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The Great Migration:

Using a Problem-Based Learning Approach and the Internet

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Abstract

The Internet allows high school students to access primary and secondary sources in the classroom. History teachers should consider different teaching and learning strategies to fully utilize these sources in the classroom. Problem-based learning offers an exciting alternative to the traditional history classroom where the lecture and the textbook are used daily. The author describes how he used problem-based learning and the Internet in his high school history classroom to motivate students to learn about the Great Migration. Background information on problem-based learning is given and suggestions are provided by the author to guide teachers step-by-step through this unique approach. Examples of WebPages on the Great Migration are provided which the author highly suggests using. In addition, the author provides detailed information on the causes and effects of the Great Migration to help the classroom teacher.

Introduction

In 1870, less than half a million of the nation's five million African Americans lived outside the Southern part of the United States (Clayton, Perry, Reed, & Winkler, 2000). However, this changed significantly in the following years. Between 1916 and 1930, nearly 1,000,000 African Americans migrated from the South to the North in search of a better life (Marks, 1989). What caused so many African Americans to move during this time period?

In the past, I taught my students the factors contributing to the Great Migration using a traditional lecture approach. I discussed the factors in the North and South which contributed to the migration. My students listened quietly and took notes. Eventually, the students memorized the information and answered test questions about the phenomena. However, my lesson plans on the Great Migration changed when I had laptop computers installed in my classroom.

Each of the computers in my classroom had wireless Internet access. By using the Internet, my students had access to primary and secondary sources on the Great Migration equal to what professional historians use (Web-Based Commission, 2000). In fact, these sources were once only accessible at museums and archives requiring extensive travel (Lee & Hicks, 2000). My students now had access to these historical sources in my classroom (Heafner, 2000). These sources included letters, images, oral histories, artifacts, and diary entries on the Great Migration (Bass & Rosenzweig, 1999).

Due to the online access of these sources, I turned to problem-based learning. My students became detectives solving the mystery behind this migration of 100 years ago. In particular, my students developed their own hypothesis, gathered data, organized their findings, and shared their findings with classmates. I will discuss the causes of the Great Migration to give teachers background information on this event, and I will share my experiences with problem-based learning as well as my insights to help other teachers use a similar approach in the classroom.

Causes of the Great Migration

Political Inequality in the South

Conditions worsened greatly for African Americans in the South following the end of Reconstruction in 1877. The Ku Klux Klan emerged when Federal troops left the South. In efforts to try to maintain their social lifestyle, the Klan used fear tactics against African Americans. In fact, African Americans were sometimes lynched. For example, seven African-Americans were murdered in Mississippi because they held jobs as firemen on the Illinois Central Railroad (Marks, 1989).

Jim Crow laws, in the South, stripped African Americans of the freedoms they hoped for following the Civil War. By removing their right to vote, one of the most important rights was taken away from African-Americans (Marks, 1989). They had tasted the opportunity to vote from 1865-1885. However, they no longer could vote in the 1890s. Emmett Scott (as cited in Marks, 1989) said:

> The ballot marks the difference between the citizen and the serf. Without the ballot, the colored American is powerless to contend for rights and justice and civil equality, with the ballot he is all-powerful to act in defense of every lawful privilege. (p. 70)

The inability to vote had an impact on political aspirations for African-Americans. Before the 1890s, there were two African-American senators, twenty-three representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives, and several hundred were members of the Southern state legislatures (Marks, 1989). Without representation in government, African Americans in the South did not have a voice working for their interests.

The Troubled Economy of the South

Floods destroyed farmlands, and the boll weevil ruined crops in the 1910s which worsened economic conditions for African Americans. The boll weevil plague began in Texas in 1892, affecting half a dozen counties; however, it spread quickly across the South. Eventually, millions of acres of cotton were destroyed. For example, in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, cotton production dropped from 1,688 bales in 1918 (before boll weevil) to 167 bales per acre in 1919 (after boll weevil). By 1917, the Southern states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi were hit the hardest (Marks, 1989). As a result, these states had the greatest numbers of African Americans who chose to move to the North.

The economy of the South was so poor in 1880 that only 11% of the nation's wealth was in the nation's Southern region where the majority of African Americans lived. By 1910, 20% of African Americans in the South were unemployed (Marks, 1989). In addition, the average wage in the South was $376 compared to $1,086 in other regions of the country. African Americans also had to work terribly long hours in the South. Many worked seventy-five hours a week. In North Carolina, the average was sixty-nine hours a week (Marks, 1989).

Interestingly, 57% of the population in the South had been employed in agriculture in 1880. By 1910, 60% of African Americans were employed in agriculture. In contrast, 46% of Connecticut's population, 50% of Massachusetts' population, and 55% of Rhode Island's population were employed in manufacturing (Marks, 1989). Due to a smaller harvest in the early 1900s, fewer African Americans were needed as labor in the South. As a result, they looked elsewhere for an opportunity to improve their lives. The urban areas of the North, with manufacturing jobs, appealed greatly to them.

The Growing Economy of the North

The United States was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution following the Civil War. The Industrial Revolution was concentrated in the North. In fact, the states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi were ten times less industrialized than Rhode Island and Massachusetts (Marks, 1989). In 1913, the United States produced more coal and steel than Great Britain, Germany, and Belgium-Luxembourg. The United States had also become the world's largest consuming population (Marks, 1989).

Collectively, productivity in the North increased 54%, but its population grew only 24% (Marks, 1989). As a result, the Northern factories had a labor shortage. Employers in the North eagerly sought African-American labor from the South to assist with the growing economy. They were willing to pay wages much greater than African Americans earned in the South working on farms. In fact, African Americans could earn $6-$8 per day in the Northern cities, doing what would take them a week to earn in the South. The African Americans who migrated from the South to the North typically found jobs as construction workers, teamsters, and janitors (Faragher, Buhle, Czitrom, & Armitage, 2000).

As African Americans moved north, cities grew tremendously. African-American migrants increasingly were employed in a variety of industrial jobs in northern cities. In Chicago, only 67 African Americans were employed in packing houses in 1910. However, by 1920, this number had grown to 3,000. Meanwhile, in Chicago's steel industry, African Americans represented roughly 6% of the workforce in 1910; by 1920, they composed about 17% of the total number of steel workers in the city. In fact, about 65,000 African Americans moved to

Chicago from 1914-1920, representing a 150% increase in its African-American population. Detroit also experienced some of the same trends. For example, their automobile companies first began to hire African Americans in 1917. By 1926, they employed nearly 11,000 African-Americans (Marks, 1989). Overall, Detroit's African-American population grew by 35,000 from 1914-1920, representing a 600% increase in its African-American population (Faragher, Buhle, Czitrom, & Armitage, 2000). In addition, New York and Philadelphia experienced an increase in African-American population with a 66% and 59% increase respectively from 1910-1920 (Marks, 1989). Collectively, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit represented 40% of the North's African-American population in 1920 (Marks, 1989). Interestingly, World War I played a major role in the African-American population growth experienced in each of these cities.

The Impact of World War I

Manufacturing increased dramatically in the Northern factories during World War I in order to produce munitions for the war effort. Factories often doubled or tripled their labor force. For example, one Chicago packing plant increased its workforce from 8,000 to 17,000 workers during the war (Marks, 1989). Interestingly, immigration to the United States from Europe declined significantly during the war. In 1915, immigration to the United States declined by one third, and by 1918, almost as many immigrants returned to their homeland as the number of immigrants coming to the United States (Marks, 1989). As a result, the demand for labor increased dramatically. Consequently, the North looked to African Americans in the South for a cheap source of labor.

During World War I, employers discovered African-American workers in the South were desperate for work, cheap labor, and very capable workers (Marks, 1989). An official working for the Carnegie Steel Company remarked that their company would have had a great deal of difficulty maintaining their operations without African-American workers who were willing to migrate to the North. One survey, conducted by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, asked 137 employers how satisfied they were with their African-American migrant workers. The survey found 117 of the employers were satisfied, and 70% believed African-American workers were equally as efficient as white workers (Marks, 1989). Interestingly, the African-American worker was willing to do jobs that White workers were sometimes unwilling to do. This occurred because of the nature of the work and the low wages (Marks, 1989). Although African Americans received some of the lowest wages possible at the time in northern factories, they often viewed it as an advance compared to their former lifestyle in the South (Marks, 1989).

Beginning the Problem-Based Learning Lesson

Classroom Setting

I used this particular lesson with students enrolled in the Advanced Placement U.S. History course that I taught at Warrensburg High School. Each section had 20-25 students enrolled in the class. The high school had about 1,000 students, and the students enrolled in the course reflected the characteristics of the general population of the school. Approximately 28% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch, and about 15% of the students were minority. African Americans composed the largest segment of the minority population in my classroom

and the school in general (MODESE, 2006). The high school was located in west-central Missouri about 45 miles from Kansas City.

My classroom was fortunate to have received a technology grant from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The grant provided funding for two wireless laptop carts. As a result, each of the students in my classroom had a laptop computer for this lesson. In addition, the high school was on the block schedule. Each class period was 90 minutes, which allowed my students to complete this technology-rich lesson in one class period.

Posing an Interesting Historical Problem or Question

Problem-based learning begins with a question or problem that students need to solve. Parker (2005) emphasizes the question or problem posed by the teacher can "develop new knowledge and correct old, mistaken knowledge" (p. 324). As the teacher considers various problems or questions to pose, it is essential to develop one that the students will find interesting (Arends, 2007). In particular, I have found it helps to develop a problem which involves a great deal of mystery. Most students enjoy trying to figure out something they perceive as mysterious. Why would so many people want to leave their home?

The problem posed by the teacher should also be challenging to students; however, it is important to develop a problem or question that is challenging but not overwhelming for students. Yet the problem should not be too easy which may cause students to lose interest (Maxim, 2006). For example, I asked my students why 1,000,000 African Americans migrated from the South to the North from 1916-1930. This question struck a "happy medium," since the majority of students were actively engaged in trying to figure out the causes of the migration.

I also took into consideration several other factors when I developed the problem for my students. First, the problem should be relevant to the lives of the students (Delisle, 1997). For example, our high school was located near Kansas City, therefore, I pointed out to my students that many African-Americans moved to Kansas City from 1916-1930. In fact, 30,719 African-Americans moved to Kansas City from 1910-1920 (Marks, 1989). I personally believe local history motivates students because they can see the relevance of what they are learning. Second, the problem should be curriculum based (Delisle, 1997).

In United States History, the Great Migration was found in our district's curriculum. Consequently, my students were learning a key concept in the curriculum and important skills by using the problem-based learning strategy. Most important, they were more likely to remember the information in the curriculum because of the unique nature of problem-based learning. Third, it is important to develop a problem for which students can arrive at multiple answers (Delisle, 1997). In fact, the question I posed on the Great Migration resulted in a wide range of answers discovered by my students from their data collection. I believe this encouraged my students to share their findings. I find it interesting that each group discovered unique stories, statistics, and conclusions which they were eager to share with their peers. As a result, students learned greatly from one another.

Generating the Hypothesis

Students should be given an opportunity to generate a hypothesis for the problem or question posed to them. Perhaps a good way to frame this for students is by asking them to develop an "educated guess" or "hunch" they have for the problem or question they will

investigate (Maxim, 2006). It is important to allow the students to collaborate with a partner or partners to brainstorm a list of ideas for their hypothesis (Arends, 2007). I found that pairs worked more effectively than groups of three or four students, since each student was forced to brainstorm instead of relying on several peers. As the students were working in groups, I floated around the classroom to monitor their discussions and encourage them as they were discussing ideas with their peers. There were several themes which emerged as the students brainstormed ideas. Many believed discrimination and economic opportunities were primary causes of the migration; however, most students failed to consider the significance of World War I.

An interesting finding was that my students felt more ownership in the lesson because they were coming up with their own ideas. In the past, I had lectured to them at the beginning of class and told them what they needed to know about the Great Migration. Now, my students were developing their list of preconceived ideas on this topic at the beginning of class. In effect, they were actively involved instead of being passive learners.

As soon as the students finished brainstorming, I had the groups share their ideas with the rest of the class. I found my students were eager to share their hypothesis with their peers. As the students shared their ideas, I wrote each on the chalkboard. Maxim (2006) believes it is necessary to acknowledge each student's hypothesis appropriately because "formulating hypotheses involves a certain amount of risk for students, so you must be especially careful to attach importance to each individual's input" (p. 350). I found most of my students had developed hypotheses which were later proven to be correct after they had collected data online. As soon as students were finished sharing their hypotheses, we were ready to move on.

Gathering Data Online

I gave my students the opportunity to test their hypothesis by collecting data on the Internet. My students investigated factors which contributed to the Great Migration, using Internet resources. Most of these Internet sources were accessed using an online search engine such as Google, Yahoo, or Alta Vista and inserting the phrase "Great Migration." Of course, I emphasized the need to be critical thinkers as they searched for primary and secondary sources available to them on this topic. Sources found through organizations, the government, and educational institutions are much more reliable than a source found through a commercial webpage. Interestingly, there were four webpages which the students used most frequently. I encouraged the students to determine which partner would look at each of these webpages. As a result, each partner was responsible for two webpages. As soon as the students finished gathering data from these webpages, they taught what they had learned to their partner. These webpages will be discussed later in more detail.

There was a great deal of excitement in the classroom as students gathered data online which either confirmed or refuted their hypothesis. I encouraged my students to record this data in their notebooks. Dewey (1910) believed this phase of inquiry was critical by saying, "The facts are objectively, rather than subjectively determined. In this way, tendencies to premature interpretation are held in check" (p. 88). As my students gathered and recorded data, they were following a process much like the processes that physicians use in developing a diagnosis for a patient. The student will record data much like a physician records a patient's temperature and blood pressure to determine the diagnosis (Dewey, 1910). This scientific inquiry can be easily replicated in the social studies classroom. Maxim (2006) says, "Students become involved in an active search for data that helps find an answer for, solution to, or explanation about that which

they are curious" (p. 351). In my opinion, this is the point at which a great deal of learning occurred in my classroom. In fact, constructivists believe students learn best when they connect new ideas to their prior knowledge (Hoagland, 2000). In this case, students learned as they found data online which confirmed or refuted their hypotheses.

Great Migration Webpages

The Great Migration: A Story in Paintings by Jacob Lawrence

Columbia University has a webpage that features the paintings of Jacob Lawrence detailing the Great Migration. The paintings are featured as part of an interactive slideshow, highlighting the factors which contributed to the migration. Interestingly, Jacob Lawrence's parents were themselves migrants. He was not a part of the migration, but he studied the event in great detail in order to depict it through his artwork. The artwork is now a part of the Phillips Collection in New York. I found that my students enjoyed viewing the artwork with captions and learned a great deal from the webpage. In particular, many of my students were visual learners, so the artwork captivated their interest in this topic. The interactive feature of the webpage also makes it very appealing to high school students. As a result, my students tested their hypotheses using this webpage. The webpage can be found at Columbia University.

In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience

The New York Library has a webpage on the Great Migration that features a substantial amount of information for students and is highly interactive. The webpage is sponsored by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. When students enter the webpage, they see and hear an attention-grabbing introduction with images from the Great Migration. Following the introduction, a series of links appear so that students can click and travel further. These links contain significant amounts of information, including some of the following topics related to the Great Migration entitled (a) Leaving the South, (b) Migration Fever, (c) the Journey North, and (d) a New Industrial Landscape. Each of these links contains beautiful photographs from the era as well as detailed information about the Great Migration. In addition, there is a link to help students with difficult vocabulary. Students can view this webpage at In Motion.

The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow

PBS has a webpage titled The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow that features an Interactive Map from which my students traced the numbers of African Americans who migrated to the North during a particular decade from each state in the union. The map is user friendly, and my students enjoyed comparing the migration numbers from various states in different decades. For example, the map indicates 22,100 African Americans left Alabama from 1910-1919. During the same time period, 23,500 African Americans moved to Illinois. The map also has a link for students to view various Jim Crow Laws during this time period. By clicking on various Southern states, students can see how the laws varied state-by-state. For example, it was illegal in the state of Texas for a White person to marry an African American. Finally, there is a link for students to view the number of African Americans who were lynched per state as well as details on racial riots that occurred in each state. For instance, in the state of Mississippi, 539 African

Americans were lynched. In addition, the map indicates a racial riot occurred in Atlanta in September of 1906 which resulted in a death toll of ten African Americans and two White people. This webpage really shows students the severity of the conditions in the South and motivational factors leading to the Great Migration.

Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago

The Chicago Historical Society sponsors a webpage called the Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago that features the factors contributing to the Great Migration. The webpage has two interactive maps which showed my students the railroads African Americans took from the rural South to Chicago. Each map allows viewers to zoom in-and-out to view details easier. I found it interesting that the caption to the map indicates that the majority of African Americans who migrated to Chicago came from the Deep South due to the railroad lines connecting Chicago to the region. In addition, the webpage discusses how many African Americans in the South learned about Chicago by reading the *Chicago Defender*, which advocated migration. The interactive map shows subscription numbers for the *Chicago Defender* in various Southern cities in 1919. Again, viewers can click on the map to zoom in-and-out to see subscription levels in greater detail. There are some very interesting correlations between subscription readership in the Southern cities and the numbers of African Americans who chose to migrate to the North. Finally, another great feature of the webpage includes links to vocabulary terms with which students may have trouble.

Finishing the Problem-Based Learning Lesson

Conducting Analysis and Organizing Data

Once my students had finished collecting data from the Internet, they proceeded to conduct analysis and organize the data in a meaningful way. The students were assessed on their ability to analyze data and organize it effectively. I found graphic organizers were a user-friendly way for my students to organize the information they had collected. In order to help my students get started, I demonstrated how to use a graphic organizer on the chalkboard. As soon as students were ready to proceed, I walked around the classroom and listened as students discussed with their peers how they planned to organize the data they had collected. My students needed to consider whether an answer was found to the problem they investigated and if they had new questions based on their inquiry (Maxim, 2006). This phase of the lesson also prepared my students to share their findings with their classmates. Arends (2007) believes that "teachers should assist students in collecting information from a variety of sources, and they should pose questions to get students to think about the problem and about the kinds of information needed to arrive at defensible solutions" (p. 395).

Sharing Historical Findings

As soon as my students finished organizing their data, they were ready to share their findings with classmates. I facilitated a discussion in which students indicated whether their hypotheses was correct or not with supporting evidence. This was the biggest portion of the assessment in this lesson for my students. Interestingly, the discussion was a very productive part

of the lesson because students learned so much from each other. In particular, this discussion was effective because the students themselves had gathered the data. In effect, they had become "student experts" on the topic. To their surprise, many of the items listed in their hypotheses were correct. My students also seemed to enjoy sharing their knowledge with their peers. Maxim (2006) says, "Young learners take pleasure and pride in the recognition they receive after sharing the results of their research with an authentic audience" (p. 357).

My students shared their findings, using other formats besides discussion. PowerPoint, digital video production, and Internet webpages can be used by students to share historical findings with a global audience. In addition, students can be asked to share their findings with an audience in your community. By requiring students to share their findings, they are more likely to retain the information because they are using what they have learned to accomplish a task (Delisle, 1997). In effect, the requirement for students to share findings gives the activity a much greater purpose and provides the teacher with an opportunity to assess what the students have learned (Delisle, 1997). The chance for students to share their findings also gives the audience the opportunity to assess the students. Parker (2005) says, "The audience members can then accept or reject the conclusions presented on their own interpretation of the evidence. This is how knowledge is constructed, corrected, and reconstructed over time" (p. 327).

Problem-Based Learning in the Classroom

Considerations for Problem-Based Learning

I taught high school social studies for a number of years before I tried problem-based learning in my classroom. As I used the approach more frequently, I reflected on my previous experiences to improve the next lesson. In retrospect, there are several things to consider before using the approach in a social studies classroom. First, problem-based learning will be more time consuming than lecture. Fortunately, the high school I taught at was on the block schedule. This afforded my students a significant amount of time to generate hypotheses, investigate the problems, and share their findings in a single 90-minute class period. Second, the physical arrangement of the classroom should be arranged to encourage collaboration (Delisle, 1997). When I first started teaching, my desks were in traditional rows; however, when I started to use problem-based learning with cooperative learning structures, I had my classroom seating system with desks arranged in groups of four. Eventually, I put tables in my classroom with four chairs at each table. Third, teachers need to consider the simplicity and clarity of the problem they want their students to tackle. The problem must have a narrow focus; otherwise, students will have difficulty determining what to focus their investigation on (Delisle, 1997). This can result in frustration.

Benefits of Problem-Based Learning

Using problem-based learning and the Internet, I no longer needed to tell my students what happened during the Great Migration. My students had the opportunity to speculate why the migration occurred and then investigated it, using primary and secondary sources found online. Based on my first-hand experience, I found students were much more engaged in the subject matter. Therefore, I have used the problem-based learning approach for countless lesson plans in my American History classes.

Problem-based learning turned my lessons into a student-centered classroom, and as a result, my students talked more frequently to each other as they solved problems. I served as a guide to facilitate the investigation and answered questions as they arose from students (Delisle, 1997). Interestingly, my students felt more ownership in the subject matter because they were at the center of their learning (Delisle, 1997). This approach was far different from my traditional lessons of the past.

History lessons have traditionally involved lecture and readings from the textbook. Unfortunately, many students do not enjoy this approach because they are asked to memorize an endless amount of names, dates, and details they do not find interesting (Bass & Rosenzweig, 1999). Problem-based learning is a promising alternative to the traditional history classroom.

According to John Dewey, problem-based learning is more appealing because it encourages students to investigate (Delisle, 1997). In fact, studies indicate problem-based learning can motivate bored students. Using this approach, my students learned through discovery that helped them internalize what they had learned and resulted in their developing a greater understanding of the subject matter (Delisle, 1997). I find it interesting that adults frequently use this approach when they are curious about an issue or want to solve a problem they are facing (Delisle, 1997).

My students also developed skills they will need in their navigation of the work world. First, they developed critical thinking skills. They formed hypotheses by considering possible answers to problems before they investigated. In addition, they used analytical skills after they collected data to organize their findings. Perhaps most important, students learn to think critically as they examine issues of the future. Parker (2005) says, "Children who have developed their inquiry abilities are able to draw conclusions based on evidence and judge whether conclusions drawn by others are supported by evidence" (p. 324). In addition, students learn the skills necessary for problem-solving. According to Delisle (1997), skill development is a critical component of problem-based learning:

> Ultimately, the true academic goal of PBL is not to develop a final answer to the problem. There is no single answer that students will find and instantly agree is the correct solution. Instead, the actual learning takes place through the process of solving the problem-thinking through the steps, researching the issues, and developing the project. (p. 13)

Conclusion

The Internet and problem-based learning can transform a high school social studies classroom. This lesson on the Great Migration is one example. By comparing and contrasting the traditional lecture approach to the problem-based learning approach, there are many benefits to the student. As I discussed earlier, students learn to work collaboratively, to develop higher-level thinking skills, and to see relevance of the material to the curriculum. Most importantly, students are more motivated to learn the topic under investigation because they have taken ownership of the topic and have had the opportunity to research sources online. As I reflect back on using problem-based learning in the classroom, I recall the increased level of excitement as students tested their hypotheses by gathering data. I saw first-hand students who became much more curious about social studies and evolved into a community of learners.

Each day, social studies teachers are developing lesson plans based on a wide range of objectives found in the curriculum. Problem-based learning can become one approach in which

to turn. By doing so, they provide a greater variety of activities for students. I often viewed problem-based learning as one of many “plays” I could use in my playbook—much like a football coach trying to develop the best strategy to succeed on each down in a game. A football coach takes into consideration many factors to determine which play will most likely succeed in different situations. Sometimes problem-based learning may be the perfect “play” to teach a particular objective, and sometimes other strategies may be better suited. In summary, I have found problem-based learning works exceptionally well to teach high school students about the Great Migration. In particular, it gives students an opportunity to investigate problems using the Internet. There are countless problems for students to investigate in the social sciences.

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