Biography from a Variety of Perspectives

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Understanding multiple perspectives—how different people see one another and events now and in the past—is often cited as a goal of social studies educators. When upper elementary students deal with a range of perspectives on people and events, “it begins the process of empathy and sets students up to become ‘bigger than themselves,’ to live more widely than their young lives can allow.”

Understanding the perspectives of people from the past is “a fundamental aspect of historical understanding.” In a survey of articles appearing in Social Studies and the Young Learner from 1988 to 2000, editor Sherry Field, concluded that “elementary social studies teachers understand that children can and do learn to take perspectives at a young age.” Like these teachers and researchers, I have observed that upper elementary school children are able to consider multiple perspectives of people and events from the past if they are given teacher support and sources of information that stimulate their thinking.

This article describes one way to encourage children to consider a variety of perspectives on a person’s life story, using a literary model as a guide to thinking about the past. To be useful in the social studies classroom, a work of literature must support thinking about powerful themes and ideas in ways that extend children’s learning of social studies.” It must not distract children or lead them into superficially related activities.

Bessie Coleman as Seen by Those Who Knew Her

We selected Talkin’ About Bessie, a Notable Social Studies Trade Book and a Coretta Scott King Award winning book, to teach students about perspective-taking. This book clearly presents different perspectives on the life of the famous black aviator Bessie Coleman. It begins with a brief introduction describing the context of Bessie’s world—a time of Jim Crow laws and racial segregation, but also a time when the Wright brothers were making aviation history.

Following the introduction is a brief statement from the author explaining that the book is a fictionalized account of a wake—the day when family and friends gather to mourn Bessie Coleman’s death. It is a series of brief descriptions of Bessie “written” by many different people who knew her—including family members, friends, an employer, a classmate, a newspaper reporter, and others. Through their eyes, readers are able to “see” different aspects of Bessie’s life and times and, in the end, construct a complex understanding of her life. This book shows, in a very concrete way, that different people saw Bessie Coleman differently.

After students have read Talkin’ About Bessie and the class has discussed its narrative style, the teacher challenges students to compose a similar biographical account of a historical figure from multiple perspectives, applying the same literary technique to another historical person. For example, one student, Maeghan, chose to study the life of another famous woman—champion swimmer Gertrude Ederle. She explored what other people thought about Ederle’s ambition and accomplishments, organized what she had learned, and then wrote a booklet that a person lived. In a one page, three-
paragraph description of Bessie’s world, author Nikki Grimes develops the following information:

- Paragraph 1: Bessie was born in a segregated society (her social world).
- Paragraph 2: She was a young girl when she learned about Orville and Wilbur Wright’s first successful flight (girlhood aspiration).
- Paragraph 3: She became a pilot at a time when the job meant performing death-defying stunts as a “barnstormer” (accomplishment in adulthood).

Maeghan started her own booklet by using this same three-paragraph format, as outlined on a planning sheet:

Gertrude Ederle was born in New York City in 1906, at a time when _______.

As a young girl, Gertrude (or Trudy, for short) almost drowned when _______.

Gertrude Ederle was America’s champion swimmer because _______.

This framework enabled Maeghan to tell what she knew about the historical context and, in turn, provide her readers with some necessary background information (figure 1). Maeghan’s first paragraph explains how women were treated in 1906. Her second paragraph describes a defining moment in Trudy’s childhood—learning to swim. Her third paragraph tells about how, as an adult, she swam the English Channel and was celebrated as a champion.

**Step 3: Create Multiple Perspectives.** After carefully examining the multiple perspectives offered in *Talkin’ About Bessie*, Maeghan listed some of the people who could have commented on Gertrude Ederle’s life, including Gertrude’s mother, father, sister, first trainer, second trainer, newspaper editorial writer, New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker, President Calvin Coolidge, and Trudy herself. Maeghan selected a few key people from this list (the mother and father) and planned the main part of her book around their observations.

Maeghan used a sheet of lined paper to jot down ideas about how each person might remember about an event in Trudy’s life, followed by a brief final comment or remark that person might make. She also sketched her ideas for illustrations—one small illustration to accompany the written text and one full-page illustration.

**Interpreting the Evidence**

A look at some of the pages in Maeghan’s finished booklet shows that she was not simply repeating facts she had gathered from various sources. Instead, she was interpreting these facts for herself. The passage she wrote from the point of view of Trudy’s mother and its accompanying illustration (figure 2) show that Maeghan had made up her mind about discrepancies between the mother’s and the father’s recollections concerning how Trudy had learned to swim. Weighing the conflicting information, Maeghan found the account in *America’s Champion Swimmer* by David Adler to be more credible than that found on the website. Maeghan’s writing and illustration about Trudy’s father (figure 3) echoes Adler’s view that Trudy’s father taught her how to swim by throwing her into the water with a rope around her waist and encouraging her to paddle like a dog.

According to Adler, Trudy’s mother had once described her as “just a plain home girl.” Maeghan saw this phrase as strong evidence of her mother’s reluctance to put Trudy in the limelight. Maeghan eagerly sifted and evaluated the evidence from the book and websites, a process that author Russell Freedman describes this way: “It’s impossible to write about anyone, any event, in any period of time, without in some way imposing, even unconsciously, your own standards, your own values. You simply can’t avoid that.” Maeghan was asserting her right to interpret the facts as she understood them. And while this stance may not be the last word about who taught Gertrude Ederle to swim, it provided an invaluable opening for student and teacher to discuss conflicting sources—an important experience for students to have, beginning in elementary school.

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**History Seen Through Many Eyes**

This list is a sampling of literature (historical fiction) for young adults that employs multiple or unconventional perspectives.

- Garland, Sherry. *Voices of the Alamo*. New York: Scholastic, 2000. The Alamo, from 1500 to the present, as described by a Payaya maiden, a conquistador, a monk, a Spanish soldier, a Tejano rancher, and others.


Gertrude Ederle as Seen by Those Who Knew Her

Other pages in Maeghan’s book provided perspectives of other significant people—such as Trudy’s sister Margaret, who encouraged Trudy throughout her career; her first trainer, who pulled her out of the water despite her protests; her second trainer, who successfully worked with her; a newspaper reporter, who doubted her ability to swim the Channel; New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker, who marched in the ticker-tape parade honoring her; and who lavishly praised her accomplishments; President Coolidge, who called her “America’s Best Girl.” Finally, Trudy herself “spoke” in the biography. In all, this project offered Maeghan the opportunity to consider nine different perspectives. She wrote about them all with the enthusiasm that comes from being an expert on a topic of interest.

Writing from Multiple Perspectives

Questioning historical material and writing original interpretations based on evidence and sources are beneficial activities for elementary school students. Students who are “history makers” learn new information while developing a sense of how we understand the past. After reading about Gertrude Ederle and then writing about her from nine different perspectives, Maeghan knows that which perspective one chooses to take makes a difference when learning about the past. She knows it in a way that only hands-on experience can provide.

Talkin’ About Bessie is an excellent example of a biography written from multiple perspectives. But a number of other children’s books highlight multiple or unconventional perspectives on historical people and events (listed below). These works of historical fiction make history much more than a list of “facts and dates” because they focus on how people see and understand the facts. When listening or reading these books, and subsequently using them as models for writing, students not only learn information about the past, they also have the opportunity to exercise their historical imaginations.

Notes


Websites about Gertrude Ederle, Swimming Champion

Smithsonian Press—Legacies
www.smithsonianinstitute.si/objectdescription.cfm?ID=99
This website provides an illustration of the silver trophy awarded to Gertrude Ederle by William Randolph Hearst.

Frank Deford Viewpoint
www.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2003/writers/frank_deford/12/03/viewpoint
A well known author, commentator on National Public Radio, and correspondent for HBO’s Real Sports describes Ederle’s historic swim and terms her accomplishment as “one of the grand achievements in sports.” Includes a 1926 photograph of Ederle.

NOWW: PORTRAIT Gertrude Ederle
www.noww.nl/info/port-ederle-gertrude.html
This biography of Gertrude Ederle claims it was Trudy’s mother who taught her how to swim by tying a rope around her waist. It also includes a detailed description of her reception in New York and her life after her famous swim.

A Look at Gertrude Ederle
www.msu.edu/~grawbur1/iahweb.html
This brief biography of Ederle includes several interesting photographs. Several links to additional information, including Ederle’s autobiography.

Queens Chronicle
www.zwire.com/site/news/cfm/BRD=1861&dept_id=152318&newsid=1061416l...
This obituary appeared in the Queens Chronicle, a local newspaper. The article describes her achievements but also provides information about Ederle’s connection to the borough of Queens, where she lived.

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