

# The Makah Whale Hunt: A Social Studies Symposium in the Classroom

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The conversation starts quickly as two students come together in a 10<sup>TH</sup> grade social studies classroom, half-way through a role play activity we've come to call a symposium.<sup>1</sup> Both students are sporting “Hello, my name is...” stickers on their shirts, and each attempts to speak in character. One represents an anti-whaling activist. She stands holding a notebook with a role card on top and is gesticulating as she talks. Her conversation partner sits in a chair holding a card that describes his role as a whaler who participated in the Makah tribe's controversial whale hunt in 1999 in Washington State.<sup>2</sup> He listens reservedly as the first student, Helen, gets right to her argument:



Students from the Science and Math Institute explore different perspectives during a symposium on the Makah whale hunt, October 2011. (Photo by Fred Hamel)

*Helen:* Sure, back then you *needed* to hunt the whale, so that you would have food—and have fuel, but now you have all the same resources as anyone ... so why don't you just use it? Why do you kill whales “just because”?

*Steven:* I don't think Makah's have casinos, so we don't really have the money—to just get stuff from groceries.

*Helen:* Well that's not the point. You can still go out and get jobs. No, the point is, in the past, humans have needed to hunt whales to survive, but not now ... by doing this you are nothing more than savages!

*Steven* (pondering his role card, silent for a bit): Well, if they tell us not to do it, we'll call them racist.

*Helen:* But that is not the point! The point is that you are hunting whales when there is no need to.

The conversation draws upon direct historical information, as well as the students' own paraphrases, ideas, and assumptions. Steven gazes again at his role card, considering the issues. Helen waits for a moment, seeming to have said enough. She moves slowly away to find a new character to engage. This particular conversation has touched on the current of racism in the Makah whaling controversy; and the loaded rhetoric around Makah “savagery” will surface again in the course of the unit. In fact, role cards have been calibrated to bring up the controversy's multiple facets (environmental, cultural, economic, historical) so they can be investigated more deeply as the unit proceeds. As conversations continue, students stand between tables—interviewing each other, attempting to speak and respond in character, taking notes. The teacher observes, strolling through the classroom, taking mental or written notes of misconceptions, as well as particularly successful conversation behaviors (question-asking, staying in character, improvising). All students in the class of 26 appear self-directed.<sup>3</sup>

## Preparing the Symposium

On the surface, our symposium is not a very complicated activity. Students are invited to imagine that a group of 10 to

Table 1: Lesson Sequence

Preparation	1–3 lessons that may include:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Image/photo analysis</li> <li>• Creating historical timelines; choosing relevant information from a small selection of texts</li> <li>• Learning about your character</li> </ul>
Symposium	1–2 lessons depending on length of class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involves: preparation of roles, norm setting, symposium dialogue, writing time, and debriefing</li> </ul>
Next Steps	2–4 lessons that may include:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structured small group and whole class “in character” and “out of character” discussions</li> <li>• Sorting and categorizing character perspectives</li> <li>• Connecting personal opinions to characters</li> <li>• Developing persuasive writing</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Four Role Cards and Guest List from Whaling Controversy

<p><b>Paul Watson</b> Greetings. I am Captain Paul Watson. I founded the Sea Shepherd Society to protect the creatures of the sea that have no one to speak for them. My organization led and organized most of the large protests near Neah Bay. I am more than an environmentalist. I am what you might call an “animalist.” I have looked into the eyes and the souls of whales, and I have found them to be intelligent, beautiful creatures—at least as intelligent and civilized than the Makah who wish to hunt and kill them. Who says that the wants and needs of humans should always be taken more seriously than the rights of animals? I stand for animal rights, and I will protect all the creatures of the oceans by any means necessary.</p>	<p><b>Wayne Johnson</b> Hi. My name is Wayne and I was captain of our first successful whale hunt in over 30 years! I believe that we had to do it! It is not just your history or what you think or what you believe that make you who you are, it is what you do. My people have always been whalers. It is who we are, and if we can’t whale, we will lose one of the most important parts of our identity. I hear people talk about legal rights but this is really about culture. People can argue about legality, about animal rights, and about the environment, but it is our identity as a people that is really at stake. My grandfather was a whaler and his father before him. If we are forced to stop our traditions, I worry that our culture will die and our young men will never learn what it means to be a Makah. It does not matter if we use a harpoon or a gun, we are still Makah and it is still our culture! We are not an extinct people!</p>
<p><b>Whaling Protestor</b> Hello! I’m here because I want to share what I’ve learned with you. I’ve been researching the Makah and I know that they hunted whales back in the day. They had to! They lived on the coast and whales were a perfect source of food in that environment. I think that things are different now though. They still live on the coast, but can’t they just go to the grocery store?! There is no longer any environmental need to hunt whales so I think they should stop. They say it’s cultural, but they don’t even use harpoons or traditional methods anymore. I think that it’s time for the Makah to evolve!</p>	<p><b>Makah Tribal Member</b> Yes, I know about the whale hunt you’re talking about. I was there! A lot of people here will tell you that we don’t have the right to whale and that we are just being selfish. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The treaty that our ancestors made with the United States government guaranteed us whaling and fishing rights in exchange for our land. We kept up our end of the deal, and now live on one of the poorest reservations in the country! All we want is our legal right to hunt a small number of grey whales each year for our own use. This is not about animal rights, or the environment, or science. It is about our guaranteed legal rights. Period!</p>
<b>Guest List</b>	
<p>Makah Tribal Member Ken Nichols Paul Watson Washington State Citizen Wayne Johnson</p>	<p>Washington State Lawyer Local Environmentalist Whaling Protestor Makah Elder Washington State Historian</p>

12 historical or contemporary figures have come together at a social gathering to discuss their ideas, passions, beliefs, and actions. Each student is charged with representing a character’s ideas and beliefs as if they were the student’s own. Many characters are actual historical figures, while some are teacher-created

to represent a perspective not easily found through a historical individual. Each character or perspective is related to other characters through a common connection to a historical event, series of events, or conflict.

This type of symposium aims to help students find a rich balance between con-

tent knowledge, conceptual understanding, and purposeful dialogue. Yet, finding such balance is especially difficult in social studies, where, as Walter Parker argues, students often “get loads of background but experience no foreground, no laboratory in which the background becomes background.”<sup>24</sup> As an instruc-

tional tool that incorporates simulation,<sup>5</sup> our activity attempts to address Parker's concern, providing both foreground and background, aiming for strong interaction between "declarative" (factual) and "procedural" (process-oriented) knowing. Indeed, in Parker's words, declarative and procedural knowledge must be "taught as one thing not two... they are [best] *conceived* as one."<sup>6</sup> Our goal in this article is to describe our symposiums as an instructional practice that conceives declarative and procedural knowledge as one thing and to share our efforts to refine this dialogue-oriented teaching practice. We provide a description of two key areas for teacher thinking and planning—first, developing materials, and second, supporting student interactions. Our approach in these areas has evolved over time, as we describe here.

### **Developing Materials to Shape a Complex Picture**

The complementary feelings of confusion and discovery are at the heart of meaningful historical thinking and are what makes the symposium a compelling activity. Finding the right balance is both difficult and essential. Unfortunately, our first attempt at creating a role-play symposium threw students into the history of the United States' involvement in Afghanistan—exposing them to over 25 characters from three different time periods. Burdened with so much confusing information, students were unable to discover much more than that the shared history of Afghanistan and the United States is messy. Many became frustrated. In refining the activity, we have attempted to preserve some of the student disequilibrium evident in our early attempts while increasing the ability of students to navigate historical information on their own. We now ask: What necessary information can we insert to raise curiosity and build a context without overwhelming students?

While the gathering of characters is situated within a longer sequence of lessons (Table 1), the activity relies largely on the strength of the character role cards.

These briefs usually take the form of a sheet of cardstock with a short paragraph of text and a guest list (Figure 1). Each character's information is written as a first person monologue and may contain real quotes and limited demographic information about the character. Students are afforded the opportunity to study these cards before the gathering and often carry them during the activity.

Before role cards can be designed, however, teachers must assemble the right cast of characters. Being deliberate at this stage is key. It is all too easy to throw characters into the meeting simply because they are famous, found in the textbook, or generally significant in some way. We have found that characters must be selected primarily because they offer a distinct and important perspective calibrated to build a complete picture in relation to the other characters. In this way, the facts of the issue become meaningful as students begin to realize the important ways in which such facts are connected.

In writing role cards, each piece of information must be weighed against the purpose of the symposium. For the activity to work, characters' perspectives must be complicated enough and related enough to create slight disequilibrium and sustain authentic and often spirited conversations between any two of the characters present. Each character needs to have a store of new information or perspective to contribute, but not so much that representing it becomes daunting. Indeed, each conversation should force students to re-interpret the issues as more perspectives and information are revealed. If too many extraneous facts are included in character role cards, information can often be ignored by students who judge it to be unimportant, or who otherwise feel overwhelmed simply trying to decipher a character.

In constructing role cards for 9th and 10th graders, for example, we've learned to distinguish between a character's personal perspective as opposed to specific historical information. An example of the former might be an animal rights activ-

ist's argument about the importance and sacredness of life, while the latter might be the details of Makah treaty history. Depending on the goal of the symposium, one type of information usually predominates. In the case of the Makah activity, we emphasize predominantly perspective-based information because our goal is for students to identify and investigate the different sides of the issue. In this case, we create opportunities for students to engage with historical information in lessons directly preceding the activity. For example, after viewing selected photos of the 1999 Makah whale hunt, students create short timelines leading up to this hunt by choosing historically relevant information from a small selection of texts. In this way, students enter the role play with a basic understanding of the Makah's whaling history, treaty legacy, and relevant involvement of the International Whaling Commission. Characters in the symposium can mention these things, but they are now free to offer perspectives and arguments instead of lists of facts or long, unwieldy historical explications.

### **Interaction Support**

At the heart of this activity is student interaction. On the day(s) of the gathering, students review role sheets, don nametags, and walk around the classroom space for extended time periods attempting to have in-character conversations with one another, sharing historical perspectives and responding to other characters. Yet, it is also essential that students track and document the information they encounter and the connections they make. This highlights a major tension in the symposium role play. On one hand, student are engaging in authentic conversations, making and revising interpretations, and asking questions. On the other, they are gathering information, recording key points, and preparing notes that will support a future writing assignment. Doing both things (conversing and note-taking) at the same time is difficult, and highlights the challenge of addressing procedural and declarative knowing

Figure 2: **Sample Character Guide**

### Whaling Controversy

*Prep:* Read your role again and write down some key points about your character below so that you have things ready to say when you start to walk and talk.

- a. What is your character's name or title?
- b. Does this person support or oppose whaling by the Makah? What are their reasons?
- c. Find the sentence (on the role card) that shows their main argument and write or paraphrase it below.

**Symposium:** As you walk and talk, use your guest list to check off the characters you've had a conversation with already. During writing time, make some notes about the characters you've talked to.

Name/Title	For Whaling?	Against Whaling?	Why do they feel the way they do?

simultaneously. This tension is at the heart of the activity and is something we have struggled to best support.

The character guide is our attempt to make the cognitive and logistical challenges of the symposium productive for students. Although we have subjected it to many revisions, the guide is basically a graphic organizer that students can use to record important information about the characters they meet and the connections among them. Ideally, the character guide should ensure that both discourse and content knowledge are encouraged, and that neither eclipses the other. In reality, this is a difficult balance to strike, and our early attempts were largely unsuccessful. Two questions from an early version of the Makah symposium guide show this:

1. Find two members of the Makah Tribe. How were they involved in the hunt? How are their arguments similar? How are they different?
2. Find a lawyer and protestor who both oppose the hunt. Why

does each think that whaling might have been ok in the past, but not anymore? How are their arguments different?

The goal here was to keep students accountable for tracking information while minimizing confusion. Not only did the guide indicate which characters should be talked to, it told students what perspective was worth focusing on and which other characters might be productively compared or contrasted. While well intended, this guide inadvertently diminished verbal interactions as students focused on writing down facts rather than engaging their dialogue partner and thinking on their feet. Students often asked one another which character went with which number in an effort to simply fill out the form. This narrow focus on an assigned task not only weakened student discourse, but lowered the overall cognitive challenge of the activity and sense of discovery.

The current Makah symposium character guide attempts to address this imbalance by re-focusing students on their conversations in addition to record-

ing specific information given by other students.

Figure 2 shows the more open-ended graphic organizer as well as some introductory questions students answer in preparation for the activity. This guide encourages students to speak to each other in any order and for any reason, without many clues as to what each character may offer or how their perspective may relate to others. This reduces the student tendency to just “fill out” the form. Instead, the less-directed guide allows students to encounter historical ideas and perspectives more flexibly on their own in the context of authentic, in-character conversations.

To further help students balance the declarative and procedural demands of the activity, we have found it helpful to impose structure on the meeting time itself. The lesson typically starts, for example, with a brief period for students to read their role sheet one last time, making final preparations or asking last minute questions (as students have spent the previous class period getting to know their character). After that, conversation norms are reviewed and the teacher often

models an example conversation with a previously prepared student. At this point, instead of simply turning students loose to their conversations and notes, we have introduced a cycle where two or three opportunities for conversation are separated by short breaks for writing. For instance, an initial 10-minute dialogue session is followed by five minutes for quiet writing and thinking. As the period goes on, the intervals can be modified based on the needs of a specific class. Separating talking and writing helps to remove the pressure of doing both simultaneously and allows students to focus fully on each. Finally, a short debriefing can help students reflect on the process of the activity and can be a time to introduce an assignment geared toward the synthesis and categorization of the information they have gathered.

### Conclusion

This activity attempts to immerse students in the excitement and disequilibrium of authentic historical thinking by merging interactive discourse, content knowledge, and simulation. The symposium also easily lends itself to interdisciplinary connections and collaboration. With the Makah Whaling unit, for example, students and faculty can make links to mathematical thinking by asking students to evaluate data about changes in gray whale populations over time. The lesson likewise helps students develop broad critical thinking and problem-solving skills that relate to everyday life: to recognize that issues are multi-faceted and involve multiple stakeholders, which plays out for teenagers in moments like searching the Internet, watching news, and negotiating social situations. In this way, the activity engages high-level literacy and content-oriented standards.

To design this kind of event effectively, however, has taken five years of regular use and revision. In some ways, balancing the procedural and declarative demands has required us to release some teacher control over the outcomes of the activity. Fostering authentic and improvised dis-



course opens the door to the possibility that misconceptions may form, or that characters will be misrepresented. Yet, these moments also reflect doors to learning. Crafting a successful meeting of this kind involves the careful and deliberate creation of a historical laboratory, which allows students to actively construct and revise historical understandings.

The lesson sequence leads into class-wide discussion, engagement with primary sources, and a final writing assignment—in the case of the whaling controversy, often a newspaper editorial. Students review and think about characters' beliefs, sort them into larger perspective categories, and explain which characters they agree or disagree with, ultimately creating their own arguments on the issue. As a framework, this activity can productively be applied to a wide range of content topics and for a range of purposes. Other recent successful symposium topics include Truman's Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, the Seattle General Strike of 1919, and U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan.

We have learned that there is a delicate balance among the content we hope students to learn, the process by which we want them to learn it, and the purpose to which it is put. Each piece is important, but only in concert with the others. More often than not, perfecting this balance has required a careful examination of the

historical knowledge we assume students need to know. We ask again and again: Why do students need to know this? How will they learn it? How and why would they use it? Shaping our practice around these questions has been a process of experimentation and adjustment for us, a challenging and especially rewarding element of social studies education. 🌐

### Notes

1. The pronoun "we" is used throughout this article to portray our collaboration in thinking about the symposium activity. Matthew Bornstein-Grove designed the materials and has taught and refined the instructional process over several years. Fred Hamel, one of Matthew's literacy education professors, has supported him in thinking about the foundations of the activity and has provided feedback and ideas for revision. In addition, Fred has invited Matt to model the activity to pre-service education students and has observed and videotaped the activity in action.
2. See "Makah Whale Hunt Succeeds on May 17, 1999," Historylink.org, [www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=5310](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=5310); See also Bruce E. Larson, "The Makah: Exploring Public Issues during a Structured Classroom Discussion," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* (September/October 1997).
3. This description is drawn from video of Matt's students during a symposium (October 2011).
4. Walter Parker, *Educating the Democratic Mind* (Albany, N.Y., SUNY Press, 1995), 14.
5. Dan Moorhouse, "How to Make Historical Simulations Adaptable, Engaging, and Manageable," *Teaching History* 133 (2008): 10-16. Lorrei DiCamillo and Jill M. Gradwell, "Using Simulations to Teach Middle Grades U.S. History in an Age of Accountability," *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education* 35 n7 (2012): [www.amle.org/Publications/RMLEOnline/Articles/Vol35No7/tabid/2634/Default.aspx](http://www.amle.org/Publications/RMLEOnline/Articles/Vol35No7/tabid/2634/Default.aspx).
6. Parker, 14.

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