DeKalb County, Illinois: A Local History Project for Second Graders

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Allie’s group of second grade students was mulling over a complicated book with a lot of text and no pictures. “Here’s something about Isaac Ellwood’s family!” she said excitedly to her group members. “It says he and his brother opened a hardware shop.” The second graders paused in their research and quickly added this new fact to their note cards.

A week earlier, I (D.B.) had been skeptical that second graders could handle the responsibility of using primary and secondary sources to research significant historical figures in the history of our county, DeKalb, Illinois. Now, as I watched students actually doing the work, I shared their enthusiasm. When kids are motivated, they can do just about anything!

This “complicated book” was The Barbed Wire Saga written by a local historian, Steve Bigolin. Earlier in the week, I had obtained this book from the local public library. Though we had discussed how to use an index when using such a book, I prepared in advance by tabbing the most relevant pages and passages for the students.

A preservice teacher was leaning over the book, helping the children struggle through the difficult reading to discover this information about the Ellwood family and their livelihood.

A Context for Inquiry

DeKalb has been described as “an urban community in a rural setting.” A largely agricultural community, DeKalb has a history that offers a rich opportunity for learning. DeKalb County, home to Northern Illinois University, is a little more than an hour’s drive from downtown Chicago. Barbed wire was invented here. Students of pop culture know it as the hometown to fashion model Cindy Crawford. It was within this context that I set out to motivate students by using...
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inquiry, technology, and different learning modalities to study local history.

To pique student interest, I introduced the unit by projecting images of several pivotal characters from DeKalb’s past. While the “Barbed Wire Rag” played in the background, I told the students briefly about some of the founders of our community. Then I posed the question for inquiry, “Who is the most important person in DeKalb County history, and why?” This question led to a discussion about how we learn about people from the past. How do we know about their lives and what they did? Often, we learn about people in the past through their own words as in the case of autobiographies, primary source documents, or from people who knew them. If we are lucky, there might be a newspaper article or a biography that we can refer to. After defining what a biography was, I posed some additional questions: Why would someone want to write a book about someone else’s life? Why is it important to know about the people of the past?

Sitting a circle on the floor, the students brainstormed a list of qualities that makes a person important. Some of the children’s responses, which I wrote onto a poster, included:

“Important people do something good for others or for a community.”
“Important people are models of good character.”
“Important people invent something useful.”
“Important people accomplish something new.”
“Important people participate in government.”
“Important people work for change.”

The Assignment

Next, I gave students the assignment: In small cooperative groups, create a PowerPoint presentation about one historical figure from DeKalb’s past. They largely depended on books, on-line digital archives, and one resource written for third graders by a

Historical Notables

Joseph Glidden often was referred to as “the grand old man of DeKalb County.” He was the largest contributor to the DeKalb churches, gave money for the DeKalb Public Hospital, and became the publisher of the DeKalb Chronicle. He also served as sheriff of DeKalb County and was a town supervisor. Like both Ellwood and Haish, he was a capitalist and invented a type of barbed wire. Glidden’s barbed wire would eventually become the standard and more widely utilized type after he had perfected it.

—Northern Illinois University (www3.niu.edu/historicalbuildings/dekalb_context.htm)

John Altgeld specialized in the buying and selling of real estate. One of his most successful ventures was the purchase of the sixteen-story Unity Block in Chicago. Despite his wealth, Altgeld developed a strong sympathy for the plight of the poor. He became involved in politics and, with the support of the Democrats and the United Labor Party, Altgeld was elected governor of Illinois in 1892.

Once in power, Altgeld embarked on an ambitious program of social reform, which included attempts to prohibit child labour and the inspection of factories.

—Spartacus Educational, UK (www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAAltgeld.htm)

When livestock encountered barbed wire for the first time, it was usually a painful experience. The injuries provided sufficient reason for the public to protest its use. Religious groups called it “the work of the devil,” or “The Devil’s Rope” and demanded removal.

Free range grazers became alarmed that the economical new barrier would mean the end of their livelihood. Trail drivers were concerned their herds would be blocked from the Kansas markets by settler fences. Barbed wire fence development stalled.

With landowners building fences to protect crops and livestock, and those opposed fighting to keep their independence, violence occurred. Laws were finally passed making wire cutting a felony. After many deaths, and uncountable financial losses, the Fence Cutter Wars ended.


The effects of barbed wire on livestock and the public were far-reaching. The wire created a barrier between the wild and the domesticated, and the public and the landowner. The wire was a symbol of the loss of freedom, and the beginning of the end of the frontier. The wire was a symbol of the beginning of the end of the frontier. The wire was a symbol of the beginning of the end of the frontier. The wire was a symbol of the beginning of the end of the frontier. The wire was a symbol of the beginning of the end of the frontier.

teacher in the district. Books filled with historical photographs and pictures found on-line were the students’ favorite resources. Having two preservice teachers assigned to the classroom was tremendously beneficial in helping the children manage difficult reading.

For the students, I defined a “primary source” as something written or produced in the time period students are investigating. These materials include letters, speeches, diary entries, newspaper articles, oral history interviews, documents, photographs, artifacts, or anything else that provides first-hand accounts about a person or event.”

**Analyzing Text**

I discussed and modeled some of the procedures for collecting and interpreting information. Using a book I had selected ahead of time, I displayed a passage that offered highlights of Henry Gurler’s life. We read the passage together, paused when we found relevant information, and added that information to the appropriate note cards.

We also followed a similar procedure when accessing some of the more non-traditional resources such as Internet sites. Using an LCD projector, I briefly showed students how to initiate a search, look for headings, and check to be sure that the websites were applicable to their own research. For example, if students deviated from the websites suggested by me, they might find websites about DeKalb, Georgia, rather than DeKalb, Illinois. They needed to be critical thinkers to check the appropriateness of their sources.

Not only was technology a motivator for this project, it was also essential to complete the assignment. Students used laptop computers to research their chosen historical subject at pre-selected websites (Figure 2). I provided recommended websites for the students, and they used their technology skills to navigate through the sites to find relevant information. Most of the students thrive in a setting where they can use their knowledge of computers.

Three students were assigned to seven small groups. Each group was provided with one laptop computer, and students took turns using the computer, typing, and proofreading. Equal opportunities were provided for each student to type, locate, insert images, and enhance the final presentations.

The project took place over the course of three weeks, spending about three hours each week to research, plan, compose, and give the presentations. The initial introduction lasted about 60 minutes. Students spent four days researching their historical figure. Several teacher-led discussions were spread throughout the weeks (on topics such as how to read resources, make note cards, use PowerPoint, and give an oral presentation). Three days were devoted to developing presentations, and an hour was devoted to giving final presentations. The students had to apply their knowledge of PowerPoint to complete visual biographies. Earlier in the year, the second graders completed another project in which they conducted research and created a PowerPoint presentation, so they were familiar with the program. In their final presentations, students talked about their historical figures while the PowerPoint show provided images and music.

**Reaching All Learners**

I strove to address a variety of learning styles (visual, auditory, tactual, and kinesthetic) so as to engage every student. For all of the students, I provided several books, some with photographs, as well as two videos. The photos and video were especially helpful to students who learn more visually.

The videos, which were produced locally through Northern Illinois University, were *Barbed Wire Pioneers: Inventing a Community* and *DeKalb Stories: A Collection of Short Films about How a Small Town had a Big Impact on American History*. These productions also appealed to the auditory learners who do better when they hear as well as see information. The tactual and visual learners benefited from a display of barbed wire brought in by
a parent. The second graders could then see and touch some samples of barbed wire, including different designs created by three DeKalb businessmen. The most exciting experience was a field trip to the Ellwood House and Gurler House, two historical homes in DeKalb that are restored and opened to the public. Unlike some of the challenging books that the students were using, these field trips were geared toward second graders. The kinesthetic learners could walk through the rooms where local celebrities lived and relate artifacts with the face of a person they were researching. We collected brochures from the two sites, which students examined back in the classroom.

Preparing to Present
Developing the PowerPoint presentations appealed to all four learning modalities. Students enjoyed selecting backgrounds, transitions, animation, and sound effects. Using PowerPoint increased the students’ motivation to learn historical facts and build a historical argument, but the media production was secondary to the social studies content studied. The most challenging aspect of the presentation was preparing notes (Figure 3) for what they would say as the images were being projected. Some groups did better than others in presenting their visual biographies. Though there were no scripts, students were encouraged to elaborate on their bulleted points. Some students rose to the occasion while others stuck closely to the exact text on their slides. Addressing these different learning styles also accommodated the practical, analytical, and creative learners in my classroom. As Yale psychologist Robert Sternberg maintains in his Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, students learn best when these three aspects are addressed.3 Practically, students had to apply their knowledge of text features and websites to navigate through online materials. Analytically, students critiqued materials for their usefulness or validity. Creativity came into play when students constructed their presentations. The students’ steady enthusiasm and participation in the project indicated to me that different learning needs were being met by this activity.

The Challenge of Primary Sources
Observing the children learning led to several conclusions about the challenges of this type of local inquiry. The first thing I realized was that skilled readers had an easier time researching local history. One problem we ran into was the lack of primary or secondary sources at a second grade reading level. Students had to grapple with some tough texts to find the information they needed, with a lot of support from me or from one of the preservice teachers who worked in my classroom each day (see the example in the opening of this article). Without the substantial adult support we provided, the students could not have been successful because the reading level was inappropriate. Thus, I would not try to do this activity without the requisite time and support from adult teacher aides.

On the other hand, I was glad the students had the opportunity to wrestle with the usefulness (or lack thereof) of certain sources as they conducted research. Because they weren’t spoon fed all the facts, their experience was more authentic and akin to what they might experience in the future as they investigate other historical topics of interest.

I was careful to support this difficult challenge with some readings that were at the students’ grade level. My experiences supported the findings of Marie Clay, who suggests students need to read books that are at their level of reading proficiency or that can be read with minimal support offered through small group instruction.6 When a child could not read one of the local history sources independently, frustration would sometimes ensue. The Reading A-Z website suggests, “A book should be easy enough to develop a student’s confidence and facilitate understanding, but difficult enough to challenge without frustrating.”

Having children do historical inquiry meant I had to give up the usual way of teaching history in which I provide a well-organized product (like pages in a textbook) and lead students to definitive answers. While I was encouraged to see how engaged the students were in the project, I was anxious about whether or not they would arrive at carefully considered conclusions. I knew just how important these investigative skills would be for the students in the future. After all, the objective of the project was not necessarily that students remember every fact about each person they were investigating, but that they experiment with a variety of sources and synthesize their findings to create their own opinions. I was encouraged when one girl asked if she could research someone else once her group was finished with the current assignment.

Four Stances Toward the Past
This project exemplified what Linda Levstik and Keith Barton discussed in their book Doing History in terms of four possible approaches to learning about the past.8

First, the kids made connections from themselves to the past in the identification stance. Though no student in my class could personally relate to the invention of barbed wire, the students were able to make other connections when they saw an old house constructed by one of the people we researched, or when they realized that Northern Illinois University was providing the pre-service teachers whom they adored.

Second, the inquiry question (Who was most important to DeKalb history?) at its core involved the students taking about what they learned of these historical figures and assuming a moral response about their character. The second graders had to decide whether the person they researched was a “good” or “great” person based on their contribution and impact on society.

Third, an analytical perspective came into play when students discussed the effects that manufactured barbed wire
An Open Question
The local history project concluded when we revisited the inquiry question, “Who was the most important person in DeKalb County history, and why?” As I expected, each group felt the person that it had researched was most important (see “Accomplishments and Contributions to Society” in Figure 3). The students supported their answers with valid reasons. When I “accepted” all nominations as important people, there was definitely some discomfort in the room. “Who was THE most important?” the students wanted to know. Some students suggested that I take a vote to see who really was the most important. Instead, we pursued the conversation further: Could they all be important for different reasons? Might there be other people who were really important who weren’t even considered in the context of this project? What about non-European countries? What about the Native Americans who inhabited this space before immigrants arrived?

Since my intention was to foster inquiry, leaving the question open for further debate was a desirable outcome. The bell rang for lunch and the class was dismissed feeling a little unsettled and still thinking about the question.

—Danielle Bell

Notes
4. Second graders’ PowerPoint biographies of DeKalb’s historic figures may be viewed on their teacher’s website at dist428.org/wright/classroom/bell/home.html.
5. Sternberg’s Triarchic Theory of Intelligence is summarized at tip.psychology.org/stern.html.