Revolutionary Movies:
Creating Digital Biographies in the Fifth Grade

Scott M. Waring, Marie Santana, and Kirk Robinson

Integrating digital video into history lessons can generate enthusiasm and excitement among students about learning history. While some students perceive history to be dull or boring due to lack of personal relevance or applicability, we found that creating digital video biographies during a unit of study on the American Revolution allowed students to actively take part in their own learning while also becoming immersed and interested in the content covered within the unit. In these activities, students learn technical skills to create videos of their own; they also learn the course content as they develop a historical narrative from various sources. (Handouts that we describe below appear in the ***Pullout*** preceding this article.)

Assigning students to construct digital biographies and narratives encourages them to be both critical consumers and producers of historical narratives. This means that students are learning how to present history content in a way that goes beyond the simple memorization of facts and dates. They experience multiple perspectives of an event and then must sort through the different representations to arrive at an understanding of their own.

Evidence for Historians

(Time Required: One 50-minute period) We began the unit on the American Revolution by discussing the role of historians and other social scientists. The teacher introduces the term "primary source" by speculating aloud about what evidence might have been left behind during the previous 24 hours that would prove a person's existence. Students thought about all of the activities in which they were involved during the past 24 hours, such as sleeping, eating, walking, riding the bus, reading, attending classes, playing outside, visiting a website, and talking to friends. The teacher gave them five minutes to create a list of material evidence that may have resulted from these activities (including written homework, school attendance records, trash from meals and snacks, fingerprints and footprints, recorded phone messages and e-mails, images on security videos in stores and school) as well as immaterial evidence (other people's memories of haven spoken with you). Then the class discussed the process that historians use to discover and understand what has happened in the past, ways to evaluate multiple sources, and how historical narratives are constructed. The teacher emphasized that everyday items can be the objects of study for historians and archeologists, not just official or written records.

Points of View

(Time Required: One 50-minute period) Next, students examined the challenges presented by multiple perspectives. The teacher instructed students to write down exactly what they saw, stepped into the middle of the room, and held up a piece of paper on which a large letter "T" was written on one side and "I" on the other. Students took notes about "precisely what you see." From one side of the room, students saw the letter "T" written on it, while students on the other side of the room saw an "I." A few students could only see the edge of the paper or the back of the teacher.

After discussion about how differing perspectives of this one sheet of paper led to different descriptions, the teacher read aloud *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, in which the familiar tale is told from various points of view.[1] Following the reading, the students discussed how the wolf, pigs, and "news reporters" observing the conflict between predator and prey, offer different perspectives to the story. Students discovered that events (and people's accounts of events) need to be examined from multiple angles.

Multiple Sources

(Time Required: One 50-minute period) The next day, we went to the computer lab and visited the All About Explorers website.[2] This Internet resource exposes students to the idea of using and comparing multiple representations and perspectives.

(See the article on page 12 of this issue of *SSYL* to read more on All About Explorers). A group of educators designed this website to teach skills such as how to assess the validity of information on a website and how to go about constructing historical narratives.

At the All About Explorers website, students are encouraged to draw upon multiple sources, as some of the information to be found on the site is deliberately incorrect. For example, the biography of Henry Hudson states that he brought back from his 1608 "important maps of the Great Barrier Reef and photographs of the various people he met on his journey"— although photography was not invented for another 220-plus years or so.

Writing History
(Time Required: One 50-minute period) The next phase was for students to construct narratives about the life of an individual who played a major role in America's fight for independence. Since these fifth grade students had extensive experience writing both narrative and expository pieces, the challenge we gave them was to write a historical narrative utilizing nonfiction books and websites.

The teacher provided students with a list of names of noteworthy people from this time period (**PULLOUT PART 1**). Most of the students received a list of lesser-known figures of the American Revolution such as John Peter Zenger and Deborah Sampson. For some of these historical figures, only advanced reading-level texts seemed to be available. We did not want ESOL, ESE, and lower-level reading students to be struggling, in this assignment, with difficult reading or hard-to-locate sources. So we assigned more familiar (but very important!) personalities like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Ben Franklin to these students.

Students visited general-topic websites that were recommended by the teacher (as listed at the bottom of **PULLOUT PART 1**), read passages from books and Encyclopedias in the school's Media Center, and reviewed social studies textbooks to get a quick impression of the historical figures on their lists. Then, each student listed his or her top three choices for further research. The teacher assigned each student a single historical person from his or her list of three, making sure that there were only a few students who would be researching the same figure.

Writing and Presenting
(Time Required: Two 50-minute periods) After further discussion of how to analyze sources and conduct research, the teacher provided students with requirements for constructing their narrative (**PULLOUT PART 2**). We again visited the school's computer lab so that the students could research their assigned subject, using the Research Chart (**PULLOUT PART 3**) and teacher-recommended books and websites (**PULLOUT PART 4**). Students spent one full period taking notes on the contributions of their historical person, and one period to writing their own biographies, which usually filled one handwritten page.

The teacher placed students into small groups in which each student could rehearse giving a presentation about his or her historical figure (ten minutes). Then each student gave a presentation to the whole class, with time at the end to answer any questions or hear comments from peers (two or three minutes for each student). At the conclusion, individual students volunteered to share what they learned from their classmates' biographies.

We were pleasantly surprised with the historical content knowledge that students conveyed during the presentations and Q&A that followed each one. Students also made comments about the interpretive nature of their peers' narratives and quality of websites: some online sources cited references, while others did not. Some accounts of events varied quite a lot, while other events seemed less contentious. Controversial questions that students might have some fun exploring include:

- Was the Boston Massacre caused by British troops firing unnecessarily or by American protesters threatening and provoking them?

- Did Betsy Ross create the first Stars and Stripes U.S. flag?

- How successful was Paul Revere's ride?

Students wanted to access multiple sources of information when learning about historical topics and constructing narratives.

Producing a Video
(Time Required: Two 50-minute periods) The last step of the project was to create digital biographies. The students used Microsoft Movie Maker (but iMovie, Pinnacle Studio, or any other digital video editing software would work just as well) to create a "slide show" of still images with voice narration. We announced that students would return to the computer lab and create digital biographies, using their narratives as the basis for scripts for their movies. We gave students basic instructions on how to create digital videos with still images and how to include a narration. The students searched the Internet for images to represent the narratives they constructed.

Students inserted the collected images into the timeline in Movie Maker, inserted visual transitions between the images to make the movie more professional looking, created title screens and credits, and recorded their narratives. Student videos averaged 2 or 3 minutes in length and typically included 3 or 4 images.
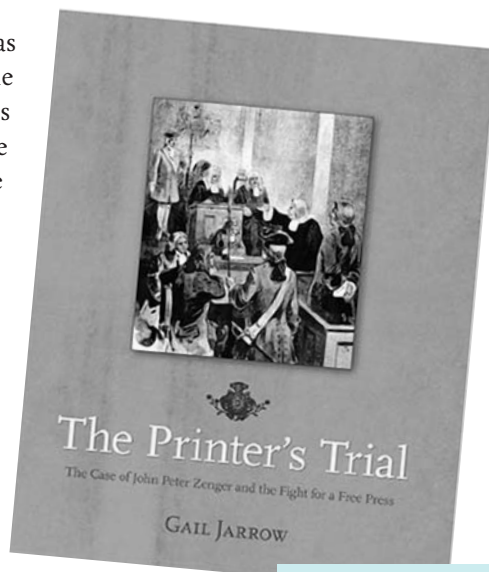
In addition to allowing these students to learn about how to weigh perspectives and to create narratives, we found that several of these novice historical thinkers gained a better

understanding of chronological order, as Movie Maker utilizes a timeline for the construction of the video. The entire class viewed each film over the course of the next few weeks (one or two per day). The films were then given showings for others in the school and for parents during open house nights. The teacher collected the biographical narratives and bound them into a class book.

Conclusion

Overall, we felt the student learning experience in our American Revolution unit was enhanced by the challenge of creating a digital biography. When planning the unit, we believed that integrating technology would, in some fashion, help us to improve student learning. In other words, if we could have taught our unit better without the added technology, we would not have used it.

At the completion of the project, we asked students for anonymous feedback on all of the activities. They enjoyed this social studies activity more than usual. They had not realized that there was so much bias involved in various his- torical sources, and said that this awareness would be reflected in research they conducted in the future. Most students looked forward to making more films. Without a doubt, this project seemed well worth the time and energy expended by all involved. 🔳
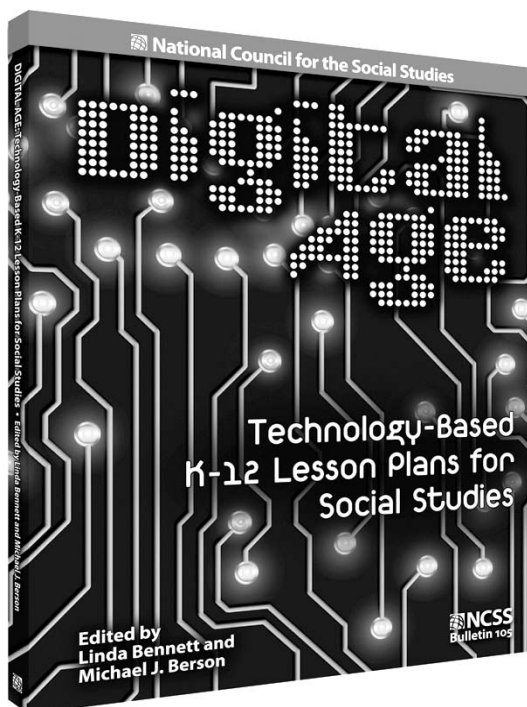
Notes
1. Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (New York: Puffin, 1991).
2. www.allaboutexplorers.com.

Scott M. Waring *is an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning Principles and is the program coordinator for the Social Science Education Program at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida.*

Marie Santana *teaches fifth grade at Cypress Springs Elementary School in South Orlando.*

Kirk Robinson *is a graduate student at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.*