Developing Critical and Historical Thinking Skills in Middle Grades Social Studies

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Far too often, social studies is seen as boring and is typically rated as the least favorite subject of K–12 students (Allen, 1994; Black & Blake, 2001; Jensen, 2001; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). However, many of the top-grossing films released each year and countless popular television shows contain historical plots and social studies elements. In addition, many best-selling video games have themes based on significant social and historical events. Given the popularity of social studies outside the classroom, why is it so unpopular in the classroom?

Much of the distaste for social studies, particularly history, in the K–12 classroom stems from the way it is taught. The traditional way history is taught—as series of lectures, textbook reading, note memorizing, and test taking—is not only boring to students (Fertig, 2005), it is also ineffective in garnering real historical learning (Scheuerell, 2007). History teachers must encourage students to think historically (Wineburg, 2001), which involves interpreting and analyzing historical artifacts and primary sources and constructing and critiquing narratives about the past. Moreover, students should have multiple opportunities to engage in authentic social studies learning (Levstik & Barton, 2005; O’Brien & White, 2006; White, O’Brien, Hileman, Mortensen, & Smith, 2006; Okolo, Ferretti, & MacArthur, 2007) and critical thinking (Fuchs, 2006; Goldenberg & Tally, 2005; National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2008).

When students engage in critical thinking, they should take part in “the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions” (Halpern, 2007, p. 6). A foundation for thinking critically and historically must be developed by the time students reach the middle grades to make students more perceptive and discriminating consumers when faced with lectures, note taking, textbook reading, and other didactic modes of instruction in high school and college classrooms. Furthermore, students who leave the middle grades with strong critical and historical thinking skills will be able to build on this foundation in high school and beyond (Facione, 2004). However, the dual skills of critical and historical thinking must be consciously taught and learned, as they do not develop in isolation on their own (Rudd, 2007; Schuster, 2008).

What follows are descriptions of lessons within a mini-unit created to help middle grades students develop a foundation for historical and critical thinking. The lessons were aimed at assisting students in thinking historically, giving students opportunities to analyze
multiple perspectives, allowing them to discover the necessity of using multiple sources when conducting research, and guiding them in learning how to construct historical narratives through the creation of a digital historical biography.

**What is a historian and what are primary sources?**

In the first portion of the mini-unit, the teacher allowed students to gain a better appreciation for the role of a historian and the sources historians use to construct historical narratives. As the students entered the classroom, the words *historian* and *primary sources* were written across the dry erase board. The students were then asked to define these two terms using their own words or by drawing pictures. After approximately two minutes, the teacher asked the students, “What is a historian?” A couple of students suggested that a historian was an actual historical figure or person that historians would study; one student answered that a historian is someone who knows about history.

Next, the students were asked to think about what primary sources are. They had a wide array of answers, but the most common were “sources we use,” “sources we get,” “sources used long ago,” and “sources that historians need.” As these are common misconceptions when discussing the work of social scientists with novice historical thinkers, one way to begin the process of understanding these terms is by taking students on a “mindwalk” (Library of Congress, 2002). For this mindwalk, the students are asked to recall all of the activities in which they were involved during the previous 24 hours. Then, the students are asked to provide any evidence that proves they existed during the last 24 hours. A good example scenario for students to discuss is the act of purchasing and pumping gasoline at a service station. The actions involved in getting gas are well known by most students, but few have consciously thought about all the potential evidence left behind when getting gas (e.g., paper and electronic receipts, video surveillance, garbage discarded, purchasing of merchandise inside, discussions with individuals who could attest to conversations).

After several minutes, the students were asked to reveal some of their evidence proving their existence. Several answers were given, such as, “My dad saw me doing my homework yesterday at my house.” This student suggested that his dad could vouch for his existence. Another answer was, “I left my hat at my friend’s house yesterday while playing video games.” In this case, the hat would be the proof of the student’s existence. To get past just human interactions, the students were asked, “Are there any answers that do not involve or depend on people as proof of your existence?” To this, one student responded, “I left a dish in the sink yesterday” as proof of existence. Another answered, “I touched a bench and left a fingerprint.” The teacher and the students then discussed how these answers tell a story about a past event or place and are primary sources.

The discussion about primary sources continued as students were shown several different primary sources from the American home front during the Second World War. This artifact set was discussed, and the students were asked why each would be included or why each source was relevant to the American home front during World War II. While reviewing the artifacts (e.g., ration stamp books, letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, steel pennies), the students began to discover, through instruction and open discourse, how primary sources are the tools that historians use to tell a story.

To help further convey this point, an example featuring the volcanic eruption in Pompeii, Italy, in A.D. 79 was used. The teacher explained that, without
the primary sources preserved by the ashes from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, historians would know much less about human life in Europe more than 2,000 years ago and how human life has progressed since. Overall, the mindwalk activity generated an excellent and interactive discussion about historians and primary sources while also creating a foundation for more mature levels of historical thinking.

With a better idea of the definitions of both historians and primary sources following the mindwalk activity, the teacher transitioned to the next phase of the lesson—a game of hide-and-seek. The students were asked to look at a photograph projected on a screen that depicted a bread peddler from an Italian immigrant community at the beginning of the 20th century (Byron, c.1900). The picture shows a food cart in front of a store of some kind. Next to the cart, there is a bicycle. Around the food cart, there are people posing. The students were asked to think about the rules to a game of hide-and-seek and to use these same rules to find the best place to hide within this picture.

After about a minute, the teacher told the students that the hunt to find them in the picture had begun. The large bread basket located in the middle of the image was the first location “searched.” Students who had chosen this hiding place were asked to imagine themselves actually hiding inside the bread basket; to picture themselves in that moment of time in the photo. Questions exploring the human senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste), along with traditional journalistic inquiries (who, what, where, when, and why), were employed with the students as they were asked, “What does it smell like?” and, “What do you feel?” When the teacher asked what they were able to hear, student answers included the creaking of the wheel on the food cart and people talking. Regarding the possible languages the people in the photo may have spoken, the students were asked, “What language or languages do you hear?” To this, one student replied, “English.” Another said, “Spanish,” while another contributed, “Italian!” This led to a discussion as to whether this photo was one of American origin or of individuals native to another country. Hiding places were examined until all of the students were found and all of the important details of the photo were discussed.

At the conclusion of this lesson, the teacher explained to the students that what they had just done—envisioning what things were like in historical photos by picturing themselves in the moment of the photo—was very similar to what historians do with primary sources. Analyzing primary sources

Keeping with the same lesson theme, the teacher projected a picture of an American Civil War era mortar, or cannon (Knox, 1864), explaining that a historian who wanted to know more about this picture would ask questions about it and critically analyze the elements within the image. This initiated an inquiry activity as the teacher asked the students if the image they were viewing was an old or new picture. The students believed it to be old because the picture was in black and white, the clothes the people were wearing in the picture were of a different, non-contemporary style, and there was an antiquated looking “war cannon” in the picture. The teacher then revealed that the picture was from 1864, at the time of the American Civil War.

The students were instructed to delve more deeply into this image by looking at it section by section (Hines & Day, 2002). The teacher covered sections of the photo so that only the top third was visible. The students were asked to infer what time of year or what season it might have been when the photo was taken, based on what they see...
could see in the uncovered part of the photo. At first, the students did not seem to know where to begin their investigation for this section of the image, so the teacher asked, “Based on how the trees look, can you figure out what time of year it is?” The students then made educated guesses about the time of year with responses such as, “I think the trees looked bare, so fall or winter.”

As the lesson concluded, the teacher asked, “How would we change the definitions of historian and primary sources, knowing what we know now?” As a whole class, the students co-constructed a new definition for historian as “someone who looks at pictures to learn about history”; and the new class definition for primary sources became “things used to prove that something exists and that give us details or provide evidence about the past.”

As the lesson came to a close, the teacher made a final effort to authentically relate the content of the lesson to the students’ lives by asking them to compare the role of a historian to certain television shows with investigative formats. The students came to realize that in shows like Law and Order, CSI, Blue’s Clues, and even Scooby-Doo, characters conduct investigations and analyze evidence similar to the way historians do. One student summed it up well by saying that both the characters in the aforementioned television shows and historians “look for and investigate evidence to develop facts and stories about the past.”

Multiple perspectives of historical events

The next lesson in the mini-unit opened students’ minds to different perspectives of historical events and taught them to think more critically about historical information and sources. The lesson begins with the teacher showing the students a sheet of construction paper. On one side of the sheet, the letter “I” is written. On the other side of the sheet, the letter “T” is written. The students are asked to look at the paper and to think about what they see. Only one part of the class can see the “I,” while another segment of the class can only see the “T.” When asked
The About Explorers website gave students access to two other websites with information on their assigned explorers. Then, the students are asked, based on the information from their two website sources, to answer three questions on the worksheet about their explorer. For example, the students researching Juan Ponce de León were asked: When and where was Juan Ponce de León born? What official position did de León hold in Puerto Rico? Where was de León buried? The catch with this assignment was that the two website sources the students were using had different information about their explorers. The website creators purposefully juxtaposed information created by authors with different perspectives or who were conveying misinformation.

Soon after the students began to work on the assignment, they realized their website sources were telling two different stories about their explorers. The students were asked to write down answers from both information sources on their worksheets and to put a star next to the answers they believed to be correct. The final question of the activity asked the students to find the similarities and differences between the differing information they found from their two online sources.

When students had finished the entire activity, the teacher drew their attention to the last question on the worksheet. Many of the students realized the information from the two website sources was different, but how could they tell which information was correct? The students considered this question, and their answers included: “The better looking website is more likely to have correct information.” “The websites with the most information are likely to have the correct sources.” and “The websites that look credible will have correct information.” Finally, the teacher asked the students what they should do when looking for credible information about historical events on the Internet. The class reached consensus that they must search in multiple places to find information and then evaluate this information carefully. Students learned that they can confidently use historical information only after they have considered multiple perspectives and evaluated information critically.

The students to keep in mind the earlier lesson about perspectives while they listened to the story. After finishing the story, the teacher asked, “How does this different version of ‘The Three Little Pigs’ relate to history?” A student answered, “Well, the wolf has one side to the story, and the reporters and pigs have another side to the story.” The rest of the class agreed. While concluding this part of the lesson, the teacher told the class that many people who actually witnessed or attended a historical event would have had their own account of the event and, thus, multiple thoughts about one historical event would be present. When asked if every rendition of every historical event would be the same, the students all agreed that they would differ—that every historical event would be remembered or interpreted differently.

Determining the credibility of online sources

In the third part of the lesson, the students engaged in an activity called the Explorer Treasure Hunt (Aungst & Zucker, 2007). The students were first directed to go to the All About Explorers website (www.allaboutexplorers.com). Small groups of students were each assigned an explorer to research from the website using a guiding worksheet. To aid the students in their research, the All About Explorers website gave students access to two other websites with information on their assigned explorers.
Engaging in an authentic historical assessment activity

The final part of the mini-unit on historical thinking allowed students to research a historical figure of their choice. The teacher directed students to put into practice their newly acquired critical thinking, historical thinking, and historical inquiry skills. The lessons on primary source analysis and multiple historical perspectives served as excellent preparation for this final activity.

The students used a variety of Web resources and a minimum of two print sources for their research. Having students gather several sources for their research was a key component in making this assessment activity authentic because, through the process of gathering multiple historical sources, students had to apply the same skills that social scientists and historians would use on a daily basis (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004).

After the bulk of their research was complete, the students created digital movies about their historical figures using Microsoft Movie Maker. Movie Maker was used out of convenience, although other digital video editing software packages would have worked just as well or better. Before they created the movies, the students had to synthesize their research into a historical narrative that included information about the lives and accomplishments of their historical figures. By developing historical narratives, students were again engaging in an authentic activity. Historians depend on narratives not only to convey facts about the past but also to interpret how the past truly was based on factual evidence (Immerwahr, 2008). In constructing these narratives, students came to understand that history is not only a matter of fact but of interpretation.

Once the narratives were constructed, the students gathered digital pictures of their historical figures and uploaded them into Movie Maker, and the uploaded pictures were then turned into a slideshow. Then, the students recorded their narratives into their computers to coincide with the slideshows of the historical figures. The historical narratives acted as a “script” for the students to reference when recording.

A convenient feature of this final activity was its flexibility. Since the final activity was a research project on a historical figure, the entire mini-unit could have been easily inserted into almost any section of the middle grades history curriculum. For example, if a middle grades American history class was studying the American Revolution, this final activity could focus on notable figures of the Revolution. If a middle grades world history class was reviewing the Enlightenment period in Europe, this final activity could be geared toward the great philosophers of that period. Even if it is not desirable to use the final activity suggested here, the first two activities on primary source analysis and multiple historical perspectives could provide a suitable background for an alternative authentic historical and critical thinking assessment activity. Such alternative activities could include the use of primary sources and multiple historical perspectives.

Conclusion

The lessons and activities outlined here represent a clear shift away from the lecture, note taking, and testing methods that are synonymous with traditional social studies and history teaching; and they are not driven by history textbooks, which tend to present history content as stationary and discourage further historical investigation (Bain, 2006). While lecturing, note taking, test taking, and textbook reading certainly have an appropriate place in middle grades social studies instruction, when it comes to teaching middle grades students about historical thinking and getting them to think more critically about the information and sources they encounter, teachers...
must implement activities that stimulate historical inquiry (Goldenberg & Tally, 2005). By employing the lessons and activities delineated here, teachers will allow students to develop genuine historical and critical thinking skills. The development of such skills is vital in the middle grades, because history and social studies coursework at the high school level will demand these skills from students. More important, students with sound historical thinking skills are, by definition, sound critical thinkers (Levstik & Barton, 2005; Martin & Wineburg, 2008; Wineburg, 2001), and critical thinking is a crucial characteristic of competent citizens in a global, multicultural, and democratic society such as ours (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Paul & Elder, 2000). If middle grades students enhance their historical and critical thinking skills today, they will be aware of and prepared for the academic, civic, and societal challenges that await them in the years ahead (Facione, 2004).

### Extensions

Teachers in all subject areas should provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking. In what ways is historical thinking in social studies similar to or different from thinking processes in other subjects?

### References


Allen, J. (1994). If this is history, why isn’t it boring? In S. Steffey & W. J. Hood (Eds.), *If this is social studies, why isn’t it boring?* (pp. 1–12). York, MA: Stenhouse.


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