Movement. This site asks: "Why do we remember some stories and not others?" They provide an excellent "teen reporter handbook" which could be a model for classrooms to create their own audio diaries.

- **The Living Room Candidate** <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/>

This is a part of the Museum of the Moving Image website. It offers presidential campaign commercials from 1952-2012, including the famous Lyndon Johnson ad titled "Peace, Little Girl" and known as the "Daisy" spot, which some say won him the election. Give it a look! Have students watch and analyze it using persuasive techniques analysis.

If you decide to have students create an audio/visual project, don't forget that they will want to use sound effects. Researching each possible sound effect for its authenticity will add an extra critical thinking layer to the project.

As Dawsari reflects on his lesson: "We were able to hold conversations where students would ask each other: 'Why did you put that airplane there?' or 'What did you use that gun noise there for?' They might respond saying, 'What we wanted to do was to make people feel like they were in a battle...!' Which would lead other students to call them on that saying, 'but that's an M-16 sound effect' or 'that's a jet plane that's not from that time period.' As a result, we would have interesting conversations about the use of sound and why it had to be relevant and accurate."

Using audio and visual primary sources can bring wonderful elements to your classroom and library. Using Foley or audio recording as part of a library makerspace will allow you to bring in information literacy skills such as site, artifact evaluation, copyright, sourcing, and citing without the perceived drudgery associated with the academic term "research." True inquiry can be built with hands-on resources that come from primary source materials.

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