ORIGINAL PAPER

Bringing History to Life Using Generative AI

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Abstract: History no longer needs to be a silent record for students to consume; it can be a conversation. Utilizing generative AI, our students have the tools to talk back and engage in new ways with the past. This article shares three structured projects for use in middle grades social studies classrooms that incorporate AI tools, develop critical thinking and media literacy skills, and engage students in building historical literacy. We break each project down into steps and provide example materials that will guide you in developing the project for your classroom topics and needs. Explore how you can bring history to life for your students.

Imagine a middle school classroom where history is no longer a boring collection of dates and dusty portraits, but a living, breathing dialogue. For decades, the "textbook version" of history has inadvertently flattened our most complex figures; icons like Susan B. Anthony are often reduced to a single quote or a lone achievement, stripped of the contextual and oftentimes messy motivations and systemic struggles that defined their lives. Today, generative AI platforms like Google Gemini, OpenAIs ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and others offer a radical shift: the ability to transform passive reading into active, inquiry-based exploration. However, this "digital resurrection" requires more than just a chat box. To truly foster historical literacy, teachers must integrate AI conversations through a rigorous framework of structured prompts, critical analysis safeguards, and firm ethical guidelines. By doing so, we can maximize student engagement without sacrificing the facts and dignity of the historical record.

Three Structured, AI-Enhanced Projects

We offer three structured projects that can be used in middle grades social studies classrooms to incorporate AI tools, develop critical thinking and media literacy skills, and engage students in building historical literacy. In these projects, students will have opportunities to develop research skills, interact with AI personas, think critically as they corroborate AI generated information with primary sources, develop media literacy, and explore the complexities of history.

The Interview Project

This inquiry-based learning project can be done over the course of a week. The learning goals for this project are designed to help students 1) learn to ask deeper, open-ended questions, 2) understand how historical figures may have expressed ideas using language and tone of their time period, 3) compare AI generated dialogue to authentic primary sources, and 4) practice

critical thinking related to perspective and historical accuracy.

In the first stage of this project, students conduct pre-interview research on a chosen or assigned historical figure. Sources may include a textbook excerpt, library database, teacher selected information texts, or teacher approved websites. During this initial research, students learn basic facts about their historical figure and determine what details may be missing or what additional information they would like to know. Students then create a list of 8-10 essential, open-ended questions that they are unable to answer from the text alone. One way to scaffold this step is to provide question stems such as:

- What motivated you to...
- What challenges did you face when...
- How did others react to...
- How did you feel when...
- Why did you choose to...

These question stems will help students to ask open-ended questions and require interpretation or perspective to be taken in a response. Additionally, you might provide a checklist for students to use once the questions are written to ensure they meet your requirements. Students should then narrow their questions to the five strongest for use in their interview.

In the next activity, students utilize AI to "interview" their historical figure. To ensure that students get deep answers that help them learn about their historical figure, it is important that they know how and when to ask follow-up questions. You may need to work with students, prior to the AI interviews, on how to probe someone for additional information. This could be done by modeling a conversation with a student where you demonstrate an initial question and follow-up questions to get a deeper, more complete answer. If your students do not have much experience with using AI tools, you might model a short conversation with an AI persona on the Smart Board, demonstrating how they will engage with their AI personas.

It is important that students begin their conversation by prompting AI to take on the persona of their historical figure. The prompt needs to be direct, such as: "I would like to have a conversation with X. Can you take on the persona of X and answer some questions?" At this point students can begin their interview. While students are interviewing their historical figure, they should take note of any surprising claims, the emotional tone, any bias or perspective they notice, and any statement that may seem too modern or oversimplified. The teacher may provide an Interviewer Notes graphic organizer (see Appendix A) for this step. After students conduct their interview, have them make a copy of the AI chatbot's responses and save it as a word document. Some AI tools allow you to save a transcript of the chat. This will be used during the next step.

The final part of this project asks students to conduct a post-interview analysis. First, they will select 2 to 3 primary sources (i.e., speeches, letters, diary entries, public statements) attributed to their historical figure. Teachers can have these primary sources printed and available, or ask students to locate the sources themselves. Additional time will be needed for students to find their own primary sources, so plan accordingly. Students read through the primary sources and the interview transcript from their AI conversation looking for similarities and differences. Finally, students write a reflection comparing the AI persona's tone and viewpoint to the primary sources. Appendix A contains examples of guiding prompts you might ask students to reflect on during their analysis as well as a comparison chart that could be used to scaffold for all students in preparation for

the reflective writing or as a differentiated assignment.

The "Fact-Check" Challenge

Next, we present a powerful student-centered inquiry project that develops media-literacy skills and is designed to help students see how knowledge is constructed. The learning goals for this activity will help students 1) understand that AI can sound confident but still be wrong (a hallucination), 2) practice checking facts using trustworthy sources, 3) learn how to compare information and explain differences found, and 4) build habits of questioning, verifying, and thinking critically.

The first activity involves developing a prompt in the form of a question about a historical event, person, or situation that is complex, easy to oversimplify, may have multiple interpretations, or has common myths associated with it. Some examples that may work well for middle school are:

- What caused the Salem Witch Trials?
- What was the purpose of the Great Wall of China?
- Why did the Roman Empire fall?
- Did Vikings really wear horned helmets?

You can also scaffold this process by providing students with 8-10 vetted questions related to a topic of study from your curriculum (see Appendix B for examples from a unit on Ancient Egypt). The first time this activity is done, it may be wise to model the questions for students in this way.

Next, students ask the generative AI their selected or created question. You might consider having students explore how voice and perspective can shape information, by choosing a specific persona for the AI to take on while answering the question. For example, students might ask the generative AI to "answer this question as if you are a Roman soldier" or "answer as if you are an early colonist in America." Students should save their chatbot transcript for use in the next step.

Next, students will "fact check" or verify at least two of the claims made by generative AI using traditional and trusted sources. They may use textbook excerpts, library databases (i.e., Britannica School, Gale, etc.) primary sources that you have pre-selected, or teacher-approved websites. You might scaffold this corroborative work by providing a simple graphic organizer such as the one found in Appendix B. During this verification step, students look for factual errors, missing context, overly simple explanations, misleading cause/effect, anachronisms, or statements that sound true but are not supported by any of the traditional sources. This type of analysis helps students see that AI isn't the "authority" on information; history is interpretive, not simply a list of facts; and that information must always be verified.

Using the information and knowledge from these activities, students write a short reflection answering questions that you provide. Questions might include:

- What did AI get correct?
- What did AI get wrong or oversimplify?
- Why do you think AI made that mistake?
- How did checking sources change your understanding?
- What advice might you give someone using AI for research?

If students are exploring a specific historical event or person, you might include additional questions related to their new understanding of the topic. Such analysis and reflection works to develop students' understanding of media literacy.

One way to vary this project is to have students work with a partner or in a group of three. Students use the same question, but they ask AI to respond from two or three different personas. In the fact-checking stage, students compare their graphic organizers to explore how different perspectives impact which details and facts were included in the AI chatbot responses. Another extension activity is to have students return to the AI generated response and "fix" it. They use verified facts, evidence from the traditional sources, and offer more nuanced explanations. This extension asks students to move from a consumer of knowledge to a knowledge creator.

The Historical Debate

Our third inquiry-based project uses AI personas to explore conflicting perspectives in history and synthesize viewpoints of historical figures. This project is designed to help students 1) ask open-ended, inquiry-driven questions, 2) explain differing viewpoints of two historical figures about a key issue, 3) moderate a debate between two AI personas and gather evidence from their responses, 4) compare the AI generated perspectives with primary sources to evaluate accuracy and tone, and 5) synthesize conflicting viewpoints into a clear and balanced explanation. An essential question to guide student work throughout this project is: How do different historical figures understand the same issue in different ways, and what can we learn by putting their ideas into a conversation?

Based on your curriculum and needs of students, you can assign a pair of opposing historical figures or ask them to choose a pair. Some examples of opposing historical figures might include:

- Hamilton vs. Jefferson
- Cleopatra vs. Augustus
- Booker T. Washington vs. W.E.B DuBois
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton vs. Frederick Douglass
- Abigail Adams vs. John Adams
- Bonaparte vs. Washington
- Mao Zedong vs. Chiang Kai-shek (for more advanced groups)

It is important to select pairs that have clear philosophical differences so students can more easily detect the contrast.

Next, students will conduct pre-conversation research. A simple graphic organizer can be designed to help them conduct initial research on their historical figures. The sources for this initial research should be pre-determined by the teacher and may come from a textbook, excerpts from a non-fiction book, or a website. Students begin by researching Historical Figure A. The graphic organizer you design can focus their research and allow them to learn who the person was; when and where they lived; what they believed about government, society, human rights, or other issues; or what major events may have shaped their views. After conducting their research, students determine what questions they still have about that person and write 3-5 open-ended "interest questions" that they cannot answer from the teacher provided source. These interest questions should be specific to the historical figure. Students will repeat this process for Historical Figure B.

Based on what they have learned about their two historical figures and the focus of the inquiry, students will write 3-5 open-ended "debate questions" that they want both historical figures to answer. You might guide the writing of debate questions based on your specific learning objectives or curricular focus. For instance, if you are currently teaching a unit that explores different forms of government, you may ask students to relate their debate questions to issues such as leadership, responsibilities of

a government to its citizens, or characteristics of a strong government. Some examples of both the interest questions and the debate questions are provided in Appendix C.

At this point, students are ready to engage with AI and role-play the debate between their historical figures. First, students will prompt AI to take on the persona of Historical Figure A. They ask their prepared interest questions and any follow-ups. Students repeat this process with Historical Figure B. Then students will take on the role of a moderator and ask both personas to respond to the same debate question, such as:

- What is the role of education in society?
- What is the best way to build a strong nation?
- Who should have political power?

As students moderate the debate, their responsibilities are to keep the debate focused on the issue, clarify questions when answers conflict, and take notes on the key arguments being made (see Appendix C for an example graphic organizer for moderator notes). Students should not be passive readers but rather active investigators during the debate. When the debate is concluded, students should save the chat transcript for use during their analysis.

Following the debate, you can assess student learning in a number of ways. Similar to the verification work students did in Project 2 above, you may ask students to verify the information provided by their AI personas by comparing it to primary sources. They would then write a reflection addressing prompts such as:

- Which parts of the AI's portrayal matched the primary sources?
- Which parts felt exaggerated, simplified, or were missing?
- How did each figure's tone or personality come through?

- What did you learn about how historical figures defend their ideas?

A second way to assess student understanding is to have them write a textbook excerpt introducing both historical figures and summarizing their stances on the issues raised in the AI debate. Finally, you might ask students to create a debate summary slideshow in Powerpoint or Canva including the main issues, each figure's stance, a quote from the AI debate, and their own synthesis. These assessments may be differentiated by providing students with sentence stems, an abbreviated written prompt, or a "structured synthesis" where the student adds the missing information based on their learning (see Appendix C for examples of differentiated assessments).

Ethical Safeguards

When considering the various ways to implement AI in the middle school classroom, the teacher must consider ethical and pedagogical safeguards specifically when using crucial conversations with the chatbot. The teacher should begin by discussing historical inaccuracy and bias with the students (Holmes & Miao, 2023). Since generative AI models are trained on patterns and language structures, as opposed to curated factual data bases, it has been known to "hallucinate" (Sturgill, 2025). When that happens, the AI creates a fluent, plausible sounding response that is factually incorrect. Therefore, teachers must explicitly teach that AI isn't a historian but a language simulation, which means every claim it makes must be treated like a hypothesis that requires external verification from a trusted source. Any "conversation" students have with AI should be thought of as a springboard inquiry, not truth. As a large language model (LLM), generative AI has inherent bias from the massive databases on which the LLM is trained. This can cause

the AI to reinforce dominant historical narratives. For example, when simulating a historical figure, unknowingly simplify complex individuals into stereotypes, overemphasize trauma, or minimize the contributions of marginalized groups like portraying a female activist as only a mother or an indigenous figure only in relation to conflict. Teachers should guide students to question how the historical figure is being represented and what human complexity might be missing (Paipeti, 2025).

There is also the question of empathy and respect concerning generative AI. Teachers must be explicit in framing any conversational activity with the chatbot as a linguistic role-play and simulation on a historical perspective, not a communication with a deceased historical figure. This is critical for safe-guarding the student's psychological understanding and maintaining respect for the historical memory, particularly for those associated with profound suffering or complex trauma (e.g. victims of 9/11). The teacher should also talk with students about which figures are appropriate for AI role-play and which figures should only be studied through primary sources (Holmes & Miao**,** 2023). In order to maintain focus and dignity, the teacher should implement explicit rules for student prompts. Prohibiting questions/prompts about events, people, or technologies that occurred after the historical figure's death will help keep the inquiry rooted in the figure's authentic time period. Discourage questions regarding the historical figure's fictionalized "what if" scenarios or speculative inquiries that are not supported by primary sources. This ensures that the student remains focused on the figure's documented impact on the world rather than speculation.

Conclusion

Generative AI does not replace the history textbook; instead it can turn the textbook into a launchpad for deeper inquiry. By moving from passive consumption reading monotone texts to "active dialogue" with historical figures, students are forced to confront the complexities, contradictions, and humanity of the figures who shaped our world. However, the "magic" of a conversation with Abraham Lincoln or Rosa Parks is only as effective as the teacher's pedagogical framework surrounding it. Without explicit guardrails against misdating and a rigorous commitment to fact-checking, these simulations risk becoming mere historical fiction themselves. When teachers act as the architects of these generative AI interactions by enforcing ethical boundaries and prioritizing primary source verification they do more than teach history; they equip students with the media literacy and critical empathy necessary to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape. The past is no longer a silent record; it is a conversation, and for the first time, our students have the tools to talk back.

References

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Paipeti, E. (2025, October 29). When AI 'fictions' redirect history: Generative models, historiography, and misinformation. *Historica.* https://www.historica.org/blog/ai-fictions-historiography-misinformation.

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Appendix A: Materials for The Interview Project

During the interview of their historical figure, students should take notes about the AI response to their questions. The following graphic organizer may help students organize their observations.

Graphic Organizer: *Interviewer Notes*

Question Asked	Summary of AI Response	Follow-up Question(s)	Notes on Tone/Perspective

Here is a list of guided prompts that may be used to help students during the final analysis stage while they are writing their reflection:
- How did the AI's tone compare to the tone of the primary sources?
- What did the primary sources emphasize that the AI may have softened or ignored?
- What did the AI emphasize that the primary source did not?
- Did the AI introduce any anachronisms or modern ideas?
- How did the interview change your understanding of your historical figure?

The following comparison chart could be used as a scaffold for all students before writing their reflection or as a differentiated assignment for multilingual students (ML).

Feature	AI Persona	Primary Source	My Notes
Tone			
Bias/Perspective			
Key Events			
Values/Beliefs			
Missing Context			
Other			

Appendix B: Materials for The Fact-Check Challenge

These materials are from a sixth grade unit focused on Ancient Egypt. The following are pre-vetted questions that students could choose from:
1. Why were pyramids built and who built them?
2. How did Egyptian pharaohs maintain power?
3. What was the real purpose of mummification?
4. How did the Nile River shape daily life in Ancient Egypt?
5. What did Ancient Egyptian farmers do during flood season?
6. What rights did women have in Ancient Egypt compared to other ancient societies?
7. How did Egyptian religion influence government decisions?
8. What was the role of scribes, and why were they so important?
9. How did trade connect Egypt to other ancient civilizations?
10. What caused the decline of Ancient Egypt?

This is an example of a student-completed graphic organizer used during the verification step:

AI Claim	Verification Source	Confirmed? Yes/No	Evidence	Notes
"Pyramids were built as tombs for pharaohs."	Britannica School article on Pyramids	Yes	Britannica says pyramids were "monumental tombs" designed to protect the pharaoh's body and possessions for the afterlife.	AI got this part right.
"Thousands of slaves built the pyramids."	Gale In Context: Ancient Egypt	No	Gale states that most workers were **paid laborers**, not enslaved people. Archaeologists found workers' villages showing they had housing, food, and medical care.	This is a common myth. AI repeated it.
"Workers were forced to work day and night."	Textbook chapter on Egyptian society	No	Textbook explains workers were organized into rotating crews and worked in shifts, not nonstop.	AI exaggerated the working conditions.
"Pyramids helped pharaohs rise into the heavens."	Britannica School: Egyptian Religion	Partially	Egyptians believed the pyramid shape symbolized the sun's rays and helped the pharaoh ascend to the afterlife.	AI is close, but oversimplified the religious symbolism.

Appendix C: Materials for The Historical Debate

Example open-ended questions that students might use or model their own questions after for this project.

Interest Questions	Debate Questions
- What was your childhood like? - How did your childhood (or education) shape your political beliefs? - What was your greatest achievement? - What is something you regret? - Who do you look up to and why? - Why do you distrust a strong central government? or Why is a strong central government important?	- What do you fear will happen if your ideas are ignored? - Do you think that dissent can ever be patriotic? - What makes a nation strong? or What makes a nation stable? - What are the most important traits of a strong leader? Why? - What makes authority legitimate? - Do you believe women should have full political equality (the right to vote or hold office)? Why or why not?

Graphic Organizer: *Moderator Notes*

Key arguments	
Tone and personality	
Evidence or reasoning used	
Surprising claims	
Additional Notes	

Examples of Differentiated Assessments
A Structured Synthesis
Although both historical figures cared about _____, they disagreed about _____.
_____ (name of Figure A) believed _____ because _____. However,
_____ (name of Figure B) argued _____ because _____.

Abbreviated Writing Prompt
Explain one of the major disagreements between your two historical figures and why each held their position.

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