

Creating a Historical “Wax Museum” about Our City

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“Welcome to the *New York City Over Time* Wax Museum!” declared Carla, a second grade student and English Language Learner, speaking confidently to a group of fourth grade students as they entered her classroom. Other second graders spoke out in turn, translating the welcome into Mandarin, Cantonese, and Spanish. These speakers were among 32 second graders, all dressed in historical costumes, lined up along the walls. They all stood as still as possible in order to create the illusion of being wax figures, their broad smiles—and occasional shouts of welcome—being the only indication that they were alive.

Our classroom had become a “wax museum” of New York City’s rich history. Figures included Lenape farmers and canoe makers; European explorers Henry Hudson and Giovanni Verrazano; blacksmiths, tinsmiths, and teachers from the colonial period; rag-pickers, sky boys, subway conductors, and pretzel vendors from the industrial period; Ellis Island doctors from the early 1900s; and famous figures like Brooklyn Dodger Jackie Robinson—all arranged as a timeline around the circumference of the room. As the museum visitors (more than 30 fourth graders and their teachers) strolled through the museum, they could push the “red button” to be found on any wax figure’s hand, “activating” the figure to share a story about what life was like in New York City “during his or her lifetime.” In this Brooklyn public school, seven- and eight-year-old English Language Learners had brought to life a vast chunk of the four-hundred-year history of New York City.

years, I felt that my students had a very fragile understanding of how their community has evolved over time. They could recall events in their community’s history; they could order them on a timeline; they could even compare how things were then and now. However, when I asked students to consider the following questions—“What was life like for this person (blacksmith, pretzel seller) back then (in the 1750s, the 1880s)? How is it similar to the way we live now? Why was her life different from the life we live now? Based on what you know, how will people’s lives in the city we live in change or stay the same in the future?”—most students were stumped.

Other primary-grade teachers had voiced similar sentiments, wondering how to move students beyond merely recalling information to being able to apply, critique, and explain information to others. We wanted to move away from what author and educator David Perkins calls “aboutitis teaching,”¹ (i.e., focusing on the accumulation of facts and information) and toward teaching for true understanding (as evidenced by students’ ability to analyze and apply information). While factual knowledge is important, students should also learn how to understand history or think and act flexibly with what they know. This goal is at the heart of our wax museum project: we want students to use what they learn about New York City’s history to theorize as to why people in their community lived in the manner that they did, as well as why people live the way they do now. We want students to begin to understand continuity and change over time in their community. To do this, students need to learn to evaluate why and how events occurred by engaging with a variety of historical sources so that they can understand the contexts of each historical era and the perspectives of different people living during each time period. Once students had built schemas of New York City during different eras, and could compare these schemas to their own lives in present day New York, we hoped that they could empathize with people who were different from themselves—both those who lived in the past and those with whom they come into contact in their own community today.



From Memorization towards Understanding

The concepts of continuity and change over time can be difficult ones for second grade students to understand. In previous



Standards as a Guide

As part of the process of moving toward teaching for understanding, I worked with my colleagues and educational consultant Ryan Dunn to revise our units of study on New York City history and to align them with the recently revised New York State Common Core Social Studies Framework.² The new framework is different from the old in that it does not prescribe a list of content objectives. Rather, it emphasizes understanding concepts and key ideas through inquiry, analysis of primary and secondary source documents, and disciplinary skills and practices. We wanted students to work toward two critical understandings: Continuity/Change Over Time and Cause/Effect Relationships. Our essential questions for the unit were “How and why has New York City changed over time? How and why has it stayed the same? What could New York City look like in the future?”

In order to answer these questions, students were taught to examine continuities and changes over time in their community, using evidence such as maps, photographs, biographies, and other materials. They also developed a timeline for their community, including important events and examining changes in their community in terms of cause and effect (e.g., The development of the subway allowed for growth in the outer boroughs). As a final activity, the class would construct the *New York City Over Time* Wax Museum

Project Overview

This project was implemented over eight weeks, with teachers devoting approximately sixteen, 45-minute periods to it.³

- **Unit Launch:** Discussion and Read Aloud, in which students presented prior knowledge on the topic as well as defined the questions they wanted to answer during the investigation (1 period).
- **Note Taking:** A review of note-taking strategies that students had learned earlier in the year and an introduction of a new note taking strategy called Key Words Notes,

where students learned to identify key words and phrases in a text, write them down, and then paraphrase what they learned, using the words that they wrote down (2 periods).

- **Research Stations:** Students rotated through five research stations (Article Station, iPad Station, Photo Station, Primary Resource Station, and Listening Center Station) where they collected and categorized information about New York City’s history in research notebooks. Students rotated through each station four times over four weeks: Week 1: Life of the Lenape; Week 2: Colonial New York; Week 3: Industrial New York City; and Week 4: New York City Today (8-10 periods).
- **Speech Writing:** After completing their research, students chose a historical person and described, in the form of a one-minute speech, what his or her life would have been like and how it compared to city residents’ lives today (2 periods).
- **Museum Performance:** Students dressed as the people from New York City history formed a human timeline. Parents, teachers, and students were invited to visit the museum and learn by listening to the students’ brief speeches about life for the person they represented (1 period).

Launching the Unit

To begin our unit of study, we asked students to jot down some of the ways they thought that New York City had changed and stayed the same over time. A timeline was strung across the classroom beginning in 1500 BCE and ending in 2014 CE. Students had learned in a prior unit on our community’s geography that the Lenape Indians arrived on the island of “Mannahatta” around 1500 BCE. Students added their prior knowledge to a R.A.N. chart (R.A.N. stands for Reading and Analyzing Nonfiction).⁴ This is a tool for organizing information during a research project or informational writing unit. First, students evaluate what they think they know (or thought they knew) at the outset of a research project by confirming or rejecting ideas as they read texts on the topic. Students write these ideas on individual Post-It notes and place them in the first column of a table, “What I Think I Know.” Students then read a text, and if they are able to confirm an idea with the text, then they move the corresponding Post-It to the second column, “Yes! I Was Right!” Over the course of the project, students continuously refer back to the chart and attend to misconceptions they may have about the content. They can write wrong or unconfirmed ideas on Post-It notes and place them in a third column called “What I Couldn’t Prove.” Any new information they learn about the topic is added to a fourth column, “New Information.”

Students then participated reading aloud the picture book *Building Manhattan*,⁵ a wonderful, visual presentation that introduces the history of Manhattan and reveals how it has



changed over time. The book covers four major periods in Manhattan's history: Mannahatta: Life of the Lenape (1500 BCE-1500 CE); New Amsterdam: Colonial New York City (1600-1700); Industrial New York City (1800-1950); and New York City Today (1950-Today). These periods served as time frames for our project.

During this experience, we asked students to cite evidence from the reading that confirmed or refuted their original ideas about New York City's history. Students confirmed many of their ideas (i.e. People used horses to get from place to place in the past). They added new information they had gathered to the "New Facts and Concepts" column of the R.A.N. chart (i.e., There used to be forests in New York City! The Lenape built their houses from sticks and bark!). They also brainstormed additional questions to add to the "Wonderings" column (i.e., What did the Lenape eat?" "Did they go to school?" "If not, why not?" "How about New Amsterdam?" "What did kids do back then?") Students decided that their "wonderings" would guide their research.

During previous months, students had been exposed to research stations as a place where one can investigate new topics

and find informational reading. In addition, they had learned note-taking strategies, such as "stop and jot" and "stop and sketch." For our wax museum Project, students used these skills as they studied each time period we read about in *Building Manhattan*. At the end of each week, we reflected on what we thought we knew, as well as our new facts, concepts, and wonderings. Using statements recorded on the Post-It notes, we created a poster of facts and concepts that were key for understanding each time period. We also built a timeline that stretched across the length of our classroom to help us develop a visual representation of the ways that New York City had changed over time.

Inside the Classroom: Research Stations

Together with my students, we brainstormed various forms of technology that might be used at the various research stations we might set up. Thirty-two hands stretched up. "iPads!" "Pictures!" "Listening Center!" "Articles!" I gathered materials: videos about specific time periods, such as a demonstration of Lenape canoe making; laminated photos; and recordings of passages from trade books for the listening center.⁶ I told

students that they would have the opportunity to participate in a new station called the primary source center⁷ where they would examine materials that were made by people living during these time periods, including facsimilies of a Map of Central Park in 1870, postcards and leaflets, and a Buffalo Bill Poster. Finally, I told students that they would use a new note-taking strategy to read articles⁸ with their reading buddies. The new strategy required students to read the text two times, select key words, and then use those words while telling a friend what they had just learned.⁹

Over the next four weeks, students rotated through the five research stations, each with a task card that included discussion questions. Students were heterogeneously grouped by reading ability (grade level readers were paired with approaching grade level readers), English language level (ELLs with Former ELLs), and gender, so that students were able to access the texts together. Students added new facts and concepts using note-taking strategies into a “New York City Over Time” research notebook organized by time periods. As students learned about each time period, they also began to categorize facts under concepts such as transportation, housing, jobs, and fun things to do. I encouraged students to converse as they discovered new things: “Did you know that little kids drank beer in New Amsterdam because the water was dirty?” “No! That can’t be true.” “Look it says it right here!” At the end of each research station period, students came back to the rug in a whole group setting with their research notebooks to discuss how their understanding of New York City was changing. Students commented on how each period compared to the last.

Students added surprising new facts and insights to Post-Its that were used first as exit slips for the research station at the end of each session, and then added to the posters for each time period. For example, students were surprised to know that the population in present day New York City actually shrank during the colonial period of New Amsterdam (the Native American population shrank and the colonists struggled to increase their number). As we completed each week, we would take images from the picture station, label them, and add them to our classroom timeline. This helped students see how New York City grew from one historical period to the next.

Outside the Classroom: Field Trips

To extend student learning beyond the classroom, we took students on two field trips, first to Historic Richmond Town, where students visited shops, homes, and schools in a colonial village on Staten Island, staffed by colonial re-enactors.¹⁰ We also went to the New York City Transit Museum, where students took a guided trip back in time on one of the museum’s vintage subway or elevated train cars.¹¹ These field trips brought to life what students were learning in their research stations about different time periods in our city’s history.

As the weeks progressed and our timeline grew, and students began to comment about how much they were learning about New York City’s history, I suggested that it was time to dem-

onstrate their understanding of the different time periods by teaching someone else about the people who built their city. “How will we do that?” the students asked. “We’re going to put on a wax museum!” I replied. “A what?” the students asked. They wanted to know more.

A Way to Demonstrate Understanding

Wax Museums tend to be used by elementary school teachers in conjunction with the reading of biographies. Students select a biography, memorize facts about the person, and then represent the figure by dressing in costume and speaking in character. Although we had learned about several famous figures while studying New York City (including Henry Hudson, Phineas T. Barnum,¹¹ and Babe Ruth), the majority of figures we encountered were everyday people whose stories have not been written down.

In order to create our New York City History Wax Museum, students had to choose a historical person who contributed to New York City’s development. Students considered the following questions:

- In which time period did this figure live?
- What would his or her life have been like?
- How did this person get from place to place?
- In what type of housing did this person live?
- What kind of job would this person have?
- What would this person have done for fun?

To answer these questions, students would need to use our class timeline and their research notebooks; they might also need to conduct more research.

Because none of my students had ever been to a wax museum, we viewed the website for Madame Tussauds in Times Square. Our virtual tour of the museum generated a lot of excitement. Students recognized several of the contemporary figures and noticed that they were accompanied by a list of facts about their lives on the website. “Can we choose a wax figure from here?” some asked. Quickly, other students exclaimed, “No!” “We want to teach our visitors about New York City history!” “About the Lenape!” “About the colonists.” “About sky boys who helped build the Empire State Building.”

Each student had to select one person from New York City history to model as a wax figure. After some initial haggling over favorites, such as the colonial blacksmith (Who would not want to “demonstrate” how to weld an iron hinge?), students got to work answering questions posed to them. Many of the students were able to vividly imagine what their character’s life might have been like. Some students required additional coaching to help them apply the information they had learned to the particular figure they were representing. With a little extra support and more direct questioning, students were able to imagine the life of their own character. I provided students

with a rubric and a checklist of what I expected visitors to learn in our wax museum, as well as a rubric for presentation, which included speaking clearly and loudly, making eye connect with the audience, and holding any notes (for reading aloud) below the belly button, not in front of one's face.

Over the course of two days, students crafted one-minute speeches about what their figures' lives would have been like. "Carie," a student who represented an immigrant ragpicker, wrote about living in a cramped tenement, changing her name to fit into her new country, and being unable to attend school.

Ciao! My name is Carie. I am an immigrant from Italy. When I was alive the population of New York City was three and a half million people. I lived in Industrial New York.

My job was a ragpicker. I collected old clothes. My family only had a little money so I had to work and didn't go to school. ... One fun fact is that when I was in Italy, my name was Carla but in New York City I wanted a better name so I called myself Carie...

When I was alive we didn't have a lot of money and we didn't have a lot of space in our apartment. Today, that's the same. Just like back then people today still collect things like cans to earn money. Back then, we didn't have a lot of food, but today we have more stores like supermarkets instead of just vegetable and meat stores...

Unlike previous social studies writing assignments, where students often listed facts that they had learned, students' speeches included vivid descriptions of New York City over time, showing real understanding about how their community had changed over time in terms of its housing, jobs, transportation, entertainment, and environment.

Empathy as Action

My second grade students presented their New York City Over Time Wax Museum to administrators, family members, and more than ten groups from other classes. They demonstrated a strong understanding about the topic and had developed important social studies practices, such as gathering, using, and interpreting evidence; chronological reasoning; causation; and comparison and contextualization.

Yet, there is more that could be done. Social studies as a practice should help students take action about the things that matter to them. In this lesson, students were asked to learn about and put themselves in another person's shoes. When we put ourselves in another person's shoes, we see the same situation from different perspectives and are often more sensitive to what that person is experiencing. This should make us less likely to treat them unkindly. As we reflect on and revise the unit for next year, I see an opportunity to use this experience to help students think about who benefited and who suffered during different periods in the development of New York City. By explicitly teaching students to be more conscious of other people's perspectives, we can create a more accepting and respectful school

and city community. Are there people who benefit more today than others from changes in our community? I look forward to hearing students' thoughts about this topic. 🌍

Notes

1. David Perkins, *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*. (San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
2. "New York State K-8 Common Core Social Studies Framework" engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/ss-framework-k-8.pdf.
3. Social studies is taught two to three times per week at our school as a stand-alone subject. However, we often incorporate social studies texts in our reading workshops depending on the needs of the students. For example, the time devoted to understanding texts varies a lot depending on whether the class is a bilingual class for newcomers or ESL students, or a monolingual class with mostly former English Language Learners.
4. Tony Stead, *Reality Checks: Teaching Reading Comprehension with Nonfiction* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2006).
5. Laura Villa, *Building Manhattan* (New York: Viking, 2008).
6. I audio-recorded my reading of passages from these books. Students read the texts as they listened to my voice in the school's Listening Center Station.
7. Primary Sources: *New York City Then and Now*, www.teachercreatedmaterials.com/estore/product/11121
8. I adapted articles for my students' reading levels from a variety of sources, including websites, trade books, and museum brochures.
9. "How to Model Note Taking: blog.stenhouse.com/archives/2009/04/14/quick-tip-tuesday-how-to-model-note-taking/.
10. "Historic Richmond" (VA), historichrichmondtown.org.
11. "New York Transit Museum," web.mta.info/mta/museum.

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