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Through their eyes: Perspective taking activities for social studies classes

Perspective Taking in the Social Studies

When seeking to plan meaningful lessons, the guiding force for social studies teachers across the country is the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). In 2013, the NCSS released its College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework as a guide for social studies teachers who hope to blend content area understanding with the skills necessary to function in a modern, democratic society. A quick glance at the framework will reveal the repeated use of a very important word for teachers: “perspectives.”

Most social studies teachers encourage perspective taking in their classes, to a greater or lesser extent. Asking students to see history through the eyes of the people who lived it is, for most us, a natural extension of the act of learning history. With thought-provoking activities, impromptu questions, and discussion prompts that ask students to step into historical events, teachers bring the past alive for their students.

In the classroom, perspective taking can be described as an instructional method that activates students’ imaginations by asking them to put aside their modern views to experience history in its context (Lee & Ashby, 2001; Levstik, 2001). Perspective taking activities have been shown to increase student engagement, interest, and enjoyment in social studies classes, and to increase long-term retention of learning (Alvarez, 2008; DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012; Gehlbach et al., 2008). Perspective taking activities have also led to increases in students’ critical thinking skills, learning ownership, and historical understanding (Colby, 2009; Volk, 2012). For all of these reasons, perspective taking activities should be part of any educator’s teaching arsenal. The following are two high-quality perspective taking activities that teachers can quickly implement in the classroom.

Who’s the Mount Rushmore of...?

Washington. Jefferson. Roosevelt. Lincoln.

These four figures of American History tower philosophically above their peers. And thanks to Mount Rushmore National Memorial, they have the opportunity to tower physically as well. But what about Benjamin Franklin, the influential statesman? Why not Ulysses S. Grant who secured victory in the American Civil War and served as a two-term president? Why not Susan B. Anthony or Frederick Douglass? And why not a new monument with more modern figures like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chavez?

I developed the *Who’s the Mount Rushmore of...?* Activity after a trip across the American West a few years ago. I found this activity provided a fun, student-centered way for me to emphasize the concepts of the C3 Framework, such as analyzing complex factors and historical contexts that shape perspectives (D2.His.4.9-12.; D2.His.5.9-12.) and examining how modern views of history are limited by the available historical sources (D2.His.8.9-12). Additionally, this activity can be modified to a wide variety of historical topics. Suggestions for these types of modifications are provided in the *Notes* section below.

Opening with Research

Students should begin the assignment by conducting research into the monument and its history. Specifically, students should seek to answer these questions:

- Who were Jonah LeRoy “Doane” Robinson and Gutzon Borglum, and why were they significant to Mount Rushmore?
- Who are the people who appear on Mount Rushmore? Why were these men chosen? Who made this choice?

- Does everyone agree that these men were the perfect choice? What are some other suggestions for people to appear on this type of monument?

Students who struggle to locate quality information may be directed to these websites:

- <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/people.htm>
- <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-making-of-mount-rushmore-121886182/>
- <http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/mount-rushmore>

When students have completed their research, lead a short, whole-class discussion to check for understanding and to modify any possible misunderstandings. When you are confident that students have a thorough understanding of the basic ideas, jump into the activity.

The Main Event: Taking Perspectives

The purpose of this activity is for students to research prominent characters in a particular period of history, and to select the most important characters by evaluating their relative importance. Any period of American history (or world history) could serve as the setting for this activity. For the purpose of simplicity in demonstrating the use of the activity, we will use the Women's Rights Movement as the setting.

For students to fully capitalize on the power of perspective taking in this activity, it is important to help students take the proper perspective. Divide students into groups, and inform students that each group is a committee that has been formed to plan the new Mount Rushmore of the Women's Rights Movement. They are to use the Internet to conduct research to decide who should be portrayed on the monument.

First, each group should select a "Borglum." This group member is named for Gutzon Borglum, the artist who designed the Mount Rushmore monument. Leave the methods for selecting the Borglum up to the groups. Most groups will likely vote, but some may not. Let students know that they have to live with their decision no matter the outcome.

Next, each individual student will research prominent characters in the Women's Rights Movement and create a list of the four most important. Those characters should be ranked, with #1 the most crucial player in the movement, in the student's opinion. Students should write a sentence or two describing why they chose that person and why they ranked them as they did.

Third, students should discuss in their groups the characters they chose and why. Every student should be allowed to share his or her findings with the group. The goal of this lesson segment is for each group to compile its own list, ranked 1-4. Immediate consensus is not necessary, and may not even be desirable. Remember, we are trying to teach students to form an informed opinion from research, to defend that opinion from scrutiny, and to come to an educated compromise based on the thoughts of the group.

Sometimes students in groups will immediately agree on the characters that belong on the new monument. Other times, agreement may become nearly impossible. This is when the group's Borglum steps in. Toward the end of this segment of the lesson, the Borglum must make a final decision based on the arguments of the committee members. Again, the Borglum may allow group members to vote on the list, or the Borglum may make a unilateral decision (in the same fashion as the original Borglum). Admonish the Borglums, though, to beware of being too heavy-handed with the decision-making power, as a whole-class vote is coming, and angry team members will have the opportunity for revenge.

Finally, each Borglum should present his or her final list to the class, and make arguments for each character. Display the choices as they are presented. Once all presentations are completed, the whole class should be allowed to vote. Remember, the purpose of this

activity is for students to master the process and all the steps involved. Since there is no right or wrong answer, the actual people chosen are, to a greater or lesser extent, not as important.

The Grand Finale: Choices, Choices, Choices

I developed two different conclusions for this lesson, and the one I selected depended upon the needs of the class. For classes with artistically inclined students, the lesson could be concluded by asking students to draw and color the Mount Rushmore of the Women's Rights Movement using the final list of characters voted upon by the class. For classes that need a little more practice writing, ask students to write a short paragraph discussing how they feel about the final list. How did it compare to their personal list? How did it compare to their group's list? How would they improve it?

Notes: Some things to consider

- There are a number of online programs that can be used to insert actual images of the students' choices into photos of Mount Rushmore. These images can be highly entertaining for students, and a good reward for a hard day's work. Face in Hole and photofunia.com are two online programs you can use for this purpose.
- Consider these topics for your class: Who's the Mount Rushmore of...
 - The Civil Rights Movement?
 - The Progressive Era?
 - The World Wars?
 - The Space Race?
 - The War on Terror?

Conclusion

The *Who's the Mount Rushmore of...* Activity is a fun way to encourage students to research, form conclusions, debate, and defend arguments. This activity activates higher order thinking and emphasizes the concepts of democratic citizenship, decision making, evaluating sources, and using evidence as called for in the C3 Framework. Taking the perspectives of members of a committee planning a new Mount Rushmore allows students to become more invested in the assignment and to see history through the eyes of the people who lived it.

Activity #2: Multiple Perspectives on the Creek War

Introduction

The current political climate has made it an interesting time to teach history. Issues such as the war in the Middle East, immigration, and "conservative" vs. "liberal" are reduced on the national level to an "us" vs. "them" argument. The idea of "good guys" and "bad guys" makes for good TV, but it does very little to address the complexity of multiple perspectives and motivations. This reduction of complexity also excludes those in the periphery that are not easily categorized or understood. As teachers of history, it is our job to not only provide the facts, but to teach our students how to analyze issues as the complex world issues they are.

When teaching, I have often noticed that my students want issues presented to them in a black and white manner. My common answer of "it depends" is never sufficient for them, but as every good history teacher knows, complex issues demand complex answers. The answer becomes more complex as multiple perspectives are presented and analyzed. Which is the "right" perspective often depends on who is speaking and what supporting evidence is provided.

When looking at current world issues facing the United States, such as war and immigration, an analogy can be made to the Creek War of 1813. As the fledgling United States was expanding Westward, they were pushing the indigenous people off their land, causing

economic loss, cultural upheaval, and death. The Creek perspective of the United States' invasion is like the one currently heard regarding Mexican immigrants or those from the Middle East. However, is it that simple now, or back then? What perspective would someone caught in the middle of these conflicts say? Would gender play a role? What if someone could sympathize with the Creeks, but were called by the United States' government to fight?

A reduction in complexity does not do this war justice. The interaction between Creeks and other indigenous communities had existed since time immemorial, and Creek interaction with Europeans and those of European descent date back centuries. The "mixed blood" population living as Creek or as Americans (and sometimes both) was very large by 1812. The idea of fighting another Creek, another Indian, or your cousin had to play a role as these conflicts escalated. As Prolific the Rapper says, "I'm Mexicana, Lakota, and I'm white too. I'm mixed with everyone, so a part of me is just like you." This complexity of identity, nationality, and (dis)inclination towards war needs to be explored.

The Multiple Perspectives on the Creek War Activity incorporates the philosophies and the details of the NCSS C3 Framework in a number of ways. First, the learning and research methods utilized by this activity allow students to evaluate multiple sources of evidence and to develop these into a well-reasoned argument about the Creek War (D2.His.16.9-12). Second, by closely examining the events and participants in the Creek War from multiple perspectives, students will find themselves conducting an in-depth analysis of a historical political philosophy and its impact on the application of democratic principles on a group of people (D2.Civ.8.9-12; D2.Civ.10.9-12). The combination of the ideals of these standards with the practice of perspective taking can create a powerful opportunity for deep learning in the social studies classroom.

Open With Research

To analyze these issues, students will need to study the Creek War of 1813. This topic is supported in my state by Alabama 10th Grade Social Studies Course of Study Standard 8, which calls for students to "compare major events in Alabama from 1781 to 1823, including statehood as part of the expanding nation, acquisition of land, settlement, and the Creek War, to those of the developing nation."

Taking Perspectives

This lesson asks students to review their knowledge of the Creek War and to analyze it through the lens of people from that period. The teacher can assign one of the ten developed perspectives or allow the students to choose one. The ten perspectives developed for this lesson are:

1. A Creek man living in the Upper Towns
2. A Creek woman living in Upper Towns
3. A Creek man living in the Lower Towns
4. A Creek woman living in Lower Towns
5. A male Alabama militia member
6. A male Georgia militia member
7. A male Tennessee militia member
8. A Cherokee male enlisted to fight against the Creeks
9. A Choctaw male enlisted to fight against the Creeks
10. An African slave held by a Creek family living in the Upper Towns

It is important to make sure that all ten of the perspectives are represented so that the class can hear voices from those that may support or disagree with the perspective they have analyzed.

The students should be provided with information about a person that matches one of the people above. The students will then create a document detailing that person's perspective. Questions to be answered in this document are:

1. Who is seen as the aggressor by this person? Why?
2. Does this person support going to war? Why or why not?
3. What outcome does this person hope for?

Once the students have created their document, they should present them to the class. In this way, all of the students can hear how people from different walks of life viewed the Creek War of 1812.

Concluding With Application

To conclude, students should be asked to apply this approach to a current issue such as the Dakota Access Pipeline issue, which would relate to modern American Indian concerns, economic interests of the United States, and could make use of lyrics from Prolific the Rapper whose music discusses the current state of the pipeline. Topics of this nature are often reduced to black and white and ignore all the grey areas.

Conclusion

As seen in the NCSS C3 Framework, perspective taking is a valuable method for teaching students to see history through the eyes of the participants. The Mount Rushmore Activity and the Multiple Perspectives on the Creek War Activity provide opportunities for students to actively engage history on a personal level.

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