

Narratives, Triangulation, and Tech: Proven Strategies for Application & Implementation to Keep History Relevant & Engaging in the 21st Century Middle Level Social Studies Classroom

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What on earth possessed John Adams to represent British soldiers in court after the Boston Massacre? When five American colonists were killed by British militia who fired into the crowd, Founding Father John Adams could have easily denied those men the right to fair treatment and representation. However, this is not what happened. The soldiers' case was a question of character, dignity, and equal justice under the law for Adams, so he chose to represent them. This decision established a precedent that would later influence the principles the United States would found itself upon, including due process, civility, and fairness. It also laid the groundwork for future actions of Adams, including the establishment of the peaceful transfer of political power from one party to another for generations to come (Sanchez & Mills, 2005).

The point of this anecdote is that these are *exactly* the type of compelling stories that middle level educators could be leading the day's lessons off with. Not only do these value-laden chronicles hook our students—inviting them to investigate history for themselves—but the presentation of ethical dilemmas within them reveals important insights about our nation's past. Furthermore, they create opportunities for teachers to use the lessons of history to highlight admirable traits modeled by individuals like John Adams. Narratives like these have a powerful effect because they nudge adolescents toward behaviors like being fair and treating others with respect, while at the same time teaching them a bit of

interesting history. They impart a bit of wisdom into real life complexities and human qualities because decency is at the center of the story, and when done right, the art of storytelling, in terms of civil discourse, “has a huge payoff if done properly and consistently” (Sanchez & Mills, 2005, p. 274).

Stories such as these reflect current challenges present in relevant contemporary issues and accomplish what a textbook excerpt cannot—serve as an example of how to treat people respectfully—both personally and professionally. Even still, according to the American Historical Association's survey of U.S. history teachers in 2023, 52% of teachers use a hard copy textbook to teach U.S. history (American Historical Association, 2024). But whereas a textbook may point out the date, weapons used, or what took place preceding the Boston Massacre, that textbook might miss those dramatic personal accounts that make investigating historical narratives so engaging by drawing from primary sources such as letters or diaries like where the Adams narrative is derived from. Often, these sources color in empty spaces historians have questions about, which is why organizations like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institute now provide primary source professional development modules and inquiry kits/sets for educators. Additionally, scholastic experts have been increasingly trending toward a primary-source-based pedagogy (Garcia et al., 2019), so there are now many

digital academic databases that are easily accessible, and these archives can provide clearer answers than a textbook ever could. And wouldn't it be convenient for teachers to have a comprehensive list of these databases all in one place? Well, this is exactly what I have attempted to do by creating a website that contains these resources and more—so that first year social studies teachers can have some sense of direction.

Introduction

My name is Brett Little, and the story concerning John Adams was found in one of many valuable scholarly articles I came across for Appalachian State's Middle and Secondary Teaching Graduate Certificate Program during the course of my research. This extensive investigation culminated in a paper and then a website which includes three specific middle level history teaching strategies, along with links to websites so that first year teachers will not be in the dark when they first set foot in a classroom. The creation of this website is my attempt to help other first year middle level teachers by providing a catalogue of ready-made resources to teach history, and the research process I used attempted to find solutions to two problem questions:

- A. What are some specific pedagogical content knowledge best practice recommendations for teaching history to middle school students based on research from scholars in the field of education?
- B. How can middle level students study history in a way that prioritizes empathy, objectivity, and 21st century digital engagement?

One of the reasons I chose "History as Stories vs. History as Events" (Little, 2024) for my research topic is because there has never been a greater need for this area of

focus, and subsequent debate about it, than right now. "Just 20% of fourth graders, 18% of eighth graders, and 12% of twelfth graders achieved proficiency in U.S. history on the National Assessment of Educational Progress" (Robertson et al., n.d., Primary section). Additionally, The Nation's Report Card indicates a decline in average U.S. History scores for 8th graders by nearly 10 points since 2014 (pre-Pandemic!) (The Nation's Report Card, 2023). This result held true for the themes of democracy, culture, world role, and technology, and the declines were especially pronounced among lower-performing students. A final, but important piece of evidence for the need for this research is that "Eighth grade U.S. history scores continued a previous pattern of decline, reaching the lowest levels since the mid-1990s, and civics scores declined for the first time ever" (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2023, para. 1).

In response to these and other challenges facing middle grades social studies education, I designed my website around three strategies that my research found aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, especially with regard to the Inquiry Strand for grades 6-8. Narratives, triangulation, and science/tech are the three methods, according to experts, that keep history relevant and engaging. "Assessing the credibility of primary and secondary sources", "constructing compelling and supporting questions", "identifying central themes/lessons", and utilizing a "range of civic approaches" are all inquiry indicators which tie-in to each of the three strategies listed on my site (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2). Students in the 21st century might not become historians, but they still need to learn how to "find valid information, analyze it from multiple perspectives, and communicate it clearly" (Cooper, 2014, Symphonic section).

The Importance of Historical Narratives

Many educators recognize, and research supports, that incorporating narrative into the classroom is conducive to improving student learning and engagement (Ramsey, 2017). This means museum/historical site visits, book clubs, read-alouds, and creative-writes that bolster critical thinking truly work. These activities invite students to put themselves in someone else's shoes to see what something might've meant to a person in a certain time period (Ramsey, 2017). Focusing on individual stories is a credible strategy because, for instance, instead of generalized military tactics, reading about it from the perspective of someone who was there is better. "Describing what trench warfare entailed is one thing but reading a firsthand account of a soldier who lived through it-exposed to rats and standing in frigid water amidst piled-up bodies-is another" (Leonard, 2024, Individuals section). For example, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, or the assassination of Franz Ferdinand are all stories with riveting starting points that center on one individual. Similar to the Understanding by Design method Wiggins and McTighe (2005) advocate, teachers can work backward, then upward through the taxonomy levels. "This approach is similar to a TV crime show that reveals the body in the first minute and then spends the rest of the show assembling evidence" (Leonard, 2024, para. 15). Furthermore, according to Sarah Cooper of MiddleWeb, "Adolescents see history through the eyes of individuals and then move outward to larger implications and patterns" (Cooper, 2014, Symphonic Skills section). Author Daniel Pink (2006) supports this as well and points out that students must

learn the concept of symphony, or "putting the pieces of a puzzle together" by understanding individuals' motivations or fears at a particular moment in history (Pink, 2006).

Elias (2010) found that fictional books about history engage middle schoolers by providing students with greater feelings of understanding through perspective-taking, and a more comprehensive knowledge of the historical period. So along with mastering transferrable skills for the real world like research, teamwork, and presenting orally, they were also able to analyze and contextualize their research. Elias concluded by stating that students exhibited "substantial engagement, investment, connection to the material, and very high scores on class work, scrapbooks, and their final performance scores" (Elias, 2010, p. 53). The students under observation also displayed empathy and compassion after the fact (likely a positive byproduct of the narrative approach).

Benjamin Barbour of Edutopia advocates the use of fictional books as well. He utilizes dystopian novels like *1984*, *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Giver*, or *Hunger Games* to teach the Bill of Rights. He explains that when James Madison wrote it, "he attempted to prevent the very future that many dystopian authors fear" (Barbour, 2019, par. 3). These fears had to do with propaganda, restrictive laws, and state-sanctioned violence. And so, by connecting the freedoms we often take for granted to the rights lost in the novels, it gives students the opportunity to explore topics like the right to privacy, freedom of the press, the right to protest, and examine controversies around laws such as the Patriot Act.

A final way that students can learn through historical narrative is by bringing in familial artifacts like authentic documents or

heirlooms which may spur newfound understanding between different cultures in a classroom or even forge lasting bonds with family members. AMLE recommends that middle schoolers dig into memorabilia, letters, or photographs like these so they can wrestle with complicated issues in a legitimate way (AMLE, n.d.).

Triangulation as an Instructional Strategy

Educators can also teach history using a method called triangulation, which is events-based. Johns Hopkins historian Nathan Connolly wants humans to evolve from arguing from one perspective's point of view to progress to what contemporary scholars are doing more often—primary source triangulation (Keiger, 2018). This is the process of bringing in different points of view on the same event in order to be as accurate as one can. Gifford's (2011) research concluded that history is interpretive, not objective, so one must corroborate and synthesize from multiple sources that contain different perspectives to understand what truly occurred. One can do this by bringing up voices in history that have been traditionally suppressed, and by “balancing various accounts” through rigorous investigation to see which sources are the most reliable (Keiger, 2018, para. 4). Additionally, Yilmaz (2008) supports the assertion that “every historical event is open to multiple interpretations” (p. 45), and that it is not just subjective, one-person stories that are biased, so to always be vigilant. Therefore, my website has enumerated a variety of archives for historical literacy to empower students to become more objective citizens and have more informed discussions. The Inquiry Strand states that students must investigate “multiple perspectives” and the “origin and authority” of sources, and the resources on my site

invite them to do just that (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2).

One such resource I list, the Zinn Education Project, offers alternative voices from history that students can triangulate from like lesser-known civil rights leaders and civilian perspectives from poverty in war-torn countries (Zinn Education Project, 2023). The Gilder Lehrman Institute, Yale's Avalon Project, and the National Archives are all examples of databases I have catalogued which offer credible primary sources where students can practice triangulation. Teachers can also use these nonpartisan sites for Webquests, interactive notebooks, or portfolios for inquiry-based learning units.

In addition, I have embedded links for primary sources on the website that are not traditionally seen in social studies classes that reflect diversity and inclusion. Sources such as Chinese Commissioner Lin's letter to Queen Victoria on the opium trade, Benjamin Banneker's letter on slavery and human equality, and a Francis Ellen Watkins Harper poem on education during Reconstruction—all examples from the site *TeachersPayTeachers.com*. Practicing this sort of primary source analysis in order to “connect emotionally and understand another person's perspective and motivations” works wonders for forging empathy and understanding (Robertson et al., n.d., Empathy section).

In summary, triangulation helps students become more open-minded, helps repair strained relations between cultures, and gets students to see things in a broader fashion than just a strict dichotomy of good and evil. With all of this comes greater historical accuracy and a larger historical archive to work from. By trying to understand an individual's thought process and the complexities of events in prior time periods, students can hopefully begin to take “informed civic action” to affect meaningful

change in their communities, which is an important goal of the NC Inquiry Strand (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2).

Integrating Technology into Social Studies

The Inquiry Strand states that a “range of civic approaches” should be used, so utilizing technology/internet applications and stressing science and innovation throughout history is the final impactful strategy featured on my site (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2). Fisher (2012) offers up an insightful approach to ingraining historical lessons, concepts, and figures into young adolescents’ minds. One major detail Fisher (2012) noticed is that students were very interested in the idea of technological advancement. Adolescents are surrounded by cars, computers, iPhones, social media, and AI-and are usually interested in it. They are also excited about possible progress in tech, and in their view, if a culture did not have it, then that culture was ignorant. Therefore, Fisher says to focus on the scientists, inventions of different cultures, and to emphasize technology in order to keep students engaged (Fisher, 2012).

One benefit of utilizing technology is that it can more readily gain/keep adolescents’ attention. Discussion apps I list on the site such as YoTeach, Voxer, or Mentimeter can be used to stimulate recall, brainstorm, practice civility, or conduct polls/surveys. Adolescents are also somewhat competitive by nature, so any site that includes history games will help foster the type of engagement Fisher (2012) refers to. On my site, I have catalogued a wide variety of game-based resources on the “Tech/Science” tab that are tailored to the NC standards. *iCivics.com* and *Mr.Nussbaum.com* offer digital civic libraries that have curriculum resources, educator tools, and video games that

improve civic skills and dispositions. ICivics encourages taking informed action to address national and global challenges which the NC Inquiry Strand (NCDPI, 2021) advocates, and iCivics lessons can also be tailored specifically to NC standards. Additionally, I have catalogued 3D museum galleries and exploratory sites like the Louvre, Be Washington, Google Expeditions, Rekrei, Mission US, and Nearpod which satisfy the “investigation” Inquiry indicator through exploration of specific times and places in history (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2).

Finally, *Sciencehistory.org*’s scientific biographies page is listed on my site, which can engage students by focusing on inventions from history, as well as teach about the lessons and struggles from various scientists’ life stories in terms of what to do or not to do in order to be successful. This satisfies the indicators of “secondary sources,” “evidence-based claims,” and “multiple perspectives” from the Inquiry Strand (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2), while at the same time keeping students engaged.

Key Concepts and Conclusion

It is vital for educators to review the consequences tab on the website about how each of the three strategies presented manifest in society and the real world. These insights contain information about how interdisciplinary overlap is possible, how more civility can be achieved, and the positive and negative impacts of implementing a certain solution in the classroom. Seeing how the implications of each strategy tie-in to the NC Professional Teaching Standards (NCDPI, 2018) of promoting a respectful environment, teaching life/career skills, and giving back to one’s community through leadership, can be helpful for choosing how to implement a given strategy, and for seeing how each

strategy fits into the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS).

One especially useful part of the website is that it gives a list of 20 key concepts and terms that middle level social studies teachers could use more often in the classroom. Concepts like historical literacy, grey areas, historical consciousness, historical empathy, and historiography. These traditionally under-utilized terms and concepts help to make sure students understand why history is important and how to better connect with and contextualize disparate people, places, and events over the arc of time. “Credibility,” “context”, and “reliability” are all terms specifically used by NCDPI in the NCSCOS Inquiry Strand that are defined on my site (NCDPI, 2021, p. 2). So by incorporating these terms into assessments, projects, and class discussions, students can practice the media, digital, and information literacy skills that are so vital to careers in the 21st century. Knowing the specific lexicon encompassing history is also quite useful in examining evidence more critically in research and helps with being able to discern fact from fiction in the ecosystem of social media misinformation and disinformation we currently inhabit.

I sincerely hope that my website can offer useful solutions for helping other first year middle level social studies educators teach such a broad subject like history. I truly want to aid middle school students in growing and developing into model citizens who contribute in meaningful ways to their communities. I also strongly believe that providing educators with access to resources through strategies like historical narrative, primary source triangulation, and a technology/science-based focus can help bridge the gap between teachers feeling overwhelmed into teachers feeling comfortable. These may be new ideas, but sometimes adaptation and innovation in response to the changing world around us is

the name of the game. As famed education reformist John Dewey once said, “If we teach today’s students as we taught them yesterday, we rob them of tomorrow” (Dewey, 1915, p. 20).

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<https://sites.google.com/appstate.edu/historysite-brettlittle>

