

What happens to primary source work?

Primary source work is at the heart of what historians do. Yet creating learning opportunities for this core skill presents a challenge, especially in the online classroom. Facilitating discussion boards that come 'alive' and ignite students' curiosity requires special skills. However, despite these challenges, moving primary source work online opens up opportunities to disrupt one-way knowledge transfer, to focus on skills development, and to include a wider range of student voices in discussion.

A wide array of techniques and platforms is available to support collaborative reading, such as [social annotation](#) tools (e.g. [Hypothes.is](#), [Perusall](#), and [Talis Elevate](#)) and [virtual bulletin boards](#) (such as [Padlet](#)), each of which has its own benefits and limitations. Both approaches allow students to curate their own collections of online material. When effectively facilitated, digital strategies for collaborative reading can help develop critical awareness of source quality and context, alongside students' digital literacy.

Embedding collaborative work with pre-selected documents and images into weekly activities can make online spaces more dynamic. Rather than simply asking students to 'read' the sources (which can encourage a surface approach to the material), requiring them to add comments, questions, and highlights to primary sources can deepen learning by encouraging students toward active engagement with what they have read.

Things to think about:

- **There are both synchronous and asynchronous ways to set the stage for collaborative primary source work.** This can be achieved through a discussion board or virtual seminar, particularly if you can break students into small groups. Dedicated platforms such as [Talis Elevate](#), [Hypothes.is](#), and [Perusall](#) allow students to mark-up text and images, and provide opportunities for students to add their own material. Adam Sheard (University of British Columbia) offers a great comparison of some of the major platforms, [Which Collaborative Annotation App Should I Use?](#)
- **Each approach to primary source work offers different levels of student engagement, openness of inquiry, and analytical depth.** Take advantage of the chance to encourage new forms of engagement with primary source material. In [Back to School with Annotation: 10 Ways to Annotate with Students](#) Jeremy Dean explores annotation strategies using Hypothes.is. In this micro-site for the [Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities project](#), Paul Schacht (State University of New York) brings together examples showcasing the possibilities of [annotation](#). This post on [Padlet Maps and Timelines](#) by Anne Hole of the University of Sussex looks at using Padlet to allow students to pool the evidence they have gathered. The [Introduction to Perusall](#) by one of its developers, Gary King (Harvard), discusses the cognitive profile of social annotation as a framework for learning.
- **Moving primary source work online requires us to rethink our role in the classroom.** Don't forget that students need to be guided through the process of taking ownership over primary source work.
- Consider **encouraging students to take ownership** by allowing them to add their own documents, while your role moves from centre stage to monitoring discussions, validating

responses, and being prepared to intervene. Jamie Wood (Lincoln) outlines the way he structured his approach to student-led curation of reading materials in the appendix to his article, [Helping Students to Become Disciplinary Researchers](#).

Things to watch out for:

- **You will need to guide students through new technology and set clear expectations of what is required.** If you ask students to use an unfamiliar platform, explain what value it adds, address any concerns over privacy, and make sure they are able to use it successfully. Test your instructions from a student perspective ahead of time (preferably several times). Dan Allosso (Bemadji State University) offers a good example of introducing social annotation to students in his YouTube [Hypothes.is Intro](#).
- **Wherever possible, use platforms that are already widely in use in your institution.** This means students are not overwhelmed by managing too many new platforms, and adds to the level of support they - and you - can access. On the [American Historical Association](#) YouTube channel, Steven Mintz (University of Texas at Austin)'s [Engaging Students Online](#) offers a useful reminder that the choice of platform is less important than making good use of it. Similar results may be achieved through different tools: a Google Doc, a class wiki, or a class blog.
- **Online platforms are still the classroom.** Consider the impact of these activities on all students, particularly those from marginalised groups who may not feel comfortable or safe interacting online. Even when platforms offer anonymity, inequities can shape practises of commenting, highlighting, and discussion.
- **Don't forget about privacy, data and university copyright policies.** Creating a free account with a platform often means giving up certain rights over **data** and this may have implications for whether it's appropriate to use it; you will need to start a discussion with your IT department. You may also need to consider **copyright** - work closely with your library to secure clearance. One solution may be to use primary source material that is openly available online.

Further Reading:

1. Lisa Lane (MiraCosta College) explores practical examples on her [blog](#) and provides a quick demonstration of Perusall in the video [Read and Discuss with Perusall](#).
2. Melodee Beal's YouTube channel, [Clio Digital Workshop](#), includes discussion of named entity recognition - identifying key people, places, and concepts in a historical source.
3. It's worth browsing Adam Sheard (University of British Columbia)'s YouTube Channel [Ed Tech with Adam](#) for tutorials on some of the main collaborative annotation platforms.
4. In [Passing 1000 Talis Elevate comments](#) Jamie Wood (Lincoln) talks about getting students to take control. (He surveys how others at Lincoln use Elevate [here](#).)
5. In [An academic's experience of using Talis Elevate before and after the shift to online](#), Anna Rich-Abad (Nottingham) talks about using Elevate to 'recreate' the classroom.
6. Monica Brown and Benjamin Croft's [Social Annotation and an Inclusive Praxis for Open Pedagogy in the College Classroom](#) offers a more in-depth discussion.