Experiencing World History through the Eyes of Ordinary Women

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During an impromptu conversation with freshmen in my world history class, one of my students, Craig, spoke up and said, “History is one of the classes that is the most interesting… but I don’t see it as one of the most important.” I was initially taken aback by his comment. I took great pride in the lessons I taught, blending critical reading, analysis, and writing skills with factual content. I believed I was teaching my students to empathize with the people we studied in history. However, it became painfully obvious that my efforts were not instilling my students with a sense of value for history.

My students’ views on history inspired me to reflect on my own teaching and to explore historical thinking. I decided to research the impact of a three-step approach to reading primary documents on my ninth grade world history students. I was curious as to whether developing and using a consistent series of strategies with various primary documents could teach my students to think like historians. I wanted them to investigate documents as a detective looking for clues and then build a case with the evidence, much like a lawyer presenting arguments to a jury.

In addition to the teaching strategies, I was also interested in providing my world history students with a multiple-perspective view of history by incorporating more women’s social history. Therefore, I selected documents written by ordinary women from three historical periods we studied during our spring semester. I found a set of letters written by a woman to her merchant husband during the Renaissance, an interview with a peasant woman who had lived during Stalin’s rule, and a memoir of a young girl living during the Cultural Revolution in China.
One challenge with teaching students skills in historical thinking is providing them with a framework to guide their thinking. I hoped that by using the same strategies with each document, the students would become more comfortable with the scaffolding and focus more of their energy on interpreting the documents. The strategies I included in my three-step approach were a reading web (to enhance comprehension and analysis), a Socratic seminar (discussion), and an historical essay. These strategies were designed to work incrementally, guiding the students through deeper analysis of the document with each method.

I focused on three aspects of historical thinking explored by Grant: historical knowledge, historical significance, and historical empathy. Historical knowledge is the understanding of the interpretive nature of history involving multiple perspectives, selecting information, and the emphasis of the historian. Historical significance is determining which information from a document or event would be important for illuminating the broader historical record. Historical empathy is “imagination restrained by evidence” or attempting to understand the viewpoint, attitude, beliefs, and/or values of the historical figure. Each strategy was designed to gradually deepen the students’ understanding of the document by building on the previous strategy. The reading web would help them investigate the document and consider issues pertaining to author bias or point of view; the seminar would encourage them in historical empathy as we considered the viewpoint of the author; and the essay would allow them to synthesize the historical significance of a person in a particular time period by comparing the evidence in the document to the students’ prior knowledge.

**Reading Historical Documents**

In order to help students move beyond summarizing the documents to analyzing the subtext, I designed a graphic reading guide. I created a “document web” based on the idea of a concept map or graphic organizer. I have labeled the three representations as simple, one-word questions:

(See Handout A, which I have adapted from its original web form for the purposes of simplification.)

- **What?** (What is the document describing?)
- **How?** (How was the document written?)
- **Why?** (Why was the document written?)

I believed that by using this “document web” the students would be better able to organize their thinking. Each question is designed to encourage the student to consider not only what the document is saying, but also why and how the document was created.

My first task was to get the students interested in reading the documents. Prior to having students analyze the documents, I had them each write a journal entry responding to an imaginary situation that I described. For the letters, I asked the students to imagine they were historians who found a bundle of letters in an attic in Nuremberg, Germany, dated during the late 1500s. They should write a list of questions they would want to explore with the letters. I listed their comments on the board, which prompted some discussion about which history was important. In each class several students wrote a question to the effect of “Was X important?” We discussed what “important” meant to them and whether or not famous people were the only ones about whom history is worth writing.

For Irina, the Russian peasant living under Stalin, the journal topic was to imagine that they (as Soviet Union historians) had learned that this peasant woman would agree to be interviewed. They were then to write ten questions they would ask her. We were able to discuss “open ended” questions and “leading the witness” aspects of interviewing. This sparked the students’ interest in reading Irina’s interview.

**Interview with Irina Ivanovna**


Irina Ivanovna, what did you think of Lenin after he died? Had anything changed? Do you remember?

Everyone praised him for one thing or another, said that Lenin had given us freedom. Let’s say they began to produce those things—the things you plow with—plows, and father bought one. Up to that point they made them in the local smithy, and they didn’t work very well. Then Father bought…. Ah, I plowed with an iron plow. The horses moved easily. Father bought a winnower. There hadn’t been any. There hadn’t been anything, anywhere. Even if you had the money, you couldn’t buy a thing. Nothing at all. And then winnowers appeared. In our large village we had to make do with only two or three winnowers, and that’s how we winnowed the grain. It wasn’t easy. And then we got our own winnower. But we only had it for about two years, and then they took it from us. Collectivization began, and that was it. That was the end. They took the plow, too, and the winnower. Everything. And we were ruined. We were left with nothing.

And how were things for you on the kolkhoz (a collective farm established by Stalin)? What sort of work did you do there? Hard work?

Oh, it was wartime, and then after the war…. hard work, day and night. In the daytime, we would reap—there were only us women to do it—and at night, when we had already cut the rye, we would drive home the threshing machine. We had to do the threshing at night on the threshing floor ‘cause we had to get them the grain fast. To the ‘levator. All the time we were taking grain to the ‘levator. In the daytime, the whole day long, we would reap, and at night, as soon as evening came, we would go to the threshing floor to thresh the grain. How many rows…. I was short, so I used to thresh three or four rows. No, more—five, almost six, more. The kids, all three of them, would be asleep, and I couldn’t get into the house. “Now don’t hook it shut,” I’d tell them. I would knock and knock, but they just wouldn’t open up. I would take a thin pole and unfasten the hook. The hut was small, and it stood all by itself, on the edge of the village. I would shake and shake the children, and they would wake up. That’s how it was. Nights were like that.
all during the harvest. I would say: “Don’t make me work at night. Look, I have kids.” “The kids aren’t going anywhere. Get on with it, work.” It was hard. We worked day and night. There were no men, after all!

With the memoir of the Chinese woman, Ji-Li, I took a different approach. In the first chapter, Ji-Li describes a public humiliation of teachers with posters called da-zi-bao. The posters accused individuals of maintaining capitalist values which Mao wanted to eradicate. To introduce this concept, I showed a clip from the movie The Last Emperor in which there is a public demonstration by the Red Guard where teachers and writers are paraded with da-zi-bao hanging around their necks. I showed the clip without explanation, then asked the students to hypothesize about what was happening. After they wrote their hypotheses in their journals, I wrote some of their ideas on the board. I then told them we would read a story of someone who lived through this time period to test their hypotheses.

**Memoir of Ji-Li Jiang**


A few days later, when I got to school, I told them we were going to post da-zi-bao on the houses of some of the bourgeoisie living near the school. The class was divided into two groups. One was going to confront Old Qian, a stern and frightening man who stalked our alleys speaking to no one. The other group was going to challenge Jiang Xi-wen, an unpleasant woman who lived in a house behind the school yard. I was assigned to the group going to Jiang Xi-wen’s house. Of course, this was not coincidence, not at all. They all knew that she was my relative. …

Aunt Xi-wen was really my father’s cousin, but I always called her Aunt. She was at least fifty years old, but she dressed stylishly and wore makeup, so she looked closer to thirty. I knew my classmates did not like her one bit. “What makes her think she’s so wonderful?” they sneered. “Just look at those clothes she got from her sister in America. Look at her makeup. Bourgeois! Disgusting!” I had always disapproved of her too. Chairman Mao taught us that “inner beauty is much more valuable than outward appearance.” How could she ignore what Chairman Mao said? Song Po-po had told me that even Aunt Xi-wen’s youngest son often grumbled about his mother’s behavior.

…Du Hai took the lead. “Down with the bourgeois Jiang Xi-wen! Long live Mao Ze-dong Thought!” he shouted. We repeated the slogans. Then Yin Lan-lan recited, “Our great leader, Chairman Mao, has taught us, ‘Every reactionary is the same; if you do not hit him, he will not fall. This is also like sweeping the floor; as a rule, where the broom does not reach, the dust will not vanish by itself.’” Her voice was loud and forceful. “Today, we proletarian revolutionary young guards have come to revolt against you bourgeoisie. Jiang Xi-wen, this is our da-zi-bao. You are to post it on your door now.” She shook the white paper in front of aunt Xi-wen’s nose.

… I did not want her to see me. I bent down and pretended to tie my shoelaces. But I could not block out her voice, dry, hoarse, and trembling. “…Refusal to let students pick mulberry leaves was an attack on proletarian students…The more you try to improve your outward appearance, the filthier your heart becomes…Your black bourgeois bones are clearly visible to our proletarian eyes…Remold yourself conscientiously…” I kept my eyes on my shoelaces and tried not to listen.

…On the way back to school everyone joked and laughed at Aunt Xi-wen’s humiliation. “Jiang Ji-li, your aunt really lost face today, didn’t she?” Du Hai shouted. I could feel every classmate staring at me. I raised my head and said loudly, “It serves her right.” I made an effort to laugh and joke along with the others.

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Studying Magdalena’s letter (the woman living during the Renaissance) took almost a full 90-minute block, including the anticipatory activity.

Letter from Magdalena Paumgartner to her husband Balthasar Paumgartner


18 April 1594, in Nuremberg,

Honest, kind, dear Paumgartner,

… The wine, or rather new wine, came the Sunday after your departure. Brother-in-law Jorg has calculated the cost as 23 gulden per large measure, no less. I have sent one to (your) father, to Wilhelm Imhoff, and to Wilhelm Kress. Since (Paul) Belhaim did not want one, Kress asked me to let him have it. So I have laid aside only one for ourselves. One for (Wolf) Rhelein; the Pfauds one. When I get the bill for the excise tax, which Jorg calculated on each measure, I will send each one a bill for his share.

Otherwise the matter is settled. I did, however, have a fight with the wine controller. When I sent him the money, 34 gulden, he sent it back to me, tore up the original bill, and said he had to make a new one because an additional barrel bought at the market must be added. I twice sent word to him that I knew of no such purchase and that you bought no wine whatsoever at the market, otherwise one would know about it. Finally, brother-in-law Jorg went there, returned and asked if perhaps Hans had taken a barrel on your behalf, and it then dawned on me for the first time that the barrel we had drunk so quickly you had gotten with Hans. So I had to send him 40¾ gulden. He informed me that it had been a good nine weeks since he had given you the bill for that barrel. I am puzzled why you have been so slow to pay it.

Kind dear treasure, I have nothing more to write at this time, except that the delivery of invitations (to brother Paul’s wedding) has gone well, four happy tables (of guests have promised to come). May God grant that the wedding goes well.

Friendly and warm greetings to you, dearest treasure: may God keep you in his grace.

— Magdalena Balthasar Paumgartner
I modeled “thinking aloud” about the document, giving the students suggestions. I wrote my web on the board and they made one on paper. The next class I told them I was turning them loose to be historians. They got Magdalená’s last three letters to read in groups of four and they were to complete a second web on the back of the first one. They could combine the information from the last three letters all onto one web. We followed the same format for the next two documents, reading the document aloud in class and the students then completing their handouts in groups of four. In both cases, I provided a great deal of prompting, hinting, and encouraging. For the final document, I had them work on the web alone so that I could observe their understanding of reading documents. The consistent use of the webs helped them glean the basic information of the women as well as the simple understanding of the purposes behind the documents. However, a more in-depth analysis of the perspectives of the authors was imperative. The Socratic seminar was intended to provide this opportunity.

**Taking on Historical Perspective**

The Socratic seminar allowed the entire class to discuss the perspective of the author through one central question. Though the reading web introduced this crucial aspect of historical thinking by asking “how” and “why” the documents were created, it did not encourage them to take on the perspective of the author in much depth. The class discussion allowed the students to share their initial impressions with their classmates and generate further questions by probing the documents. The seminar gave me an opportunity to remind them of their prior knowledge of the time period, challenge their assumptions about the beliefs and practices of the people and help them avoid “present mindedness.” This style of discussion was an excellent match for this type of document analysis because “participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information.” One critical component to a quality Socratic seminar is the opening question as it is designed to probe the participants thinking about the text in a deeper way. My choices of questions were as follows:

**Magdalená’s Letters**
- Was Magdalená happy?

**Irina’s Interview**
- What would Irina say was the greatest contributing factor to her suffering?

**Ji-Li’s Memoir**
- Was Ji-Li a true revolutionary?
- What would she do next?

These discussion sessions allowed us as a class to explore the texts at a deeper level, adding that crucial layer of historical empathy to the analysis of the documents. The format of sitting in a circle, with no hand-raising but rather people speaking when they had a question or comment, and students hearing comments from group members, all contributed to a rich, deep discussion. Once we conducted a thoughtful discussion, I assessed the students understanding of the documents through a writing assignment on an historical question.

**Writing Historical Narrative**

An historian weaves a story by using threads from the primary source material; this is both analytical and creative. I had the students write a response to an historical question that required them to create a picture of the time period we studied using both the information from the documents and their prior knowledge. The question they answered was the same for each document: What can we learn about life in the Renaissance from Magdalená’s experience? (Appendix B) We worked for one class period creating an outline where all students followed the same five-paragraph format, but decided on three or four topics they felt they wanted to explore and found two or three quotes from the text to support their topics. They were comparing and contrasting the experience of the author to their broader historical understanding. They experienced first-hand the difficult process of selecting and choosing data to form their narratives. They realized historical information is often unavailable, biased, or even inaccurate, thus influencing the historical account. They constantly had to take on the historical perspective of the people of that time period in order to paint a clear picture.

The students’ answers served as an assessment of their abilities to critically interpret the historical documents. In answering the questions, the students were forced to take on the role of historians as they analyzed what information was important, trustworthy, or insightful, and compared the evidence in the document to their prior knowledge. For example, with Magdalená’s letters, their task was to describe life for women during the Renaissance based on her letters. In order to be successful, they had to demonstrate several basic skills. First, the students needed to analyze basic evidence in the document by evaluating what information was important, communicate the main subject of the documents, and explain what evidence could be generalized to the people of the time compared with aspects that made Magdalená’s circumstances unique. Second, students had to demonstrate an ability to take on the perspective of the author of the document by capturing the writer’s “voice” and tone as well as communicate an understanding of how and why the document was created and the influence those factors could have on the authenticity of the evidence. Third, they needed to consider the perspective of the general population during that time period by analyzing when the information in the document was consistent with their prior knowledge. My students found Magdalená’s letter particularly interesting because it demonstrated her role in the business and challenged my students’ understanding of the place of women during the Renaissance.

**Meta-cognition**

To analyze the impact that this experience in historical thinking had on my students, I asked them to share their impressions of the documents and strategies. Included with each phase of the three-step approach, I asked the students to reflect meta-cognitively about their thought processes in an “historian’s journal.” Because I was challenging my students to think in significantly different ways, I wanted to make them...
Handout A
Reading Guide for Historical Documents

Good reading is about asking questions of your sources. Even if you believe you can’t arrive at the answers, imagining possible answers will aid your comprehension. Reading primary sources requires that you use your historical imagination. This process is all about your willingness and ability to ask questions of the material, imagine possible answers, and explain your reasoning. This reading guide is designed for you to organize your thinking on paper so we can both evaluate your progress. It was designed from a research study on historians and how they read historical texts.

For the purposes of publication, this guide has been adapted from its original web form.

Historical Document Analysis

**HOW WAS THIS DOCUMENT CREATED?**

What **type** of document is this?

Date?

Author?

How did the **author** get the information?

**WHAT DOES THIS DOCUMENT TEACH US?**

List 3-5 facts included in the document that enrich your understanding.

List 2-3 questions raised because of what is excluded from the document.

Describe the **tone of the document**. Provide evidence (short quotes) to support your ideas.

**WHY WAS THIS DOCUMENT CREATED?**

Purpose for document?

Intended **audience**?

**Point of view** in document?

Can you find any other documents to corroborate or contradict the information in this document?
Guide for Response to an Historical Question: Magdalena’s Letters

Once an historian has read and evaluated historical documents, the next stage is for him or her to present that information to the general public. This brings a good deal of responsibility to tell the truth as best as possible. Having thoroughly read, discussed, and contemplated the four letters Magdalena wrote to Balthasar, you should answer this question: **What can these documents tell us about the life of women in a similar situation during the Renaissance?** You will need to select what you find to be the most significant pieces of evidence from the letters to explain your position. Remember, an historian must be true to the documents, so you should refer to the letters extensively. Below is a suggested format for your response:

**Section 1**
Your answer to the question based upon the letters. Choose aspects of the documents you think provide insight into the lives of women in the Renaissance. Include the evidence you think best captures her situation and is of significance to us historically. What information does she provide that we can generalize to others during the Renaissance? What information is unique to her situation? What information in the letters is consistent with what you know about the Renaissance? What information is new?

This section should be organized as follows:
- **Introduction:** Explain what the letters teach us, include all the aspects you will discuss.
- **Include a paragraph for each aspect of her life that you have selected and support with evidence from the letters. Discuss the limitations of the letters as well. See the questions in the above paragraph.**
- **Conclusion:** Restate the information you covered and tell us what these documents mean to us historically.

**Section 2**
Explain your experience in historical inquiry during all three stages: reading the letters using the web, Socratic seminar, and writing your paper. How did you feel about the experience? What strategies did you use in each stage? What were the successes, struggles, excitement, or frustrations? What did this experience mean for you as a student of history?

Your paper should run approximately 4-5 pages.
aware of their own thinking by having them describe their decision-making processes. If my students formally “thought about their thinking,” they would appreciate the mental shifts I was demanding at a more sophisticated level. Following their completion of each web, the students described in their journals their process of making the web by responding to questions such as: How did you decide what information to put on your web? What was the most difficult aspect of making the web? What was the most rewarding? How did this experience compare to the last web? We ended each discussion seminar with a debriefing session giving the students an opportunity to share what they felt were strengths and weaknesses in the seminar and to offer suggestions for improvement. Each essay included a metacognition section in which they explained how each strategy had impacted their understanding of the woman’s document (See Handout B). The students benefited greatly from exploring their own thinking and increased their appreciation for their challenging tasks as historians. In many ways, I feel this was one of the most important aspects of teaching historical thinking and strongly urge teachers to incorporate this into their own instructional practices.

Implications of Three-Step Approach
It became evident that the three-step approach to evaluating primary source documents had changed my students’ view of history. They openly discussed their newfound appreciation for the historian’s complex job of piecing together facts from fragmented documents into a cohesive story—one that is as true to the historical facts and context as possible. They also became more connected to the time periods studied through the women’s personal stories. As one student said, “I may not remember all the facts we learned, but I’ll never forget these women.” The students recognized that the political, economic, and cultural events of a time period affected people in very personal ways. History is a story of people and these women’s accounts made that very real and tangible for my students.

The students also understood that history is a collection of stories, rather than one never changing narrative. For example, by reading Ji-Li’s memoir, they came to recognize that people disagreed with Chairman Mao’s motives, were affected in different ways, and faced unique fears. They also saw that historians shape the narrative of history by selecting facts each historian feels are important. The students said they appreciated that historians were very knowledgeable, but they said they would be more critical readers of historical documents in the future. They recognized that because they and their fellow students had disagreed on the motives, beliefs, attitudes, or significance of each historical account, historians must do the same. The students said they now felt a greater respect for the challenging role of historians.

Notes

References


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