



Teaching the Mystery of History

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Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up the next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they [the students] scribbled down names and dates, and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.¹

HISTORY LESSONS FOR YOUNG HARRY POTTER and his compatriots were devoid of inquiry, imagination, empathy, interpretation, and personal meaning. Such history instruction is not only the stuff of fiction, unfortunately. Asking one class of fifth grade students the question “What does it mean to be a history student in your school?” provided a sleepy series of answers: “Study, take notes ... To hear stories, do worksheets and study events ... To learn about history facts and ideas ... It means applying yourself, paying attention, and scoring well on tests and quizzes.”

In a history class, students typically “listen to the teacher explain the day’s lesson, use the textbook, and take tests. Sometimes they memorize information or read stories about events and people. They seldom work with other students, use original documents, write term papers or discuss the significance of what they are studying.”²

Meaningful History

The history classroom should be transformative, not boring. Students should be challenged to do more than listen

to a string of facts and then recite. We believe that

1: Powerful and meaningful history teaching is founded upon “systematic and sophisticated literacy work”;³

2: Student abilities to comprehend history and think historically are based upon “a set of skills educators can nurture, not an ability whose development they must wait for or whose absence they must lament”;⁴

3: Effective teachers are concerned with both course content and student learning processes;⁵ and

4: Active teaching (presenting information creatively, structuring discourse, and monitoring work on assignments) increases student gains on achievement tests more than individual student work on curriculum materials.⁶

A meaningful history classroom is a place where the teacher provides students with conceptual frames of reference to practice the doing of history.⁷ To create such a classroom is by no means an easy task, especially in today’s political environment, where a standardized curriculum is stressed. Educators and social studies critics Dianne Ravitch and Chester Finn claim that many students do not acquire historical knowledge from their exposure to history in schools.⁸ Recent state-mandated standardized assessments in history and social science appear to verify this claim. For example, during the first two years of the Virginia Standards of Learning Assessments, students have scored lower on the history and social studies sections than on any of the other core subjects (English, math, and science).⁹ When confronted with such results, we must recognize the need to

re-examine our own approaches to the teaching of history.

Fundamental Skills

To understand the relationship between past and present, students must practice the fundamental skills of the historian. These fundamental skills include: (a) chronological thinking; (b) historical analysis of cause and effect; and (c) discussion, debate, and persuasive writing. We provide below a lesson plan, “The Mystery of Sam Smiley,” that may be used to begin to address such skills with students. It supports the development of strategies that enable students to: (a) explore historical questions; (b) comprehend and work with ideas from various sources; (c) recognize and attempt to reconcile conflicting accounts; and (d) construct explanations and narratives that reveal an understanding of historical context and chronology. This lesson could be used as an introduction before any unit of study that utilizes primary documents and asks students to participate in analyzing them. It is appropriate, with some modification, for both upper elementary and middle school social studies classrooms.

Practicing Historiography

Historiography is “The writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods” (Webster’s). The Mystery of Sam Smiley reveals to students that “history is less than the past,” in the sense that we can never know everything that actually happened.¹⁰ Participating in the mystery highlights the fact

Lesson Plan: The Mystery of Sam Smiley

Overview of the Lesson

- ▶ Grade Level: Fifth through eighth
- ▶ Time Required: Two 50-minute periods
- ▶ Materials: Use the Handouts that follow in the Pullout section
- ▶ Read aloud. “Sam Smiley has disappeared without a trace, under mysterious circumstances. We will break up the class into groups of three to four students. Each group will become a team of detectives. The teams will sift through available evidence gathered from different sources. Each team will create a profile of Sam Smiley, construct a time line of Sam’s final day, and produce a report detailing events that might explain Sam’s disappearance.”

Scaffold the Investigation

Provide each group with an evidence analysis chart (see Pullout, handout 1) to aid in their detective work. Students can use the guide to catalogue evidence in preparation for

- building a profile of Sam Smiley.
- creating a timeline to trace the events of Sam’s final day.
- trying to explain Sam’s disappearance.

Follow a Trail of Evidence

Provide each group with a range of sources including: six eyewitness statements (handout 2); a local bus schedule (handout 3); the content of Sam’s wallet (handout 4); and a map showing where Sam was last seen (handout 5). In elementary classrooms, allow teams of students to read and work with one handout (at least 10 minutes) before passing out the next one. Middle school classes could be given the evidence all at once. (Younger students often feel overwhelmed with the amount of material they have to evaluate if it is presented all at once).

Ask Critical Questions

Read aloud to students: “As detectives, we consider carefully all of the available sources of information. When trying to understand an event that happened in the past, we put all the information that we have collected into one place. Then we can compare and contrast different bits of evidence, see if any patterns emerge, and look for hints at what might still be missing. Apply the following four questions to each of your sources of evidence in the Mystery of Sam Smiley.”

Handout 1 instructs teams of detectives to analyze the information provided by each source:

- 1) Observations: What does this source tell us directly about Sam Smiley and the events leading up to his sudden disappearance? If the source is a witness, what did he or she directly observe or have knowledge of?
- 2) Inferences: What does the evidence from this source suggest about the personality of Sam Smiley and the event leading up to his sudden disappearance? (Inferences are like hunches. They are ideas that may lead somewhere, but more evidence is needed to back them up.)
- 3) Gaps: What does this evidence not tell me about Sam Smiley and events leading to his sudden disappearance? (What is missing in the information provided by this source?)
- 4) Questions: What new questions arise from the evidence I just gathered? What questions can I ask witnesses that might help them remember even more about that evening? What further evidence should I be looking for?

As students examine each individual source, encourage them to evaluate the utility of each source in the light of the above four categories, and also to examine the consistency of information across sources. Moving between working groups, the teacher can begin to act as Chief Detective, gathering observations and discussing inferences. The Chief Detective can

spur the detectives to do their best work and ask provocative questions, such as, “Why are some pieces of information interesting, while other pieces of information seem unimportant?”

Report the Findings

Groups create and present their profile of Sam and timeline of Sam’s day. The Chief Detective can contrast the work of various teams, pointing out any differences in the reported timing of certain events as well as different impressions of Sam as a person. The Chief may request that each team explain its results to resolve such discrepancies. The Chief then asks teams to read their final reports, which summarize the evidence and provide a best guess at the events that may have led to Sam’s disappearance. Again the teacher evaluates the degree of consistency, or lack thereof, in the final reports.

Recognize Imperfection

At this point in the lesson, students often ask the question, “So what really happened to Sam?” The surprise is that there are several possible answers, and no clear winner, given the information in the handouts. There are several reasonable scenarios (hypotheses) for what might have happened to Sam, but there is not enough evidence to support one as the most likely.

The need for a teacher-centered “correct” answer reflects students’ predisposition toward seeing history as little more than a neatly packaged and easily consumed, if not particularly satisfying, chronicle of facts. A response from the teacher, “Well, we have all seen the same evidence. I know as much as you do about what possibly could have happened,” can perplex and frustrate students. Such consternation is appropriate, since a key point of the simulation is for students to begin to develop an awareness and image of what the actual process of historical research can feel and look like. It can be frustrating, and it can look messy, but at some point, a crucial understanding—or maybe a new and central question—can arise.

A teacher-centered answer to the mystery would deny the complexity of what it means to do historical research. A fixed answer would also prohibit a future exploration of such issues as: What is history? Who writes (or “produces”) history? Who is history for? And what is the point of history? (Questions, particularly the latter, which teachers tend to hear from frustrated students, rather than choose to ask of their students). The Mystery of Sam Smiley creates an opportunity within a social studies classroom for students to begin to wrestle with these questions. By participating in the creation of a coherent narrative, they can glimpse at their role in the process of doing history.

Ask Critical Questions (Again)

Ask questions about each team’s particular construction of Sam Smiley’s story:

- How did you actually come to your conclusions?
- How did you use the evidence to look for clues?
- What strategies and skills did your group use to come to your current conclusion?
- What other forms of evidence would help you develop a clearer picture of what happened to Sam?
- What problems did you face in trying to solve the mystery?
- How is the mystery of Sam Smiley like doing historical research?
- What does it mean to study history?

Conclude the lesson by asking students what they liked or disliked about this activity. Do they think that any of the skills they used today will be useful in understanding other events in history?

that histories are constructed. Researchers use fragments of the past to make connections and create an understanding of events. Indeed, if more evidence is found, or the evidence is interpreted and used differently, then a very different reading or depiction of the event may arise.

Listening as students explain the logic and reasoning behind their answers, we hear them break from the typical opinion that history is a static, neatly packaged, and unquestionable record of the past. In contrast, student comments following the lesson included: “History is like solving a mystery about the past” ... “You have to dig around to find out” ... “History means trying to find answers by looking at different pieces of evidence” ... “It’s all based on evidence” ... “It involves using detective skills to question and use sources. Because there are limited facts and possibilities” ... “Historians aren’t always sure about what happened, so they have to go with their intuition and support [ideas] with evidence which could get hard sometimes.” Ultimately the extent to which an interpretation is accepted rests with how well the historian has marshaled the evidence into a narrative that can withstand critical inquiry from knowledgeable and historically aware citizens.

Conclusion

At the 2001 National Council for the Social Studies Annual Conference, James Loewen, historian and author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, stressed the importance of teaching historiography.¹¹ “The Mystery of Sam Smiley” supports this assertion; it provides the teacher with a conceptual framework that allows students to acquire the understandings and abilities necessary to begin to examine and practice the doing of history. The simulation serves as an entry point through which students can continue to participate in projects and lessons that are not merely “yoked to the textbook, [and] captive to a talk and chalk.”¹² Creating opportunities to engage deeply with the processes of doing history allows students to begin to develop a sense of mindfulness as to the purpose, power, and utility of studying history that goes well beyond an ability

to recite dates, names and places. As Peter Lee, co-director of the Concepts of history and teaching Approaches (CHATA) Project contends, it is “absurd...to say that school children know any history if they have no understanding of how historical knowledge is attained, its relationship to evidence...Without an understanding of what makes a claim historical, there is nothing to distinguish such an ability from the ability to recite sagas, legends, myths, and poems.”¹³

Notes

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 133.
2. D. Ravitch and C. E. Finn, *What Do Our 17 Year Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 194; See also M. B. Baxter, R. H. Ferrell, and J. E. Wiltz, *The Teaching of American History in High Schools* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1991); J. P. Shaver, O. L. Davis, and S. W. Helburn, “The Status of Social Studies Education: Impressions from Three NSF Studies,” *Social Education* 43, no. 2 (1979): 150-159.
3. C. Riley, “Evidential Understanding, Period, Knowledge and the Development of Literacy: A Practical Approach to ‘Layers of Inference’ for Key Stage 3,” *Teaching History* 97 (November 1999): 6-12.
4. K. Barton, “‘That’s a Tricky Piece’: Children’s Understanding of Historical Time in Northern Ireland” (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA, April 13-18, 1998): 80; See also R. Ashby, and P. Lee, “Discussing the Evidence,” *Teaching History* 48 (1987): 13-17. R. Ashby, P. Lee, and A. Dickinson “How Children Explain the ‘Why’ of History: The Chata Research Project on Teaching History,” *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (1997): 17-21; L. Levstik, and K. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, 2nd ed. (Rahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001).
5. J. R. Fraenkel, “Characteristics and Behaviors of Effective Social Studies Teachers in Selected Countries” (Paper presented at the 74th Annual Conference of National Council for the Social Studies. Phoenix, AZ, November, 1994).
6. Jere Brophy and T. L. Good, “Teacher Behavior and Student Achievement” in M.C. Wittrock, ed., *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 328-375; A. C. Porter and J. Brophy, “Synthesis of Research on Good Teaching: Insights From the Work of the Institute for Research on Teaching,” *Educational Leadership* 45, no. 5 (1988): 74-85; T. L. Good, and J. Brophy, *Looking into Classrooms*, 7th ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997).
7. K. Barton, “History: It Can be Elementary,” *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (1997): 13-16; P. Lee, “Making Sense of Historical Accounts” *Canadian Social Studies* 32, no. 1 (1998): 52-54; Levstik and Barton.
8. Ravitch and Finn.
9. R. N. Weber and H. R. Carmichael, “New Virginia Battlefields: New History Standards Generate Controversy,” *Virginia Journal of Education* 91, no. 4 (1996): 16-18.
10. K. Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991): 13.

11. James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995).
12. W. C. Hope, “It’s Time to Transform Social Studies Teaching” *The Social Studies* 87, no. 4 (1996): 149-151.
13. Lee, 48-49; See also Ashby, Lee, and Dickinson.

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