Social Studies and the Young Learner 25 (4), pp. 17–22

Oh, Say Can You See? Visualizing American Symbols in the Fifth Grade

Kristy A. Brugar and Andrew H. Dickman

Symbols have always had an important role in shaping our identity as a nation. The American flag, the Statue of Liberty, the White House, and the bald eagle all help to convey American values such as liberty, freedom, democracy, and independence. But how do elementary students understand these symbols and the values behind them? In this article, we describe a series of lessons in which fifth-graders examined the stories behind American symbols through observation, inquiry, and analysis.

These lessons[1] were co-taught by the classroom teacher (Andy) and a university professor (Kristy) in the final week of the school year. Beginning in October, the 23 fifth-graders in Andy's class had been taught using interdisciplinary instruction in social studies. Often, the fifth-graders worked with multiple informational texts and visual images as sources for historical inquiry in order to tell the story of the past.

The visual arts serve as a record of the past, connecting people across time and space. In order to learn from visual materials, elementary students must utilize a variety of skills such as observation, analysis, and interpretation. For example, based on observation and analysis of visual sources, students can recognize and identify multiple perspectives concerning a historical event. Examining and analyzing works of art can make history come alive and generate excitement about learning.[2] It can engage a wide variety of students in learning about social studies content and concepts that are evident in their daily lives.

Lesson 1: Examples of Symbols

The key questions associated with this first lesson include: What are symbols? What are examples of American symbols? In what ways do American symbols represent the United States?

Andy introduced this lesson by showing a video called, "Symbols of the United States." In this video, the narrator prompts viewers to think about American symbols in terms of questions in need of investigation. For example,

"Where did the first American flag come from and when?"

"When was The Pledge of Allegiance written? Who wrote it and why?"

Following the video, Andy asked his students, "What are symbols?" All 23 hands go up! One student responded, "A sign that shows something" while another students simply said, "represents stuff." A third student stated, "stuff we believe in." Andy synthesized the students contributions by stating, "symbols are pictures that represent ideas we believe in."

"So what are some examples of American symbols?" Again, all hands were raised. Andy asked several students to share their thoughts. Their examples included the bald eagle, flag, Liberty Bell, handicap parking, no parking, and highway signs. Many, but not all, of these examples were included in the video. Sensing the students' enthusiasm, Andy asks, "Can you tell me other symbols of America?" One student stated, "Capitol Building" referencing to another example from the video. Then Tom identified, "the original flag." Andy inquired further, "What do you mean the original flag?" Tom explains, "You know, the one with 13 stripes and 13 stars in a circle, the old one." Andy asked, "Why is that a symbol? To which Tom responded, "because it represents our history—how we started with 13 colonies. The ones that broke away from England."

The class had just completed a unit on the American Revolution, so Tom utilized his prior knowledge of American colonization and the American Revolution in his response. In retrospect, we wish we would have asked Tom if this was a "good thing," thus giving him an opportunity to think more critically about the decision to break away from the British.

The conversation continued as Olive asked, "What about money?" Andy responded, "Yes, our money is a symbol, and it also includes a lot of symbols. Let's look at a dollar." Several students dug crumbled dollar bills from their pockets and Andy displayed a dollar bill on the document reader so all students were able to see the various symbols.

You can find more coins to color online at:

www.usmint.gov/kids

Andy modeled how one can investigate a dollar bill. He asked a student, "Where should we begin, Olive?" She responded, "I want to start with The Great Seal, the thing on the right side." Then Andy asked all his students to examine in detail the artifact and the images included within it.

Andy: Okay what do you see?[3]

Olive: I think I see olive branches in the eagle's foot.

Andy: What is that a symbol of?

Olive: Maybe peace. It's making me think about the Olive Branch Treaty.[4]

Andy: Great! What else? Alan, what do you see?

Alan: I see arrows in the other foot. The arrows could mean war or fighting, like the Revolution.

In this brief exchange, Olive and Alan made observations and assertions based on previous learning in their responses.

Next, Andy prompted his students to look more closely at details within the image. "How many leaves are there? How many arrows do we see?" After quietly counting, the students collectively responded, "Thirteen!" "Could the number 13 be a symbol, something that represents a bigger idea?," asked Andy. A student suggested, "It could be about the thirteen colonies." Throughout this exchange, the fifth-graders were displaying their prior knowledge of American history, specifically their understanding of colonization and the American Revolution, which were the two most recent units of study before this experience.

Finally, Andy wanted to invite students to focus on their own lives. He asked, "Over summer vacation, some of you might go to Washington. What would you like to see in D.C., the District of Columbia?" Students' responses included various locations such as the Washington Monument, the Pentagon, the Lincoln Memorial, and the White House. Andy then asked, "Are these all symbols?" The students nod their heads in general agreement. Andy asked, "Why?" Vanessa responded, "They represent freedom and stuff about us being Americans."

Andy closed the lesson by asking his students if there are symbols associated with things other than our country. Ken asked, "You mean like our school? I think the Halfman Hawks are a symbol." Andy agreed as he motioned to a poster on the wall, "You are right the Hawks are our symbol! Remember that a symbol represents something else. What does it [Hawks] represent or say about us?" Everyone repeated the slogan together, "Here at Halfman Elementary School, We are Respectful, Responsible, Kind, and Safe."

Lesson 2: Stories Behind the Symbols

This lesson opened with a large group reading. We gave each student a copy of a book *Uncle Sam & Old Glory: Symbols of America*, and students took turns reading aloud passages from the introduction. We selected this text because it is a brief introduction to a variety of American symbols with straightforward descriptions.

Next, the student were organized into small heterogeneous ability groups (2-3 students per group) and given an image of an American symbol for investigation. Each student's graphic organizer already included the symbol to be investigated (For example, see **HANDOUT A**, page 21). We selected American symbols based on symbols identified in "Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations, Social Studies Grade Five"[5] as well as symbols identified in the various classroom resources available to students including their textbook. The students investigated the following symbols: the American Flag, the bald eagle, the Declaration of Independence, the Liberty Bell, the Great Seal of the United States, Benjamin Franklin's cartoon "Join or Die" (1754), the Statue of Liberty, the Uncle Sam cartoon character, and the White House.

For this lesson, Kristy guided the instruction around the use of the graphic organizer (**HANDOUT A**), which is designed as a framed picture with the image in the center and students' writing—their observations and questions—creating the "frame." Students responded to the prompt ("What do you see?) by discussing their observations in small groups. At first, observations were superficial, and some students seemed puzzled. The group investigating the Great Seal started their conversation with "it's a circle with stuff in it." Another group named "the American flag," and then got quiet. So Kristy prompted the group by saying, "If I have never seen the American flag, how could you describe it for me?" This got the students talking,

"There are stripes!"

"How many?"

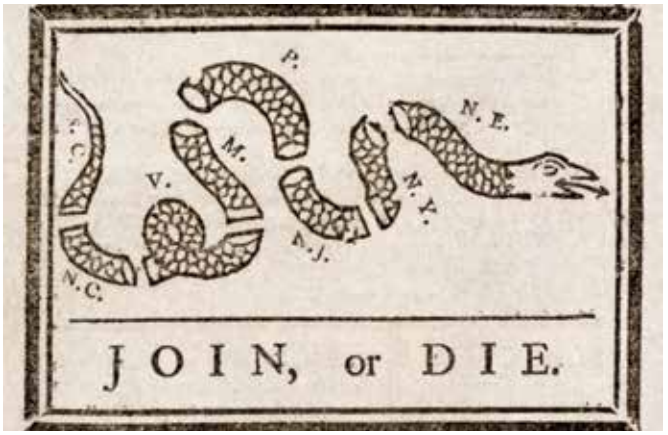
"Isn't there 13 for the 13 colonies?"

"Yep, and 50 stars for the states"

"What's the difference between states and colonies?"

"What about the colors? I think those are important."

Each student wrote his or her descriptions on their graphic organizer. As students wrote, Kristy gave verbal reminders to use descriptive language and to identify the details as they had done in the previous lesson. Tony and his group examined the Statue of Liberty. In response to this first question Tony wrote, "A green torch, an old handbook, an old statue, a crown with spikes." In the example below, Becky described the snake as "scaly" [sic] and "looks like macaroni."



After approximately five minutes, Kristy directed the fifth-graders to the second prompt, "What is the story the artist or author is trying to tell?" Becky and her partner, Allyson, responded, "Well I think he or she is trying to tell its like a group and they are saying join our group or die … like give me liberty or give me death." The group's response referred to Patrick Henry's speech, which was part of their American Revolution unit and the idea that the colonies had to come together to be successful.

Not all groups made connections with prior lessons. Ken and Robby examined a photo of The White House and made connections to their lives outside of the classroom. Ken described "a lot of people" by a building. So, he thought the artist might be showing, "That it may be like a party." His partner, Robby, wrote, "This is a spesal [sic] place where the president lives and have [sic] meetings."

A third group examined the image of Uncle Sam. This group carefully described the details in their image, including the use of bright colors and Uncle Sam's expression. This close viewing became a nice segue to the third prompt, "What evidence do you have to support your hypothesis?" Mary reacted, "He might be yelling at someone or he's making a deal with someone." Her evidence included, "His eye brows are like squished together and he's pointing at someone."

Students identified a variety of possible sources of evidence for inquiry, which included, "It (The Great Seal of the United States) is in the Oval Office," and [We know this] "from our social studies books and the videos we watched."

Finally, Kristy directed all students to the final prompt associated with the graphic organizer: "What questions do you have for investigation?" Throughout the year, Andy encouraged his students to think about what they wanted to know/what they were interested in. The students were directed to create questions using the words who, what, when, where, why, and how. "Who made this [the American] flag?" "When was it [The Declaration of Independence] drafted?" "Why is a bell [the Liberty Bell] important?" And "What inspired this person [Charles Thompson, in 1782] to create this symbol [the Great Seal of The United States]?

Lesson 3: What It Means, and How Meaning Changes

For Lesson 3, the students used the questions they created to conduct a short inquiry about their symbol. They had various informational texts at hand (See "Suggested Books/Resources"). Each student had a text to read and explore individually so that each member of the group could be actively engaged in the investigation of their questions.

Each group approached its inquiry a bit differently. In several groups, each student took on one question. Katie said, "We took the questions we made up. After we find the answers, we'll tell each other." In other groups, students worked together, comparing information from various resources. Becky said, "It is easier if we look up each question together, but using different books. We can find out if all of them [the sources] agree before we write the answer down."

After about 20 minutes, Andy and Kristy described how students could present their findings on a small poster board. Students worked at framing their symbol and creating titles and captions.

Kristy encouraged students to refer to their graphic organizers from the previous lessons for ideas of what could go into the captions. She reminded the fifth-graders that a caption usually explains what's in the picture, and often very briefly.

Andy asked the students to review the answers to their questions for investigation. "Most of you looked at your symbol as part of history. On the left-hand side of your poster, you are going to write about what your symbol meant in the past." Student responses varied depending on their symbol, but all groups were able to place their symbol in a historical context. For example, Tony's group, which examined the Statue of Liberty, wrote "It was a gift from France after the American Revolution to show freedom, friendship, and liberty. When travelers came



to America to settle there, they saw the statue and saw liberty and freedom."

Becky's group described Benjamin Franklin's cartoon, "In the past Benjamin illustrated this picture to prove we'd be stronger as a united team…We could be better united as one instead of thirteen fragmented colonies."

Finally, Kristy directed students to analyze these symbols in a modern context: What does this symbol mean today? Where do we see it [the symbol] today? For example, Tom's group investigated the American flag. They identified similarities past and present, notably freedom and peace. In other cases, students saw the symbols as confined to particular times or places. For example, Mary's group thought they only saw Uncle Sam on/around July 4th. Other groups described seeing these various symbols in history textbooks or at school. However, Olive's group examined the Declaration of Independence. They explained, "This symbol means the U.S.A. is [an] independent country" which "you can find in a museum, a text book, or [mentioned in] a TV program." They concluded by stating, "that means we have freedom, liberty, and justice."

Once the posters were completed, Andy displayed the students' work. Students used the skills developed throughout the year to grapple with this lesson, including observation, cooperation, collaboration, reading for information, and summarizing. They referred to prior knowledge, used multiple sources, and synthesized materials in order to draw conclusions about their chosen symbol of the United States, as it was used in the past and is now used in the present.

In the lessons above, we focused on traditional American symbols that are identified in our state content expectations. In the future, we might also ask students to generate a list of other American symbols based on their own observations in their community (**HANDOUT B**, page 22). Our assumption is that students might select a few more modern or unexpected symbols such as the "golden arches" of McDonalds, street signs, or even religious symbols (e.g. a Christian cross from a nearby church).

On reviewing their choices and field observations, we would ask students to critique the symbols. We would assist by asking more pointed questions about people's values in the United States. For example, if a student has chosen a commercial logo (such as McDonald golden arches) as a "symbol of the United States," what reasons could he or she give for doing so? What values do the symbols represent? In what ways do these reflect (or not reflect) your own values? What is the difference between a national symbol and a corporate logo? Between a national symbol and a religious symbol?"

Finally, we would ask students to compare the values of the past and present. "Think about how people lived during the eras of U.S. history that we have studied. In what ways are American values the same and in what ways are they different? How might we explain the differences?"

Notes

1. We define a "lesson" as a one-day experience for students that includes an warm-up, activity/activities, a wrap-up, and an objective, formative assessment.
2. James D. Laney, "Jacob Lawrence's "The Migration Series": Art as Narrative History," *The Social Studies* 98, no. 4 (2007): 131–136.
3. Students employ this standard series of questions when utilizing visual arts during the year: (a) What do you see? (Observation) (b) What is the artist trying to tell you? (Hypothesis & Inquiry) (c) How do you know? (Evidence & Analysis)
4. Andy's class had just finished a unit on the American Revolution, during which they discussed the 1775 Olive Branch Treaty.
5. Michigan Department of Education, "Grade Level Content Expectations: Social Studies," http://michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-28753_38684_28761—-,00.html.

Kristy A. Brugar *is an assistant professor of social studies educationat Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan*

Andrew H. Dickman *teaches fifth grade at Halfman Elementary School in Madison Heights, Michigan*

SUGGESTED BOOKS/RESOURCES

Ben's Guide to the U.S. Government for Kids. "Symbols of the U.S. Government." This webpage is devoted to U.S. symbols for grades 3-5, bensguide.gpo.gov/3-5/symbols/index.html.

Firestone, Mary. ***The Statue of Liberty (American Symbols)***. North Mankato, MN: Picture Window Books, 2004. A guide to the Statue of Liberty with highly stylized artwork and brief but informative text.

Keenan, Sheila. ***O, Say Can You See? America's Symbols, Landmarks, and Important Words***. New York: Scholastic Nonfiction, 2004. Twenty of America's symbols (places, objects, and documents) are described in easy-to-read language with engaging images.

Murray, Julie. ***Liberty Bell (All Aboard America)***. Pinehurst, NC: Buddy Books, 2005. Written for early elementary readers, this nonfiction book includes historic events and facts, along with relevant vocabulary.

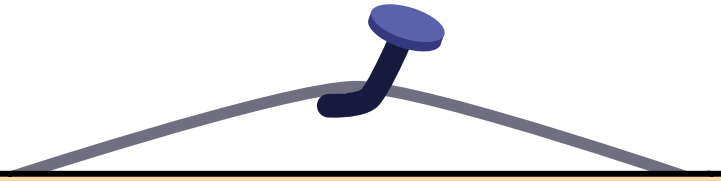
U.S. Mint, "The study of language arts, social studies, and math—not to mention science—can all benefit from the infusion of a little metal. Classroom teachers helped design all the lesson plans on this site," www.usmint.gov/kids/teachers/lessonPlans.

West, Delno C. and Jean M. West, ***Uncle Sam and Old Glory: Symbols of America***. New York: Atheneum, 2000. Good for an introduction. Short descriptions of 15 American symbols each shown as a woodcut.

Yanuck, Debbie L. ***Uncle Sam (American Symbols)***. North Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2003. The people and events responsible for the shaping of this symbol are described.

HANDOUT A

Examining a National Symbol



1. What do you see?

4. What evidence do you have to support your hypothesis?

Sketch the symbol in this center space.

2. What questions do you have for investigation?

3. What story is the creator of this object (the artist or author) trying to tell? (That is, state a hypothesis.)

HANDOUT B

Symbols in Your Community—An Investigation

Take a walk (or have your parents drive you) around your neighborhood. Keep your eyes open for possible American symbols in your neighborhood. A symbol represents more than the object itself. It can be a picture, an object, or even a use of color – something that represents an idea or a place. Complete this organizer, and be ready to share what you found with your classmates.

ITEM 1

a. Identify the object that might also be a symbol
b. Draw a picture of the symbol (draw or cut and paste a photo)
c. What does the symbol represent?
d. What values do you think are expressed through this symbol?
e. What questions do you have about this symbol?

a. _____

_____

c. _____

_____

d. _____

_____

e. _____

_____

ITEM 2

a. Identify the object that might also be a symbol
b. Draw a picture of the symbol (draw or cut and paste a photo)
c. What does the symbol represent?
d. What values do you think are expressed through this symbol?
e. What questions do you have about this symbol?

a. _____

_____

c. _____

_____

d. _____

_____

e. _____

_____

Item 1 (b)

Item 2 (b)