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Informing Preservice Teachers about Multiple Representations of Historical Events

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Abstract

Since historical thinking can be such an unnatural process, social studies educators need to find effective methods to open students' minds to historical ways of thinking while building upon and modifying researching skills already possessed. This article looks at one way to assist students in thinking historically and making them more aware of the multiple representations that may exist of an historical event or time period. Through the utilization of one historical event, the Battle of Lexington Green and the World Wide Web, the process described demonstrates how one technique for instilling and enhancing historical thinking may be used.

Introduction

Researchers in social studies education increasingly have examined the concept of historical thinking (Hartzler-Miller, 2001; Levstik, 1997; Levstik & Barton, 2001; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 1991). This approach refers to the idea of allowing students to think like historians by engaging them in the act of "doing history" (Levstik & Barton, 2001; Wineburg, 1991). More and more, there is an emphasis, within national and state standards, that students be taught historical thinking skills. For example, the 1996 National Standards for History defined history as "a process of reasoning based on evidence from the past" that "must be grounded in the careful gathering, weighing, and sifting of factual information such as names, dates, places, ideas, and events" (p. 49). The 1994 National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards stated that a well-designed social studies curriculum will help each learner to construct a blend of views of the human condition. NCSS maintained that students should learn how to build a personal perspective that allows them to investigate emerging events and persistent or recurring issues and consider implications for themselves, their family, and the national and world community.

Social studies students need to be encouraged to learn how to make their own choices after weighing a variety of components, including personal expectations, positive and negative aspects of a situation, responsibilities and expectations, and results of those choices for themselves and others. History, as it is taught in many schools, too often ignores an essential element of historical thinking by teaching history as static facts to be learned and in a singular form of what happened in the past, void of interpretation (Hartzler-Miller, 2001; Levstik, 1997). Levstik (1997) contended that American culture presents historical issues as a dichotomous battle between those who are right and wrong or the winners and the losers; she argues that it is essential that history be taught in a way that is contrary to this belief. Other researchers concur and argue that a more effective and engaging method of teaching history allows children to consider multiple perspectives and conduct historical inquiry (Drake & Brown, 2003).

Wineburg (2001) noted that historical thinking is not a natural process and is not something that children attain easily or automatically. Its achievement, Wineburg asserted:

> actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think—one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates, and stories than it is to change the basic mental structures we use to grasp the meaning of the past. (p. 7)

Mature historical thinking allows individuals to "go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born" (Wineburg, 2001, p. 24). As students are given opportunities to use "primary source material, contextual clues, empathy, and imagination to interpret events, they experience the ways in which authors' backgrounds and values influence historical accounts" (Hartzler-Miller, 2001, p. 676).

Despite the sophisticated nature of historical thinking, research on how students learn history and how it has been taught clearly demonstrates that students are capable of "doing history" and engaging in historical thinking beginning as early as in the elementary grades (Levstik & Barton, 1997). For example, Booth (1980) argued that history is an adductive process in which children, as young as the age of four, were able to ask open-ended questions about historical events and could construct productive answers. Downey and Levstik (1988) asserted that history instruction should begin at the earliest possible age; there is no benefit in delaying it. Children, at the youngest ages, are capable of making basic distinctions in historical time (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Brophy & VanSledright, 1997). Barton (1997) found that children in kindergarten were able to determine differences between the present day and events in the past. All of this points to the capability of students, as early as elementary aged children, to engage in lessons that allow them to think historically.

If children are expected to attribute meaning and to understand how the history that they read in texts, magazines, and books was created and constructed, they must go into the field and authentically create history in a manner similar to that of a professional historian. Researchers refer to this authentic investigation as disciplined inquiry or, more specifically, historical inquiry (Avery, 2000; Levstik & Barton, 1997; Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). Through historical inquiry, students learn that the accounts that they read are subjective and created by a person with his or her personal motives and beliefs. By constructing a historical narrative through their own authentic investigation, students can gain a better understanding that there are various viewpoints to each historical event and that no one account is all encompassing.

When students rush through the acquisition of facts, the best they can hope for is to retain bits and pieces and maybe have the opportunity to revisit the content at another time in another grade. When students "do" history rather than memorize names, dates, and events, they achieve authentic intellectual achievement. Seixas (1998) notes that "students do not have the prior knowledge, language skills, or training of the historian. The responsibility thus lies on the teacher to arrange suitable encounters with historical sources and accounts" (p. 314). Unfortunately, historical inquiry seldom is practiced in social studies classrooms throughout the United States (Hartzler-Miller, 2001); through the interaction with preservice teachers in social studies methods courses, university instructors have an opportunity to improve upon the ways future K-12 educators think about how social studies content should be conveyed.

Researchers predict that technology use in education is increasing and will continue to do so, particularly given the mandates of state and national standards (ISTE, 2004; Kleiner & Farris, 2002; Newburger, 2001). Technology is the perfect medium to assist educators in an effort to allow students to think and act as historians (Martorella, 1998; Mason et al., 2000). The World Wide Web offers social studies educators ample opportunities for providing their students inquiry-based lessons through data collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources (Milson, 2002) and, most importantly, in ways that the instructor could not do without technology or, at least, in a more efficient manner (Dawson & Harris, 1999). Many educators, teaching social studies content, are still relying upon the textbook as their primary source of information for their students (Lee, Doolittle, & Hicks, 2006), and it is also unlikely that these individuals will raise probing questions or create activities that allow the text to come to life (Ravitch, 1998). Thus, preservice teachers must be made aware of how technology, more specifically the World Wide Web, facilitates the acquisition of historical thinking and inquiry skills.

Procedure

Preservice teachers and, in turn, their future students must be taught the skills necessary to successfully evaluate online sources for accuracy, authority, and authenticity. Prior to any activity evaluating multiple representations of historical events, time should be spent looking at how one would properly evaluate online historical sources. The Cornell University Library's Five Criteria for Evaluating Web Pages and Purdue University Library's Comprehensive Online Research Education Tutorial offer great resources for assisting educators in evaluating online resources. Without this basic knowledge, evaluating multiple representations of historical events, taken from online sources, would not be as valuable of an endeavor.

The following activity, which is being used with preservice teachers in their social studies methods course, looks at the way in which the World Wide Web can be utilized to teach an historical event, specifically the Battle of Lexington Green. This helps them to see how they may begin the process of allowing school-aged students an opportunity to think like historians by engaging them in authentic historical inquiry. Through a focus on the Battle of Lexington Green, teachers can illustrate the fact that different accounts of the same historical event may be portrayed in dissimilar ways and even confuse and include contradictions to other historical accounts and sources, even though there has been over 200 years to come to some consensus. This process allows students to have an opportunity to use various accounts available on the World Wide Web to construct their own understanding of a range of aspects of this historical event.

An introductory video, entitled Road to Revolution is available on the Revolutionary Viewpoints web site and used as a precursor to the investigation of the Battle of Lexington Green. This video provides a brief overview of some of the events leading up to the first shots of the American Revolution, which gives them enough background information to begin their inquiry.

Next, students are provided several web sites that discuss the events of the Battle of Lexington Green. These sites were some of the first results returned after performing a search through one of the most commonly utilized search engines, a procedure similar to that which might be used by a school-aged student who was asked to investigate information about an historical event. As the preservice teachers have the opportunity to investigate this list of web sites pertaining to the Battle of Lexington Green, they are asked to fill in sections of a question sheet that is provided to them (see Appendix). This sheet includes questions such as: "How many British were present?"; "How many Americans were present?" "Who fired first?"

The first web page that is shared with the students is one that is part of a web site created for Henderson Island –part of the Pitcairn Island group in the south Pacific. This island group was named for the son of Major John Pitcairn, a participant in the Battle of Lexington Green. The creator of this web site decided to include information about Major Pitcairn and his involvement in the American Revolution. In this account, 77 armed American Militia were present and in formation on the green, while Pitcairn brought 200 well-equipped marines with him that morning. It stated, "It is known that Parker's men did return fire, though it is unlikely that they held their ground for long" (para. 10). This site indicates that after the battle was complete, eight Americans died and ten more were wounded.

The next site that was shared with the students is that of the Jubilee Newspaper, which dubs itself as being "The Newspaper of Record for the American Christian Patriot." On this site, there is a section entitled, "The Battle of Lexington: A Day All Patriots Should Remember." This section of the site reports that the battle pitted "a British contingent of 140 grenadiers" (para. 1) versus "70 Patriots of Lexington" (para. 2). The site mentions that after the battle ended, "Eight brave Patriots fell dead and ten lay wounded on the Lexington Green" (para. 3). When addressing the question of whether the American Militiamen fired, this site notes that "The courageous men of Lexington returned one volley of shot into the British line wounding but one" (para. 3). This is also a good lesson to discuss bias and how language can alter perceptions of how an historical event occurred and the nature of the participants involved.

The third site, Public Bookshelf, states on their homepage that the information available on their site is "as is, with all faults." The page provided about the Battle of Lexington Green is from "Our Country," which was originally published in 1877 as a "Household History for All Readers." This version of the Battle of Lexington Green indicates that "Eight hundred British troops marched silently to the foot of the Common"; although it does not mention the exact numbers that were involved in the battle. The American leader Captain Parker "found himself at the head of almost seventy men" (para. 5). As the battle neared, Major Pitcairn is thought to have yelled "Disperse, you villains! Lay down your arms! Why don't you disperse, you rebels? Disperse!" (para. 6). The site mentions that at that very moment, the British soldiers fired some random shots over the heads of the Americans but had no effect. It also indicates that the "Minute-men had scruples about firing, until their own blood had been spilled" and that once "the blood of their comrades had been shed, and as the shrill fife of young Jonathan Harrington set the drum a-beating, the patriots returned the fire with spirit, but not with fatal effect"(para. 7).

Eight minutemen died as a result of the skirmish. No British soldier lost his life in this battle, but three of the British were wounded, “with Pitcairn's horse” (para. 7).

The next site students have the opportunity to view is from the Department of Military Science at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. This site indicates that the British column, consisting of “650-900 troops” (para. 2), arrived at Lexington Green and that Pitcairn ordered the militia “to be surrounded and disarmed” (para. 4). In the end, eight Americans were killed and ten more were wounded and “so started the first battle in the American Revolutionary War” (para. 5). This version goes on to state that the “British column then advanced to Concord…This time when shots rang out, the Americans were more prepared and fired back in ‘The Shot Heard Round The World’ and so began the American Revolution” (para. 6), which contradicts all of the other sites, even itself, about where the “The Shot Heard Round the World” occurred.

Through the web site Battle at Lexington Green, 1775: The Start of the American Revolution and the ‘shot heard round the world, the students are given an opportunity to view a primary source account, a sworn affidavit, that indicates that the Americans never fired upon the British. All of the other accounts they investigate note that the Americans fired upon the British, after being fired upon, except for this primary source. In the words of twenty-three-year-old Sylvanus Wood, one of the Lexington militia present that morning on Lexington Green, “There was not a gun fired by any of Captain Parker's company, within my knowledge. I was so situated that I must have known it, had any thing of the kind taken place before a total dispersion of our company” (para. 9).

By investigating these sources, as well as others, the students find that many different representations of the Battle of Lexington Green exist. They find that the British contingent numbered anywhere from 140 to 1,300 soldiers and that these British marines faced an American force of somewhere between 39 and 130 militiamen. Also, we learn that eight Americans were killed and ten wounded, but we are not exactly sure of what Pitcairn yelled, how many British were injured, or if the horse is included in the statistics. Some of the questions that are asked of them have a clear-cut answer, while some answers have great inconsistency between them.

Once the students have had ample opportunity to review the Internet sources, they are asked to look at a group of six paintings interpreting the Battle of Lexington Green from the web site Revolutionary Viewpoints. They are asked to gather in small groups so that they may view these while collectively answering questions from a “What Do You See” guide. Together, they go through the three sections of the guide: observation, knowledge, and interpretation. These sections ask the students questions that allow them to describe exactly what they see in each of the paintings, to summarize what they already know about the situation and time period shown and the people and objects that appear, and to discuss the conclusions that can be made from what they are able to see in the images. Lastly, they are asked to discuss what questions that the images have raised and what are some sources that can be used to find those answers.

Lastly, the students have an opportunity to view a reenactment video of the battle on the web site The Battle of Lexington: Patriot's Day Reenactment 2003. The students are asked to think about the data collected about the Battle of Lexington Green from their prior knowledge, the web sites reviewed, the historical paintings, and the reenactment video. They discuss similarities and differences between the various resources and decide how the Battle of Lexington Green might have “occurred” and how it might be presented to school-aged students. This process helps them to better understand the process of historical inquiry, how historians create historical accounts, and how bias, interpretation, and multiple representations exist in historical narratives.

Conclusion

Recently, teachers in the state of Florida were presented with House Bill 7087 that states that American history should be viewed as "factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable" (line 1159-1161). This causes great consternation for all involved in social studies education. This mindset is most difficult for preservice teachers, as they are confronted with differing interpretations and representations throughout their education, primarily while conducting online research for their own university class assignments. This is evidenced in this quick inquiry activity on the Battle of Lexington Green.

It is essential that preservice teachers are provided the skills and knowledge necessary to enable them to conduct online historical inquiry projects with their own future student population. By having an opportunity to evaluate multiple sources of a single historical event, preservice teachers begin to understand that much of what is told and written about historical events is subject to the interpretation of its author and that varying accounts do exist. This activity also opens an opportunity for further investigation of primary and secondary sources as well as searching for other perspectives, specifically that of the British. This process utilizes the World Wide Web for purposes of allowing preservice teachers the opportunity to understand that multiple representations of historical events exist, while also allowing them to see the benefit of permitting their future students the opportunity to engage in authentic historical inquiry through the utilization of the resources provided through the World Wide Web. Once empowered with the knowledge and skill base necessary to conduct online research and inquiry-based assignments, these preservice teachers will become more effective and empowered social studies educators.

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Appendix
Battle of Lexington Green

	Geocities	Jubilee	Public Bookshelf	WPI	Sons of Revolution	Sylvanus Wood
How many British were present?						
How many Americans were present?						
What did Pitcairn yell?						
Who fired first?						
Did the Americans fire?						
How many Americans died?						
How many Americans were injured?						
How many British died?						
How many British were injured?						