

Disciplinary Literacy in History Grade 9-12th

Strategies for Teaching Historical Literacy

Historical Fiction

- Historical fiction is a great way to get your students engaged reading about history. These creative narratives are often from the perspective of people around the student's age which helps them to empathize more with people from the past and understand them.

Inquiry-Based Instruction

- Ask your students thought-provoking questions about primary sources and historical events. For this strategy to be effective refrain from surface level questions such as, "At what time did the Crusades occur?" Instead, ask questions that challenge your students to reason and analyse such as "Does slavery still affect African-Americans today?"

Online Discussions

- Take advantage of asynchronous online forum boards by asking students to voice their opinions on a given topic and allowing them to debate one another. One of the main benefits of online boards is that students do not have to engage each other face-to-face so shy students feel more comfortable speaking up, increasing participation.

How Literature Can be Used in Historical Literacy

Research and Findings

To be historically literate means to be able to read, write and think like a professional Historian. However, in recent years this ability students have been extremely lacking in this area. Many do not know how to dissect a primary source or express their opinions about historical events coherently. Fortunately, various tools and strategies are available to social studies teachers who want to make their students more competent in reading and writing. By utilizing these instructional strategies and concepts, teachers can increase historical literacy among their students and nurture their passion for reading and writing.

One of the most important tools for teaching historical literacy is a strategy known as "saturation." While textbooks are useful in exploring various historical topics, they suffer from numerous problems, including a lack of thematic structure and reducing historical narrative to a bunch of dates and facts. However, if teachers utilize saturation, they can make amends for these deficiencies. According to scholars, saturation is the process of surrounding students with books and media outside the textbook, including magazines and newspapers, which help them understand the world of the past (Otto, 1992). If teachers rely solely on textbooks to guide their instruction, their lessons can become bland in students' eyes. However, if supplementary reading material enriches their lessons, they can offer more perspectives and a deeper layer of understanding to the student of the same topic. Moreover, these popular works are often more accessible to students, increasing their interest in reading them.

Online discussion forums have also proven to be another useful way to increase historical literacy. While distance learning has some restrictions, it also has some advantages over traditional face-to-face communication. Firstly, because students communicate through text over speech, everyone can have their opinions heard and represented. This allows students to engage in more in-depth dialogue about primary sources and articles. According to Courtney Luckhardt, a history professor at the University of Memphis, discussion boards allow students to "... how people use the past in the present moment, they critically engage with the uses of history in popular culture, where most feel more confident in their own power of analysis," (2014, p. 189). Secondly, because many discussion forums are asynchronous, students can take the appropriate time they need to think and formulate a response, allowing them to develop their writing skills better. In fact, often times students engage more in online discussions than in real life because of this time factor. Overall, although discussion boards can never replace face-to-face discussions or live debates, they have their strengths which, when used properly, can greatly improve historical literacy.

Another critical component of thought-provoking discussions is asking questions. It is important for history teachers to place a strong focus on inquiry-based instruction. Historians usually examine primary sources with a goal in mind that is rooted in inquiry as they try to analyze and interpret historical events (Lent & Tomlinson, 2016). Therefore, if students are to think like historians, teachers must learn to focus more on inquiry strategies when teaching history. For example, instead of giving all the details of a historical event, give students the basic facts and ask them questions to allow them to come to their own conclusions. Moreover, teachers can ask students to write short essays on in-depth questions requiring analysis and critical thinking.

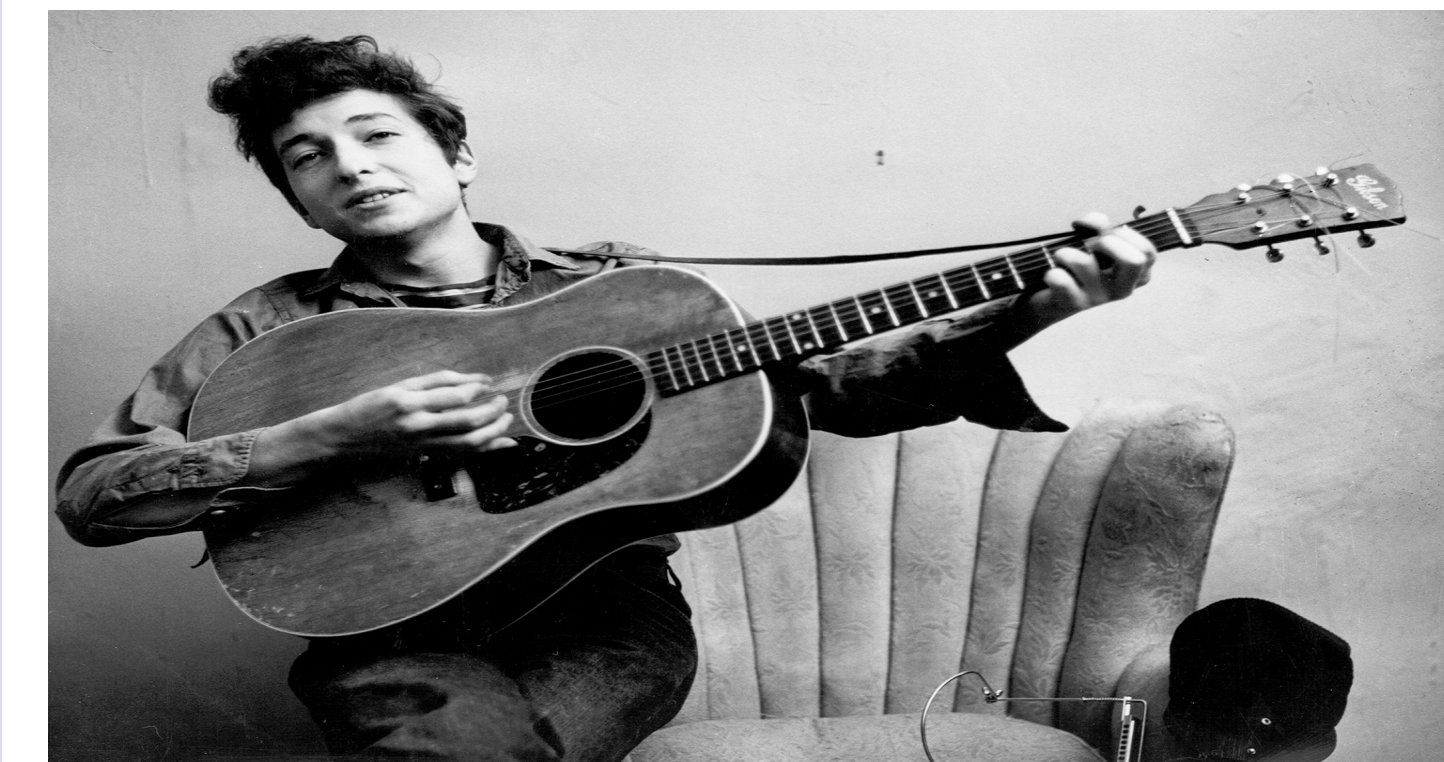
Historical fiction is also another useful tool in stimulating critical thinking. Unlike textbooks which tend to be dry and remote, fiction often has deep emotional undertones and subjective experiences which can capture the reader's imagination. According to scholars, "Good historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their historical counterparts," (Rycik & Rosler, 2009, p. 163). This is why providing your students with a list of literature they can select from is a good idea. That way they can choose the books and novels that resonate with them the most. Moreover, historical fiction provides opportunities for historical figures and events to be humanized. Of all of the advantages that historical fiction provides, this is arguably one of the most useful as it makes history more personal instead of a collection of dates and facts to be memorized.

Apart from humanizing historical figures, contextualization is also very important. Without understanding context, students can never make sense of any of the material they read. Unfortunately, many textbooks do not properly foster this skill by only asking text-dependent questions. As one teacher noted, "Does anyone think that [Lincoln] could speak about equality without everyone in his audience knowing he was talking about slavery and the causes of the war?" (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015, p. 637). Context is everything when it comes to historical literacy. Students cannot appropriately access the reading material they need to understand the content without background knowledge. This is why teachers must encourage students to bring forth all of their information regarding a topic when examining historical texts. When teachers foster this kind of contextualization, students learn to see historical narratives as properly existing in a web of knowledge instead of as isolated bits of information.

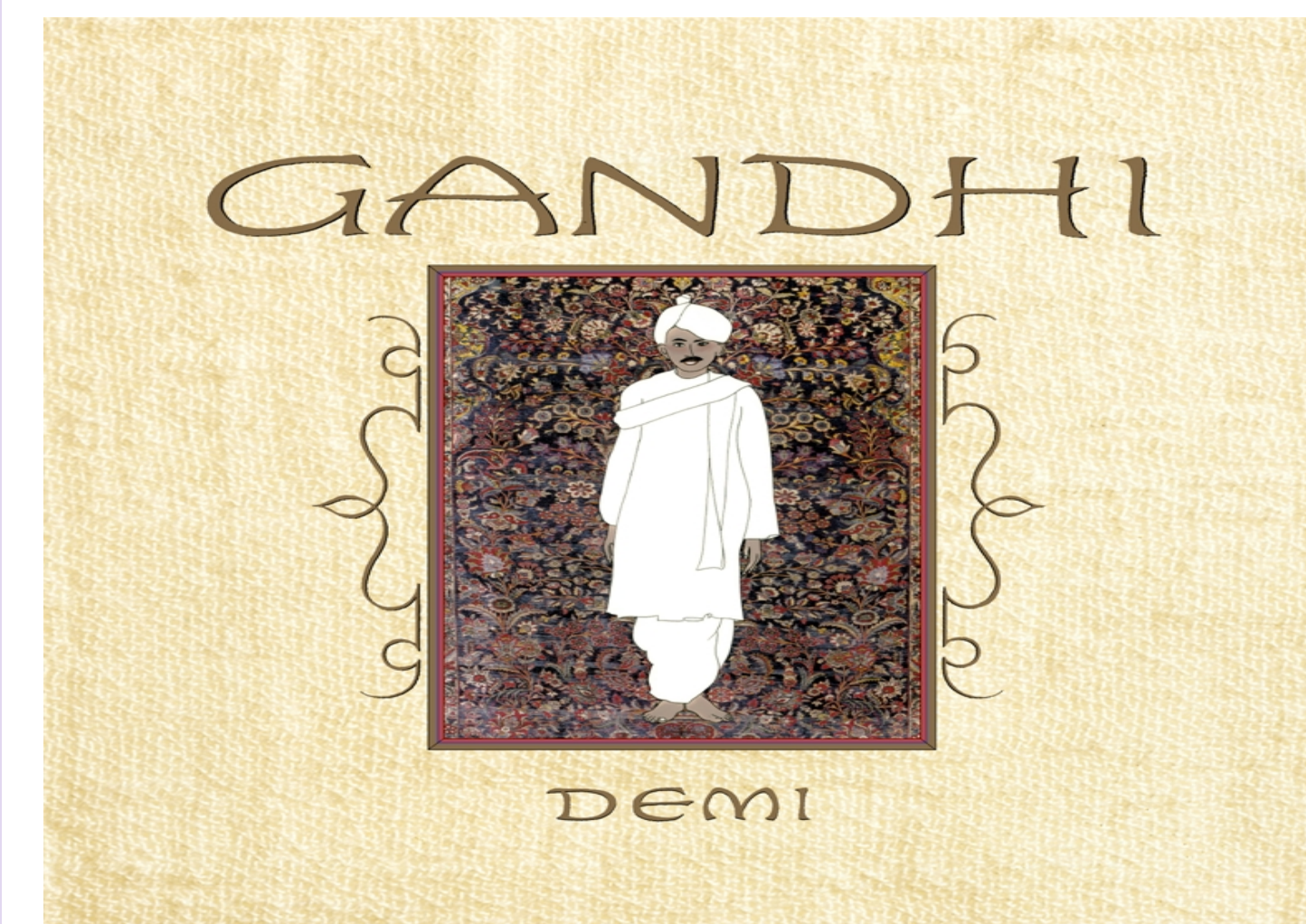
In conclusion, historical literacy is an essential skill for any student of history. There is not one ultimate instructional strategy to obtain historical literacy. Rather, a multifaceted approach is best. However, what all these tools have in common is that they broaden students' historical awareness and empathy while improving critical thinking skills. As the field of social studies continue to develop, and new research is done, more strategies will be discovered which will both enrich and transform how historical literacy is taught.

References

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Traditional folk songs such as those written by Bob Dylan are useful in giving students an idea of the cultural and political climate of different eras.



Children's books such as "Gandhi" by Demi are useful ways of building student's vocabulary on new historical topics.



Historical poems such as "The White Man's Burden" by Rudyard Kipling can be used to identify bias and different attitudes towards historical events.