

# Reliability and Impact: Student Perceptions of Historical Sources



by

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*I*n this study I examined how high school history students view historical sources such as textbooks, photographs, drawings, film, and poetry. Which of these sources do students consider reliable and why? Which forms do they feel have the biggest impact on them and why?

## **Subjects and Methodology**

The sophomores enrolled in my History of Europe III classes at West High School were the participants in my study. History of Europe III is a class for students of varying abilities, and this research took place during our study of World War I. During this unit, as in previous units, I offered students a variety of primary sources to interpret and evaluate. On the last day of the unit, I distributed a survey in which students were asked to rate the reliability or accuracy of a number of sources used during the unit, with one meaning "not reliable" and five meaning "very reliable." They were also asked to write comments explaining why they considered a particular source to be reliable or unreliable. Next students were

asked to rate the impact each source made on them or how long they thought they would remember it. Space was provided for comments regarding their rating of sources. I asked students to be as thorough and honest as possible, and reassured them that there were no “right answers.”

## Results and Analysis

*Articles and photographs are real. Historians have gathered the facts and photographers were at the scene. Filmmakers, artists, and songwriters use their own interpretations.*

*This quote exemplifies many students' faith in the truth of photography and historians' accounts of history. Illustrating the impact of forms other than the text.*

*The photos and films contained such amazing pictures that I'll remember them a lot longer than the dry readings. The poems were really descriptive and made me think about what went on more than the readings that were just the facts and dates.*

The students in my study found photography and film to be the most reliable sources of historical information; however, they judged historians' articles and the textbook to be more reliable than other art forms such as drawing or poems. In terms of impact, students overwhelmingly rated photographs and film first and second, and for the most part did not feel the textbook had a big impact on them.

This research is significant because it shows how critical are the sources a history teacher chooses. If students overwhelmingly find photographs to be reliable and memorable, should not history teachers employ photographs more often in their classrooms? Because film has such a large impact on students, teachers may need to be extra careful about what films they show and how they are debriefed. The fact that many students do not find textbooks to be memorable may mean we need to make them one of many sources of historical information, instead of the driving force in a curriculum.

**AVERAGE RATING AND RANKING  
OF EACH SOURCE ON SURVEY.**

5 = "VERY RELIABLE" / "BIG IMPACT"

1 = "NOT RELIABLE" / "NO IMPACT"

<u>RELIABILITY</u>		<u>IMPACT</u>	
1. Photos	4.60	1. Photos	4.56
2. Film	3.92	2. Film	4.38
3. Article	3.85	3. Article	3.10
4. Text	3.75	4. Poems	3.00
5. Poems	3.39	5. Text	2.92
6. Song	3.06	6. Sketch	2.87
7. Sketch	2.92	7. Song	2.55

Students' faith in the "truth" of the four photographs they examined matches Marcy Singer Gabella's findings (Gabella, 1994); they judged the photographs to be "what actually happened." Students gave these photographs of trench warfare on average the highest reliability rating of 4.6 (see Table above), and stated that the photos had a big impact on them: "the photographs were real images of the war and were powerful." Only a few students alluded to the fact that the photographs might be biased or reflected the photographer's perspective on the war. As expressed by one student, "most of these examples besides the photographs were not very reliable basically because they were not done on a first hand account and the creators could easily choose what they wanted to display." A few students did note that the photographs depicted the war in a negative light; they described the photographs as "a little one-sided" and taken "not of good things." Student recognition that the four photographs showed the negative side of war is important in light of the impact the photos made on their classmates. "The photos are hard to forget because that's what the war was like, death." If I had selected photographs showing a more positive side of the war, would that have significantly changed the students' perceptions of the war?

Unlike the students Gabella observed, who “believed without exception that the textbook tells you what actually happened,” (1994, p. 346) a majority of my students did recognize that the textbook’s author may be biased and that the “text is written by an author.” Because textbooks are “a secondary source,” they also recognized that “some things can be biased and off the truth.” One student stated, “We studied the war last year in American Studies and this book is completely different.” Many students did accept the text’s value as a source of facts or details; it received an average reliability rating of 3.75. Some students also found the textbook easier to understand than less familiar history sources like drawings and poems. “It is hard to understand sketches, poems, and songs because it is not written out for me to understand as well as the textbook,” wrote one student. The textbook’s average score of 2.92 for impact is significant. Students acknowledge that the text may contain some important facts, details, and interpretation (as one student said, “The text helps you understand the photos”), but many found it boring. “The book—to me was just facts and numbers. For instance the book said that maybe in a certain battle 300,000 were killed, but if you see that in a picture it’s much more virtual.” These findings suggest that textbooks have their place to help students locate primary sources historical context. They suggest also that teachers must provide students with guidance and practice interpreting artistic sources of historical evidence.

The drawing, “Hand to Hand Combat,” by Otto Dix, received by far the lowest average reliability rating, a score of 2.92. During the discussion of this work, students voiced their opinion that it was “more fictional” than photographs or the textbook and “just one guy’s interpretation.” Though the students negated the drawing’s value as a source of historical information, they showed insight when describing what they considered to be its message. They said it showed the fighting to be “chaotic”; “you can’t tell where one person ends and another begins—that’s what it must have been like in the trenches.” Another student’s comment alluded to a film we had watched, declaring the war to be “crazy, confusing, not simple and glorious like the professor told the students in ‘All Quiet on the

Western Front.” After listening to these remarks on the drawing I asked, “From what you’ve studied, is that an accurate description of trench warfare?” Based on the nodding and murmuring of “yes,” it may be that the students perceived some validity in the artist’s sketch after all.

The 1930’s film version of the novel, All Quiet on the Western Front was considered fairly reliable (3.92 average rating), and made a large impact on students (4.38 average rating). During the debriefing of the film, I told them the author of the novel, Eric Maria Remarque, had fought in World War I, as many of them suspected. This may have influenced students’ rating the film second in both the reliability and impact categories. They valued the film because “it was like you were seeing the war yourself,” and also because it personalized the war: “I will remember the sources that deal with real individuals. It was much sadder and more personal when Paul died than when I read about people dying in my textbook.” This personalization, as well as the visual impact of the film, may have contributed to the fact that its average rating for impact was noticeably higher than its reliability rating. A few students did comment that film can be biased, pointing out that “All Quiet on the Western Front,” “was from the perspective of a German soldier, which is an obvious bias.” Another said, “the movie seemed realistic, but it was a movie,” seeming to recognize that film does not necessarily reflect reality. The powerful visual and emotional impact of movies combined with the plethora of historical films released in recent years (e.g., “JFK” and “Braveheart”) means that it is important for history teachers to assist their students in becoming critical viewers.

The poems the students read were also written by men who had fought in the war. August Stramm fought and died for Germany, and Siegfried Sassoon was in the English army. (Cross, 1988 and Sassoon, 1920) These poems were rated fifth in terms of reliability and fourth in terms of impact; however, the poetry was specifically mentioned in several students’ comments on what sources made an impact on them: “They (photos, film, poems) were someone’s real experience. It’s easier to

relate to those and remember." "I will remember the pictures and poems and film because they affected me more. They made me understand that to the soldiers there was no glory to war. The textbook sometimes fails to express that, but by pictures and their feelings I could better understand what they went through." Poems struck a chord with some students that the textbook did not.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Hopefully this research raises some important questions concerning the sources used in high school history courses, as well as the reliability and impact of those sources on students. Students in my study found photographs and film to be the most reliable sources, as well as the most memorable. Poetry, music, and drawings were rated as least reliable, though poetry had high impact on some students. These results underline the importance of thoughtful inclusion of sources such as photography and film in history courses. The textbook's average impact rating of 2.92 supports Gabella's suggestion that history teachers reduce their reliance on textbooks as "provider of the central narrative," and unseat themselves as "sole validator of classroom knowledge and participation" (Gabella, 1994, p. 350).

According less authority to what the teacher says and downplaying the central importance of the text are fairly revolutionary ideas to many educators, but they are supported by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) curriculum standards. These standards recommend that "teachers gradually move...to a less directive role that encourages students to become independent and self-regulated learners." (p. 12) The National Standards for History echoes this, lending support to students' use of several meaningful sources when interpreting events of the past. The standard, "Historical Analysis and Interpretation," stresses the importance of "the use of more than a single source: of history books other than textbooks and of a rich variety of historical documents and artifacts" (p. 65).

The student comment, "It's rare to get video, poems, and songs in class," may reflect the reality that most history teachers

do not use a variety of sources on a regular basis. If teachers continue to rely on the text as their primary teaching resource, we fail to tap into sources that may provide greater meaning to students. When teachers use a variety of sources and help students to evaluate these sources, we are "inviting them to participate in the interpretation of significance," (Gabella, 1994, p. 357) which is certainly a worthwhile goal for history educators.

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