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Assessing History Through Interaction: Preventing lectures as a base of education

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ASSESSING HISTORY THROUGH INTERACTION

Preventing lectures as base of education

JUNE 5, 2024
ANNAK BJORNSTAD
Honors Capstone
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Introduction

When I talk about my studies, few of my peers understand why I chose to study history. Their experiences in history classrooms have made it all but impossible to imagine a world where they might choose to pursue the subject professionally. In fact, they all tell variations on the same story: how, when they were kids, they loved history and the idea of discovering what happened in the past; and how, over time, their excitement and admiration were sapped by high-school history’s lectures, textbooks, and standardized tests. These same peers now think of the words boredom and history as one and the same. And, looking back over my own experiences, I understand their frustration.

Many overlook, however, the extraordinary pressure placed on secondary-education teachers to improve their school’s state-wide test scores, and the extent to which those improvements are used to evaluate job performance. Faced with looming deadlines and constantly changing standards, teachers are often forced to use the most easily-accessible tools for maintaining student progress: premade lectures and outdated textbooks. This capstone aims to change that. What follows is a template for interactive lessons meant to give teachers and students greater flexibility within the state standards while also providing ample opportunities for collaboration and creativity. It is my hope that the work herein can provide a foundation for lesson plans and syllabi that are no longer beholden to a single mode of instruction.

The work is split into two sections: Knowledge for Teachers and Knowledge for Students. Knowledge for Teachers contains infrastructural information for the creation of a learning environment that is conducive to interactive learning. With examples of ideal classroom spaces and practices, as well as suggestions for physical and temporal organization, this section gives educators a functional understanding of how and where these lessons might unfold. The Classroom Practices area of this section not only provides examples of produced work, but also examples and steps to
show how historical context can be delivered. That said, the most important focus within *Knowledge for Teachers* is the outline of the **Washington state standards**. Within these standards, although there are distinct historical subject-requirements for each grade level, there is a continuous expectation of what students should be able to contextualize and produce with the context they are given. Using the four state standards that are *output-oriented* as opposed to *subject-focused*, I have connected specific interactive practices to their corresponding state standards. Instead of changing the state standards or *rejecting* state-wide tests, this section accepts the pressures of both. In so doing, *Knowledge for Teachers* invites educators to consider the curriculum provided as a means of rethinking administrative constraint.

The second section, *Knowledge for Students*, contains explanatory material for the students themselves. This includes classroom expectations, where, for example, students are invited to collaborate with the instructor to decide what participation should look like. There are also sample assignments and grading policies. In the *Student Interaction* section, the primary goal is to allow students to understand why classroom engagement is important. As a student, whenever I encountered something that was frustrating or time-consuming within the classroom, the first question I asked was, “Why is this important?” This section allows both teachers and students to answer this question together, while also showing students that historical events are not frozen in the past.

I undertook this project for many reasons. For my love of the discipline, for my belief in the classroom as a site of exploration, for my future as an educator, and for all the other teachers who are brave enough to teach history in the secondary setting. As much as I would like to believe that we’ll all wake up one day ready to prioritize life-long learning over short-term performance metrics, the truth is: our students need us, and they need us now. As teachers, it is up to us to see the limitations we inherit as the raw material of change. It is up to us to create spaces where students
can challenge themselves and one another, no matter the setting or expectation. The subject of history itself is fluid and ever-changing, and it is my hope that, with the work that follows, our students, teachers, and classrooms might be fluid and ever-changing, too.
Knowledge for Teachers

Physical Classroom Space

Tables of around four to six students each, also called islands of concentration. The purpose is to “give groups and individuals working alongside each other the necessary privacy for focused attention” (19). These islands allow students to sit where they are comfortable, allowing them to feel more comfortable communicating with each other. Natural light along with ambient lighting allows for students to feel awake without feeling overstimulated, creating a space that encourages attention and focus within the present.

The goal with the physical classroom space is to provide a space where students can feel comfortable to learn. Comfortability comes in many forms, but traditionally students need to feel safe and relaxed within the classroom setting. This allows students to learn, as they are more willing to participate if they are comfortable.

Example of Classroom Set-Up:

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1 Steve Lawrence and Benjamin Staehli, "Montessori Architecture A Design Instrument" (Amsterdam: Arthur Waser Foundation, 2023.)
Ideal Class Day

*Important Note:* These activities are based off the block schedule, which consists of two 90-minute class periods every other day and one 50-minute class day at the end of the week. This benefits the actions of each class day as there is more time during the class periods and a day in between each class, allowing students to process what has gone on during the previous class. Due to the classes being 90-minutes long, students can delve deeper into the topic, as there is more time to wrestle with a concept instead of waiting for the next class period.

*Content Delivery:* Splitting content lectures and background into up to 5–15-minute segments, which is also known as microlearning. Segments consist of important historical details relating to the class objective, along with the important historical characters. There is context given regarding the event being learned about in class, along with chronologically connecting it to the previous class session. By the end of the learning segment, students should understand where and when the historical event took place and the important characters of the event. Microlearning contains a lesson plan where each section of content has one distinct learning objective allowing for students to grasp the main arguments and content from each segment. Many studies have shown that this benefits students’ attention spans and processing skills, as students are easily able to find the important details of the content.²

*Contextual Delivery Steps:* (Using example of Hops Industry Presentation)

1. Important Context to Deliver: Dates, where event took place, turning points, historical characters present, actions taken.

2. Make short (5-15 minute) presentation with these things in mind

Example presentation: [Capstone Presentation.pptx](#)

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Individual Work

Often based on reflection, individual work will occur at the beginning of class. Due to this work setting up the class, instead of individual work, it can also be called sparks or kindling, amongst other things. The students will receive an open-ended question about the previous class period. They will then have about five to fifteen minutes to answer the question however they see fit. Reflecting on previous content allows for students to grasp concepts better, along with aiding retention rates.\(^3\)

Example Reflection(s):

**What comes to mind when you think about the American Revolution?**

When I think about the American Revolution, I think about the British and the red coats. In addition, I think about George Washington leading particular battles, along with the Boston Tea party. With the American Revolution, I feel like I know a lot of it already, as we have learned about this topic for years in school. I have also watched Hamilton, which showed how important he was to the writing of the constitution, along with the revolution itself. I also remember that the French helped us with the revolution, forcing the country into debt. I know that the American Revolution influenced the French revolution as well, and I think a revolution in South America, but I’m not sure.

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Note: A Student’s reflection at the beginning of class does not have to be put together! It is a display of ideas that allows them to process what the learning goal is for that day. In addition, as seen above, there are multiple ways a student can portray what they know, so allow for all processes to occur.

**Small Group Work**

Using document-based lessons to understand context and arguments. Document Based Lessons consist of having students receive and analyze a group of primary and secondary sources about an event. The focus is to have students focus on the nature of historical knowledge, along with the historical narratives that are being portrayed within the documents⁴. Must come after background segment, allowing students to expand upon their knowledge of the subject. Engaging in leading questions, allowing for students to produce open-ended answers. Make sure to ask students if the narrative “makes sense”, leading the discussion around a central historical argument.

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Note: A historical narrative revolves around the ideas that are emphasized during a Historical event. Although History is seen as a stationary event, History is made up of stories with evidence. Within our present day, it is important to acknowledge the type of evidence that is used in regard to a Historical event, as the person telling the story is often attempting to get an argument across. Once a narrative has been found out, the student must analyze the argument that the historian is attempting to portray, relating the narrative to other narratives regarding a similar historical event to ensure its legitimacy to what happened during a specific event.

Note: See Washington State Standards section to see leading question examples.

Large Group Work

Work on analyzing the narratives the documents produced, comparing it to the context given at the beginning of class. Allow for the students to lead the discussion, allowing them to question and produce their own narratives within the historical content based on the context that was given. Students can lead the discussion in a variety of ways, but the main goal is to not be talking for the teacher’s approval. This means, that if there is a lull in the conversation, it is mostly up to the students to think about what to talk about next. In addition, students are the ones that decide what to talk about in general, with the teacher making sure that everyone is heard, along with making sure that the discussion remains on topic. One of the common questions to start the discussion would be to ask the students what historical context is missing. This allows students to recognize and understand negative biases.
Washington State Historical Standards

Uses critical reasoning skills to analyze and evaluate claims

- Classroom Focus: Analysis, Distinction between argument and evidence
- Classroom Questions: What makes a source credible? What is the argument of this piece, does the argument presented make sense, is it credible? What is the evidence of this piece, does it help the argument?
- Potential Practices: Students individual reading primary sources, coming from multiple figures during specific event or time period.

Research: Having the students read the sources regarding a specific historical event allows for them to engage in “open-ended” investigations, allowing more engagement with the even to occur.

Uses inquiry-based research

- Classroom Focus: Encouraging a space where students can ask and create questions regarding the subject. Allow students to discover and interact with the content naturally.
- Classroom Questions: What do you want to learn more about? What is interesting to you about this topic? What do you already know about this topic?
- Potential Practices: Individual reflection, asking/answering questions above. Sharing and discussing answers to classroom questions in a small group, around 2-3 people.

Research: Allowing students to create and ask questions is also called self-determination theory. This theory allows for students to connect their personal activities with their environment, allowing for historical context to be connected to present-day life. This theory also allows for students to

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5 Avishag Reisman, “The Document-Based Lesson”. 
safely interact with leadership and freedom of choice in connection to the material, encouraging students to engage in the content more in depth\textsuperscript{6}.

**Deliberates public issues**

- **Classroom Focus**: Debating on an issue using credible sources to back up an argument. Looking at historical narratives regarding the evidence used to back up an argument.

- **Classroom Questions**: What are the narratives presented regarding the arguments provided in the evidence? Do the narratives presented feel accurate considering the context that you know about this event? How can we portray an argument while listening to another individual?

- **Potential Practices**: Student-led discussions (see Discussion expectations above), Individual reflections with evidence. Having students answer or create and answer an open-ended question about the given topic.

**Research**: Having students find the historical narratives themselves allows for less teachers biases to occur in regard to the event. Due to myself being a white teacher, the discussion allows for more students of different backgrounds to input their personal experiences and compare them with the historical event we are evaluating\textsuperscript{7}.

**Producing an entity that supports a student-made claim**

- **Classroom Focus**: Making connections between disconnected subjects.

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• Classroom Questions: Why is this event/topic important? Why is your claim important? What are the arguments that have already been made in relation to the topic/event? What is missing from the historical narratives made in relation to the topic/event?

• Potential Practices: Creating a creative entity, does not have to be an essay to be a product that supports a claim (See: Open-ended creative assignment below)

Research: If students are able to choose the entity they are creating, it helps them contribute to different competencies, with the students focusing on learning the content opposed to the result\(^8\).

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Knowledge for Students.

*Note: The following material is intended to be shared and developed with students according to the needs of each classroom.*

Participation and what it looks like.

What does participation look like to you? What actions come to mind when the word participation arises?

Below, I’ve included brief explanations for what participation looks like to me, but if we’re going to build this class together, I need know what participation looks like to you. As you read, think about what you want to add to our *This Is What Participation Looks Like* document:

**Individual Work:** With every individual assignment, a) including an explanation of how and why the assignment challenged you; b) creating work that reflects challenging engagement.

**Small-Group Work:** Communicating one’s ideas through writing or speaking with consistency, respect, and patience. Taking note of other individual ideas. Eye contact, focus on group work, even when not talking with the group. Looking at documents that have been provided and interacting with them. Connecting ideas posed by others.

**Large-Group Work:** Communicating one’s ideas through writing or speaking consistency, respect, and patience. Taking note of other’s ideas, providing your own commentary or ideas. Questioning yourself and others. Maintaining eye contact, looking attentive, focused on conversation, even if not talking with the group. Still looking at documents that were brought up in

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9 Ideally this would be open-ended but can change depending on the classroom and students involved. Some forms of taking note of other ideas can be writing notes down, verbally recognizing an idea, or bringing up the idea in the next classes’ reflection.
conversation, following along with conversation, writing down what you think is important to remember.

**Homework/Assignments:** Using the ideas that were presented in class through discussion or individual work to back up your arguments. Active use of the documents provided in class. Turning in assignments by their due dates, unless exempt from due date by teacher. With every individual assignment, a) including an explanation of how and why the assignment challenged you; b) creating work that reflects challenging engagement.

So: what does participation look like to you? What do you want to add? What did I miss? Or...what does participation not look like?

**Grading**

**Participation**

Since most of our work will take place in the classroom, once we have reached a collective agreement for what constitutes successful participation, this will be your primary grade in the class.

My hope is that by allowing you more time to focus on your lives outside of the classroom, it will increase your focus inside of the classroom. This, I hope, will also lead to less burnout—and more interaction with class materials. Furthermore: participation creates community. I want our differences to create space and connection with the lessons. I want participation to be our common ground.

And, as for the work itself, this emphasis on participation should give you the time to focus on the process of learning instead of the completion of an assignment.

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10 Heeok Jeong, "Agency and pedagogy in literacy education".
More to the point: the act of participating in this classroom is the work of history. Historical events are complex, fluid, mobile, and volatile, and they require us to be those things, too. The more changeable we are, the more we will connect with historical events. And the more we connect, the more incisive our analyses will become. Why? So that history can be seen for what it is: a constantly changing discipline, even if the events being discussed occurred hundreds of years ago.11

What about assignments?

Assignments and homework will represent a smaller portion of grade, but they’ll be no less important.

Because I believe it will give you the chance to synthesize the information we encounter and connect to it in a more individualized manner, our assignments will focus on process12. Instead of rushing through the assignment to complete the next, I want you to have the time to be creative. I want you to build connections between the work of our classroom and the work of your life. In order to do that, you have to create the work that works for you—not the work you think I want to see.13

Note for teachers: See possible rubrics and introductions to possible assignments below.

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12 Macarena-Paz Celume, Maud Besancon and Franck Zensani, “Fostering Child and Adolescents’ Creative Thinking in Education”.
13 Macarena-Paz Celume, “Fostering Child and Adolescents’ Creative Thinking in Education”.
Reflections.

Glossary. These words can mean many things, but here, now, is what they mean to us:

Argument: A stance that was taken at the event, sometimes with evidence or without.

Bias: Using one’s personal experiences and values to dictate their argument and evidence.

Narrative: A story being put forth regarding a historical individual or event.

Reflections are processes of observing, acknowledging, or questioning content.

In a Reflection, acknowledging the arguments, biases, and narratives presented within specific content will be crucial. But just as important—and maybe more important—will be the process of acknowledging your own contributions and responses to our work in the classroom.

What do I mean? Reflections can:

- Asses your contributions to class and identify new or different ways to engage in class.
- Trace how class discussion unfolded and how your (and our) ideas changed or developed as a result.
- Recognize your role in the discussion and how it contributed to classwide experience.
- Add your own argument to the content provided during class time.
- Compare the content provided in class to personal life experiences.
- Acknowledge biases that appear in our readings and the roles they play within.
- Acknowledge biases that appeared in the classroom and the roles they played within in.
- Question the narratives that appeared in the content provided in class.

But...Reflections do not have to be written in traditional paragraph form. They can be, of course, but they can also take whatever form you want them to. Trust me. Look at Canvas! The submissions can include but are not limited to writing, voice notes, songs, drawings, rants...and the list goes on.

As you consider your first Reflection, there are some guidelines you should adhere to:

- The content that is being reflected on must be from the current class week. Simply: keep it to what we are doing now.
• The reflection must include some form of a question. Your question does not have to be related to the class content necessarily, but it must be related to the class week itself.

• The reflection must be yours. You may use ideas that were mentioned in class, but the work that you submit to me must be your own.

There will be three possible grades for these reflections: A, C, and F. An F in the gradebook means you did not turn in or complete the assignment. A C in the gradebook means you completed the assignment, but that its content was not reflective of what I know you are capable of. This does not mean you have to spend an hour on your reflection. But I would like to be able to tell if you thought about something that happened during class. An A in the gradebook means that you completed the assignment in a way that reflects the complexity of classroom discussion.

And that’s it! If you have any questions regarding what content or form of media is accepted. The answer is simply, yes.
Doing with Documents.

You’re all familiar with history textbooks. Timelines and keywords and maps of maps. Please read chapters whatever to whatever by some day next week.

But, when you get a textbook, it’s easy to forget that you are being told what the important parts of an historical event are. Someone, sometime, went through mountains of material, decided what was important, found the sources they needed, and used those sources to support an historical argument or narrative. For the record: that’s not a bad thing! That’s just what history is!

So, in this class, instead of having you read a textbook, I’m having you make a history textbook. Kind of.

Instead of having you read a textbook, the goal is for you to construct your own narratives about an historical event, using different sources to determine important details. You will be dealing with two types of sources throughout this class:

**Primary sources**: Sources that were made during the time of the event, by someone who took place in that event.

Using the Boston Tea Party as an example: newspapers about the Boston Tea Party, photographs, journal entries from participants, posters from the British, legislature citing the Boston Tea Party, etc., would all fall under the category of a primary source.

**Secondary sources**: Sources that were made after the time of that event no matter if they were present or not.

Using the Boston Tea Party as an example: a book about the Boston Tea Party written in 2010, journal entries from 1920 mentioning the Boston Tea party, artwork depicting the Boston Tea Party that was painted in 1850, etc., would all fall under the category of a secondary source.

Although it seems daunting, the job is clear: using the sources you have at your disposal, you are going to figure out what’s important about an historical event and use evidence to support your argument or narrative.
You will be doing this work in class with your teacher and your peers. You’ll use both primary and secondary sources to analyze the different historical narratives that are being portrayed, along with making your own conclusion about the historical event.

Interacting with sources is different than interacting with a history textbook. Textbooks provide specific context for the sources chosen. Although I will provide you with some historical context with which to situate yourselves, it is going to be up to you to determine whether or not the sources provided are necessary for the narrative you’re developing.

Open-ended? For sure. But there are some requirements for you to follow:

- You must analyze the sources. And analyzing can consist of many things. Ask yourself: what details are sticking out to me? Are any interesting, unique, suspicious, or exciting quotes or voices or takeaways? Who’s writing this and why? Who took this photo and why? How are certain people portrayed? The questions are endless.

- You must decide what is important about an historical event using evidence from sources, context, or other evidence-based narratives provided during class time.

- You must decide what is important, along with stating if you believe that the sources given to you are helpful for understanding this historical event. You never have to agree with the sources given to you, and your frustration is welcomed.

- When you decide what is important in an historical narrative, you must say why those particular events are important. Ex., *The Boston Tea Party was lit because they dumped tea* is not a valid why statement.

Let’s get started!


**Sources used in example context PowerPoint**

**Slide 5**


*Illustration of Ezra Meeker’s hop processing plant.* 1883. 3 x 5 inches. Puyallup Washington.

**Slide 6**


**Slide 7**

Sources used in capstone presentation

“30,000 Workers to Harvest Hops” Pickers to Start Tomorrow on Late Crop.” The Oregonian, August 1936.


“Crowds Spend Vacations Picking Hops.” Spokane Chronicle, September 1933.

Siewart, Herman. Three older Native American women dressed in Western clothing in a hop field. 1891. 4 ¼ x 6 ½ inches. Puyallup, Washington.