

Rethinking Women’s History Month to Inspire Civic Action

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Biography can be a powerful vehicle for teaching students about the lives and accomplishments of historical figures and for promoting historical inquiry in the elementary classroom. As students identify emotionally with someone who lived in the past, history comes to life.¹ New technologies and online resources can enable teachers to support students as they create innovative digital biographies using presentation software, podcasts, or video.²

Biography is a popular approach to history education in the younger grades, especially when teaching units of study during Women’s History Month, which is March. A biography-centered approach, however, can be problematic when such lessons are not tied to any context, promoting the misconception that individuals create social change in isolation. Missing in this approach are examples of collective action and common experiences among historical figures who confronted and overcame obstacles to social change. This narrow “great persons” focus can result in students viewing history as “a few famous individuals changing the minds of other individuals.”³

Jessica Staudt aimed to challenge a traditional approach to biography in her teaching about women’s history and women’s rights. Jessica knew that she wanted to do a research project in conjunction with Women’s History Month. At the same time, the fourth grade classes at her Mason City, Iowa, elementary school were tasked with completing a biographic expository writing assignment, in line with Common Core standards.⁴ Combining these two objectives, Jessica developed an assignment integrating literacy and inquiry, in which students critically explored the trials and triumphs of women leaders at both national and local levels. She aimed to help students recognize how such leaders are connected across time in their efforts to create social change, and to see ways that the struggle for gender equity continues today.

To achieve these goals, Jessica used a cooperative biography approach as a springboard for student research and later civic action.⁵ In addition to meeting Common Core Standards in English Language Arts, this project supported several national social studies standards, namely **2 TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**, **5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**, **6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**, AND **7 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**.⁶ The duration of such a project is flexible, with this one using up to three hours of classroom time per week, and lasting about three months.

Biographical Resources

Jessica selected five agents of change for her students to study: Amelia Bloomer, Maya Angelou, Carrie Chapman Catt, Ida B. Wells, and Jane Addams. While these women were all from the Midwest, the group is ethnically diverse and represents different periods of U.S. history. Jessica selected women about whom she could find appropriate digital and print texts for students to examine in their guided reading groups. She used this research project as an opportunity to teach essential literacy lessons about finding information in non-fiction texts, using



Ida B. Wells, American reporter, editor, suffragist, sociologist, and civil rights reformer, ca. 1891. Read more at www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_wells.html. (Image: Library of Congress)

text features, properly identifying sources, and taking effective notes—skills that directly link with Common Core English Language Arts standards.

To guide student research, Jessica selected a mix of digital and print resources about each of the five women. Working in small groups, students used iPads to access teacher-created QR codes, bar codes that can be easily scanned to direct students toward specific websites that feature high quality biographic materials and primary source documents. Student groups also analyzed fiction and non-fiction print resources, watched videos, listened to audio sources, and conducted their own Internet searches using a safe search engine for kids, www.kidrex.org. Jessica created a project website (sites.google.com/site/ladiesto-learnfrom/home) to manage all of the resources and encourage independent student inquiry.⁷ Her website featured step-by-step directions, resources, and rubrics for assessment, as well as a shared Google document that students used to reflect on their learning after each stage of the project.

More than Caricatures

Rather than focus merely on the usual biographic information, such as birth date, hometown, timeline of life events, and educational background, Jessica encouraged students to investigate their historical figure's key personal qualities and character traits, social contributions, struggles faced, obstacles overcome, and community partners who helped in the struggle. Jessica provided a graphic organizer (HANDOUT) for students to record their research findings and note their sources. Students recognized the ways that the women fought for equality and overcame challenges, whether structural or personal. Sam shared that "Jane Addams tried to help the poor and rich people get along." Brittany wrote, "Jane Addams and Carrie Chapman Catt both had problems with illness, but all of the women fought for women's rights." Students recognized that these women did not work in isolation. Jack wrote, "They all had helpers," thus pointing out that change does not happen just through the actions of solo citizens. Students highlighted how the women took action to try to create change. Ashley wrote, "They used their voices in some way, whether it was on paper or out loud."

Writing about What We've Found

After collaborating to collect information about their selected woman, students independently wrote expository research papers. Jessica reviewed her school's research rubric with students to identify expectations for content and quality of work. Even in this initial stage of the project, students began to exhibit greater awareness of gender issues and the ways that women overcame obstacles. In her paper about Catt, one student wrote, "A struggle she had was fighting for her own rights. She faced the people that said women couldn't do things men could do." Another student noted, "Carrie Chapman Catt was persistent because she worked on women's rights for years and years and years."

Making Connections Between Lives

Jessica asked her students to think about how these individuals are connected and how each person's life story is part of a larger community story that extends from the past to the present. Rather than considering the research papers as the culmination of her Women's History month activities, Jessica used the individual biographies as a starting point for a broader study about women's roles in the community, historically and today.

First, Jessica jig-sawed student groups so that students who studied different women were now placed together. In these new groups, students used the Making Connections graphic organizer to identify thematic connections among the five women studied.⁸



Students drew colored lines between images of the five women; each color signified a different type of connection. For example, a black line indicated that the women faced similar struggles; a yellow line illustrated that the women overcame struggles in similar ways, and a red line showed that similar character traits were exhibited.

The conversations that ensued were lively. Students posed questions to each other, such as "Carrie Chapman Catt was brave; was Amelia Bloomer brave too?" and exhibited great curiosity about the other women. In one group, a student noted, "My woman stood up to a conductor," and another countered, "My woman stood up to a lawman, so they both were standing up to people." Another student realized, "All the women were active citizens, and they all had to face their own struggles." Another student commented, "They are all known for the rights they helped make. They impacted the world with the things they were doing." Students realized that all five women exhibited great bravery in standing up to unfair social norms and used their voices in powerful ways to inspire and ignite positive social change.

Researching Contemporary Women

After students investigated and made connections among these reformers, Jessica sought to extend the conversation about women's rights into the present. She introduced her students to four contemporary local women in leadership roles: the

SIDEBAR: Keeping Social Studies Vibrant, K-6

Harding Elementary School in Mason City, Iowa, where Jessica taught this activity, is a Title I school in which more than 70 percent of the students are receiving free and reduced lunch. Despite support from the school administration for her work in all the disciplines, Jessica often felt pressure to focus on reading and math, at the expense of social studies, in an effort to increase students' test scores.

Instead of allowing social studies to get squeezed out of the curriculum in her classroom, Jessica took action and creatively integrated social studies into her literacy lessons. Student research and writing took place during the guided reading portion of the literacy block in Jessica's classroom, providing a rich opportunity for students to work together to understand texts about these women's lives and active citizenship. In addition, Jessica taught textbook analysis and letter writing as mini-lessons within this project. Her use of biography as a starting point for this larger inquiry into women's rights supported Common Core standards regarding reading and writing expository text, student research, and digital media production.

Jessica and her students faced the additional challenge of the lack of resources on past and present women leaders. She noted, "My options for texts at school were limited. The school library did not have many books about women leaders, and the few they had were outdated publications, texts that were not very engaging for 21st century learners." To compensate for the limited resources, Jessica searched online for short biographical articles that were accessible for fourth-grade guided reading groups. She provided URL links to these resources for her students, and they are still posted at sites.google.com/site/ladiestolearnfrom/past-leaders.

Note

Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996).

superintendent of the school district, the first female mayor in their town, a state representative from the area, and an Iowa state senator.⁹ Students worked in groups to research the four local leaders; they had great difficulty finding information online about the women. Jessica recalls her students' frustration, noting,

They knew from the little I had told them that these were incredible ladies who were doing great things. So why couldn't they find anything about them? Even the local newspaper didn't have much to say about any of the women. My kids got mad.

The challenge of researching local women leaders sparked students to action. Jessica encouraged students to write letters to these people to share their experiences with this project, ask questions, and discuss the challenges of trying to research local women leaders. Letter writing can be a powerful advocacy strategy for young people, helping students to articulate their views, ask thoughtful questions, and share experiences with an audience beyond their classmates and family.¹⁰

Many of the students began their letters by sharing what they had learned about women in history and the connections, namely bravery and using their voice, that they had noticed among these influential women. For instance, Brian and Jack wrote, "We studied women from the past. We did Amelia Bloomer. We learned that she fought for women's rights and made it so women could wear pants. We found out that she and some other past ladies used their voices to create change."

After describing their research, students went on to express their frustrations about finding information on local female leaders. Allie wrote, "We tried to research local women. And you were one of them! But it was hard to find information on everyone. But why?" Madison and Sarah similarly shared, "We thought it was hard to research local women because there was not a lot of information." All of the students concluded their letters by asking the female leaders important questions about how gender had affected their lives and career paths. For example, Catlyne inquired, "Did you face struggles getting to your current position? How did you overcome them? Also, did anyone help you?"

Two of the four local leaders responded to students' letters. State Senator Amanda Ragan wrote that she, too, sees the disparity of women in leadership roles. "I have noticed in the Senate that there are more men than women. While women make up over 50% of the population, in the Senate, less than 25% the Senators are women." Senator Ragan encouraged students to become advocates for women's rights, "I appreciate that you would like to see more women in roles of power and decision making. You can get involved now and when you are older to advocate for yourself and other women's rights."

Likewise, Superintendent of Mason City Schools Dr. Anita Micich graciously responded to students' letters, sharing stories from her own career, reflecting on women leaders who influenced her, and noting mentors who supported her career path. She wrote to students, "Women's roles have changed over time in our country and now more and more women have opportunities available to them for careers that were never there before. Education makes this happen."

A Graphic Organizer for Biography Research

HANDOUT

Name of the notable person _____

Research by _____

What is this woman known for? _____

What struggles did this person face? _____

How did she overcome hardships? _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Who helped this person succeed? How did they help?

What 3 character traits best describe this notable person? Give evidence for each trait.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

My questions about this topic:

Sources I used:



Maya Angelou, American poet, educator, historian, best-selling author, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist, producer and director.

(mayaangelou.com)

Sharing their Own Voices

To conclude this project, Jessica asked students to consider the question, “Why does learning about women’s history matter?” Working with partners, students responded by sharing information about the women whom they had studied and using their own fourth grade voices to articulate important messages about women’s rights and women’s history. Students elected to convey their messages in various digital formats, including recording public service announcement videos and creating digital books with text, pictures, and sound on the website www.littlebirdtales.com.

Students used digital media production as a way to publicly recognize the accomplishments and contributions of past and present women leaders. While some students highlighted the equality that past women leaders sought, other students like Carter and Evan used their Little Bird Tale as a platform to raise awareness about current, local women leaders (about whom they’d struggled to find information). For example, students wrote that State Representative Sharon Steckman “serves on many committees to help make life better for others” and that she “was a teacher and never backs down from a challenge.”

The students’ digital media productions about these women leaders were a form of taking action to promote increased equality between men and women. Through this medium, several students sought to raise awareness that women have changed the world by using their voices and being brave. One student reflected that she wanted to grow up to have a leadership position in government, just like the state senator she researched, and use her voice to advocate for women’s rights. A team of two boys shared their strong feelings that, “both men and women need to be in leadership positions so that all kids have leaders they can look up to.”

In addition, students reflected on their own responsibilities as creators of information. For example, recognizing the power of the message of their digital text, Max and Jack ended their piece by asking viewers to consider whether their own digital book was “fair.” These fourth grade students were exhibiting

a critical consciousness about their own work.

Tackling in-depth projects can be difficult in today’s educational climate (SIDEBAR). Jessica’s work reminds us of the power of an integrated approach to learning and to the rewards of finding creative ways to raise students’ awareness of key social issues and empower students to take civic action. Like the women activists her class studied, challenging conditions notwithstanding, Jessica had the power to make change in her own classroom. We all do. 🌍

Notes

1. Gary Fertig, “Using Biography to Help Young Learners Understand the Causes of Historical Change and Continuity,” *The Social Studies* 99, no. 4 (2008): 147–154.
2. Scott M. Waring, Maria Santana, and Kirk Robinson, “Revolutionary Movies: Creating Digital Biographies in the Fifth Grade,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 4 (March/April 2009): 17–19.
3. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004, p. 156).
4. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
5. Marilynne Boyle-Baise and Jack Zevin, *Young Citizens of the World: Teaching Elementary Social Studies through Civic Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
6. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands.
7. Jessica Staudt, “Ladies to Learn From,” (2013), sites.google.com/site/ladiestolearnfrom/home.
8. Gary Fertig and Rick Silverman, “Creating Biography Webs to Investigate Individuals’ Historical Contexts,” *Social Education* 73 no. 5 (2009): 244–246.
9. Dr. Anita Michich, superintendent of Mason City and Clear Lake Schools; Jean Marinos, first female mayor of Mason City; Sharon Steckman, Iowa State Representative; and Amanda Ragan, Iowa State Senator.
10. Rahima Wade, *Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

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