

Creating Biography Webs to Investigate Individuals' Historical Contexts

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Biographies, which are popular among young people, can stimulate interest in the past when students investigate the historical contexts in which individuals lived. Creating biography webs offers students structured opportunities to investigate how other people and groups influenced the personal development of specific individuals (NCSS **Strands II, III, IV, and V**).¹ Students work in pairs to complete five activities that require active problem solving and decision making. They work as partners to determine the most effective means for displaying their learning while also educating their peers.

- Activity 1: Students design original book covers for the biographies they read, enabling them to experience the interpretive nature of historical understanding, recognize the perspectives of other individuals and groups, and evaluate the individual's historical significance.
- Activity 2: Partners construct timelines to identify the events that influenced their individual's biography and make connections between elements of historical context and the ways in which they shaped personal identity.
- Activity 3: In small groups, students create a table to organize storytelling presentations and compose explanatory narrative accounts. They use physical artifacts representing significant people, issues, and events to narrate their selected individual's biography.
- Activity 4: Students use photographs

and other visual images to depict each individual's material conditions and interactions with other people and groups. Captions should describe the conditions and explain the significance of social interactions.

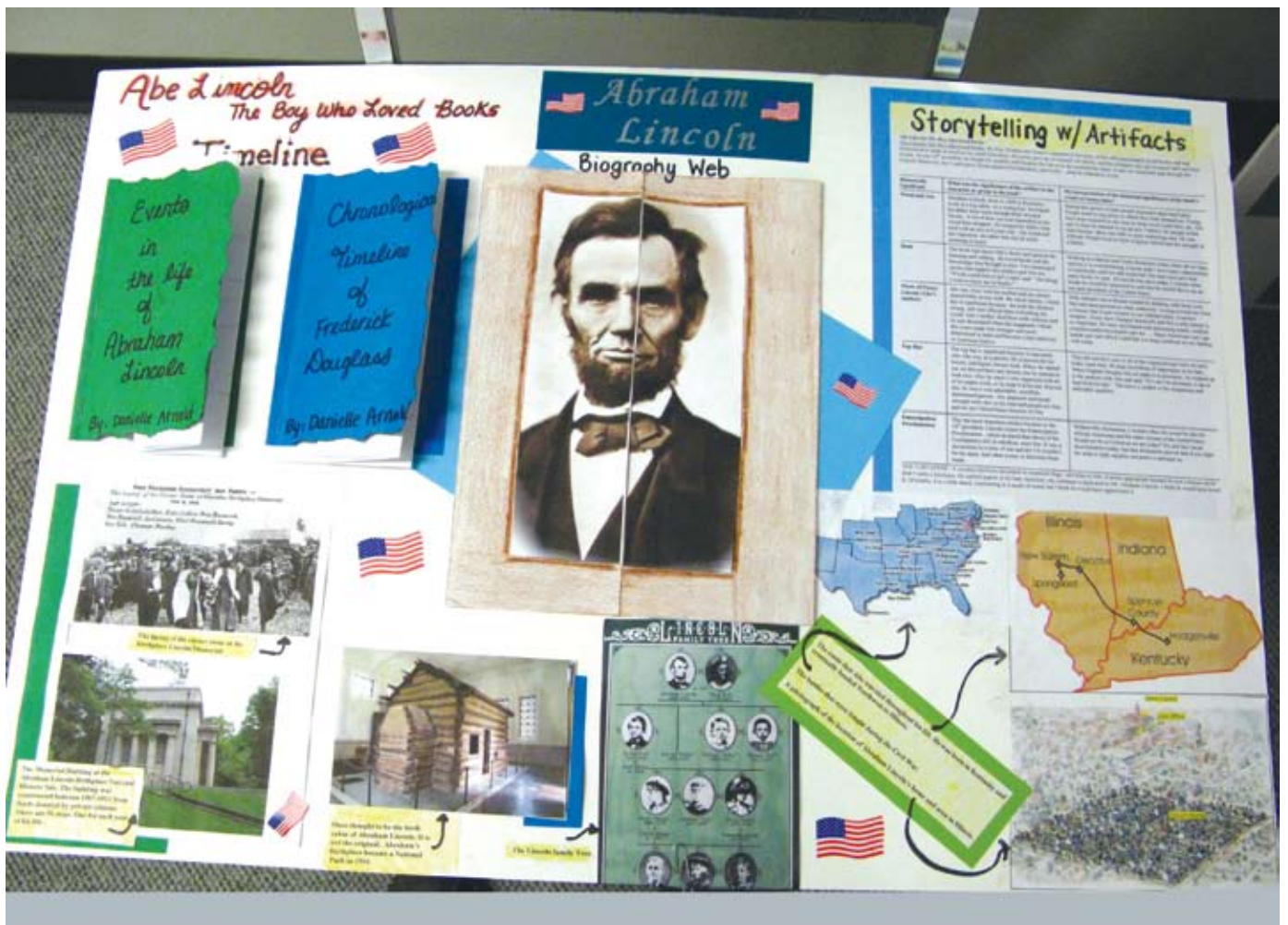
- Activity 5: Maps are made tracing the individual's movements through a series of geographical locations to create a sense of historical place.

The five products students create during these activities are mounted on standard-sized foam board (See pg. 245). Although pairs collaborate to learn about the same individual in history, each student creates his or her own biography web to ensure individual accountability, promote deliberation, and provide opportunities for all students to interpret and make use of historical evidence.² As a culminating activity, partners present their biography webs to the class and combine them to create a classroom timeline.

Reading Biographies and Designing Original Book Covers

Partners who share interest in a particular person's life, select and read biographies of the same individual. Allowing students to choose the biographies they read promotes self-directed learning and encourages ownership in the process of creating the biography webs. After reading their biographies, partners work independently of each other to design a new book cover for their biographies, illustrating the individual's historical significance through a picture or collage. On the left end-flap, they write a description of their illustration and explain how it represents the individual's historical significance. On the right end-flap, they compose an "I Am" poem as a synthesis activity that invites students to engage in empathy by stepping into the roles of their characters.³

Partners reunite to compare and contrast book covers. Teachers initiate discussion by asking the class: Why do you think so many partners did not depict the same issues or events? Do you think that one book cover is more historically accurate than the other? Help students draw the conclusion that learning history requires interpretation. Different readers will respond to biographies and understand historical events in different ways based on their own unique backgrounds and personal experiences. Explain to stu-



A completed biography web of Abraham Lincoln.

dents that understanding an individual's life requires more than reading a biography. Additional sources of evidence provide information about the historical times in which the individual lived and help to explain why people thought, felt, and acted as they did. Emphasize that interpretations of the past are not made-up stories or fiction; rather, they are pieced together like a puzzle using different, but reliable, sources of historical evidence. After comparing their "I Am" poems, partners will discover once again that—just as there is no single correct book cover or biography—there is no single correct way to think and feel about an individual after reading a biography. Understanding an individual's life and times may change after additional sources of evidence are considered.

Developing Initial and Parallel Timelines

Partners develop two timelines, each with a distinct purpose. An initial timeline is developed to record the significant events in an individual's life according to the authors of the biographies. Collaboration between partners enables students to compare information from two different biographies, generate questions that emerge from reading distinct accounts, and reconcile discrepant accounts of events and how these impacted the individual's life. Differences of opinion regarding which events to include on timelines can prompt learners to ask questions that require investigating additional sources of historical evidence. Have students make distinctions on initial timelines between events that had personal significance for the individual—such as a marriage or

loss of a loved one—and events that had public significance.⁴

To situate the individual's life within a larger historical context, students develop a second timeline that accompanies or runs parallel to the initial timeline. Parallel timelines relate the individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions to larger social issues, material conditions, and political events. Extending a parallel timeline to include events that occurred before and after an individual lived can help point to antecedents and consequences of certain events and inventions. An extended parallel timeline for the Wright Brothers, for example, might focus on significant events in the history of aviation by featuring some of the early pioneers of flight, the locations where they worked, records set and challenges overcome in achieving the goal of pow-

ered flight. Students will require teacher scaffolding to make effective use of additional sources of historical evidence. The challenge here is creating parallel timelines that feature controversial issues, mass movements, and significant events that can be related directly to the development of individuals' values, beliefs, and actions.

Storytelling Biography Using Artifacts

Partners compare their timelines and collaborate in selecting what they believe to be the five most important events in the individual's biography. Next, they identify an artifact that could be used to represent each of the five events. Students write a short paragraph describing how the artifacts represent the events and explaining the historical significance of the artifacts and events for the individual. The five significant events, five artifacts, and narrative explanations may be organized in the form of a simple table with three columns. The storytelling with artifacts table is the only identical product on both partners' biography webs, because students deliberate to achieve a consensus concerning the most significant events, appropriate artifacts, and explanatory narrative.

Once the table has been completed, partners find, draw, or make the artifacts that will be used in an oral re-telling of their individual's biography to another group of students. Artifacts are stored in a historically appropriate "container." Partners take turns presenting the artifacts—removing one item at a time to add an element of suspense and authenticity to the storytelling process—and explaining how they represent significant events in the individual's life. When finished, presenters invite members of the audience to ask questions, at which point they may refer to pictures or read passages from the biographies. If the two presenters cannot answer a question, it is written down for further investigation.

Using and Interpreting Historical Photographs

Partners display historical photographs or other visual images on their biography

webs depicting the individual interacting with other people and groups. Captions are written for each photograph that describe the kinds of people and groups with whom the individual associated. The captions explain what motivated the individual to engage in these interactions, and how different groups represented or influenced the individual's values, beliefs, and actions. Visual images such as posters, paintings, political cartoons and drawings may also be used to situate individuals within historical contexts in ways that narrative accounts may fall short.

Using Maps to Create a Sense of Historical Place

Students complete their webs by finding or making maps that can be used to trace individuals' journeys and to locate the significant events in which they participated. Biographies lend themselves to mapping because they involve the movement of people, ideas, and inventions. The routes traveled by individuals and groups may be color coded to represent journeys taken at different times and for different purposes. Students write descriptions of the individual's movements, use them as map inserts, and include symbols on their maps to indicate important people, places, and events.

Using Biography Webs to Create a Whole Class Timeline

As a synthesizing experience, all students present their biography webs to the entire class by highlighting one or two activities they believe to be important for learning about the historical context within which their individual lived. Each student selects a date on the class timeline to place his or her biography web and explains to the class why that date represents an appropriate placement. Partners may select different dates—however, they should be encouraged to use historical evidence to support their decisions.

A final class discussion addresses the entire sequence of biography webs displayed on the class timeline: How might the individuals on our timeline be classified? Can examples from history be used

to defend the assertion that changes in people's material conditions will effect their social relations, but changes in people's social relations will not impact their material conditions? Students can learn from and use timelines to sequence people, issues, and events, measure time intervals to determine how long ago an event occurred, and make hypotheses about the consequences of past events for later events and varying groups of people.

Biography webs are collections of activities that engage young learners in investigations of how individuals' values, beliefs, feelings, and actions were shaped by their interactions in groups, prevailing economic conditions, controversial issues, and significant events. Each activity can stand alone or be used in combination with other activities to interpret how historical context influences character development and personal identify. Creating biography webs helps students recognize that individuals do have the agency to make history, particularly when they worked with others who had similar goals. However, the values, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals acquired were given form and substance by the times in which they lived and by the specific institutions and events they experienced. 🌐

Notes

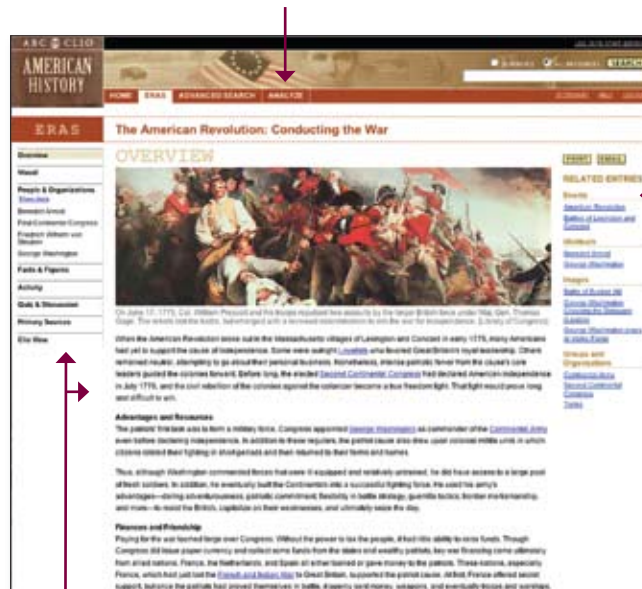
1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence*, Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994.
2. The biography web of Abraham Lincoln was created by Daniel Arnold, a teacher candidate at the University of Northern Colorado who read, *Abe Lincoln: The Boy Who Loved Books*, by Kay Winters (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2003).
3. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).
4. Gary Fertig, Jennifer Rios-Alers, and Kelly Seilbach, "What's Important about the Past: American Fourth Graders' Interpretations of Historical Significance," *Educational Action Research* 13, no. 3 (2005): 435-451.

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