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Teaching Second-Grade Students to Curate and Interpret the Egyptian Museum

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Abstract

Second-grade students learned about ancient Egypt and turned the products of their learning into a museum. The students practiced interpretation of their artifacts to help others understand what they had learned. The four parts of the interpretation of the museum focused on visitor understanding, construction of artifacts, preparation for generativity, and both skills and communication for the purpose of skills transferal. Second-grade students helped younger students and parent visitors explore the museum by serving as docents. The visitors received information through hands-on experiences, and verbal and visual interaction with the site.

Key Words: elementary, inquiry, interpretation, museum, social studies

In a major midwestern urban charter school Mrs. Inkrott's diverse second-grade students engage in a two-month unit on Egypt. There are two major components of this unit: the Egypt daily lessons, and museum creation and tour by the second-grade student docents. The Egypt lessons are significant and necessary to understand the museum. The students read information books, create artifacts, and learn to curate and interpret a museum they create in their classroom. The students curate the products of their study into an Egyptian museum where guests learn about culture, geography, and history. Their guests include relatives, kindergarten students, and first grade students in their school, and provide oral interpretation through tours of their products. Through reading this paper the audience can learn: How do second-grade students learn to be docents to curate and interpret their artifacts in their museum? Investing students with interpretive powers means that they are responsible for effective communication of knowledge to visitors an area referred to as taking action/communicating information in C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). Student docents contribute to visitor understanding, construct artifacts to interpret with guests, engage in generativity, and they help transfer skills to their museum attendees.

Relevance for Teachers/ Practitioners

Teachers use the C3 Framework inquiry arc when planning inquiry experiences for their students and include standards such as:

D1.2.K-2. Identify disciplinary ideas associated with a compelling question.

D2.Geo.3.K-2. Use maps, globes, and other simple geographic models to identify cultural and environmental characteristics of places.

D3.1.K-2. Gather relevant information from one or two sources while using the origin and structure to guide the selection.

D4.2.K-2. Construct explanations using correct sequence and relevant information (NCSS, 2013).

Students ask questions about the interaction between people and the land. Students engage in multiple map building activities to explain climate, environment, physical features, and weather. Students use multiple information books to use as source materials as they build knowledge about a place. Students explain both sequence and contribute relevant information as they work to guide people through their culminating project. Students share this information with multiple real audiences as they describe what they have learned.

Context for Teaching and Learning

Teachers of elementary social studies have their students work with museums and collections in a variety of ways. Students use historical thinking and imagination supplemented with primary sources to engage in historical reconstruction. Some teachers begin their instruction with a museum visit and use both the experience and artifact kits with second graders to conduct inquiry (Coppersmith & Song, 2017; Dilek, 2009). Other teachers have prolonged or multiple museum interactions where students are frequently on the museum site. Students learn that school-based social studies include historical thinking. Yilmaz et al. (2013) found that students who visited museums as part of their school experience were captivated and motivated to learn, engaged with the exhibits, could recall historical knowledge, enjoyed social studies, and found social studies to be meaningful. These experiences helped the students to become informed citizens. Students who use images and objects learn to identify political changes. Rawlinson et al. (2007) suggest that social issues can be addressed in museum school partnerships. Students develop social studies skills from objects in museum collections that reflect social change. Students also develop inquiry skills from objects that reflect technological change, and they learn that objects represent social change.

Researchers have not recently discussed the power of student curating museum content (Strickland & Van Cleaf, 1985; Shamy, 1991). This is unfortunate because the content found in museums could enhance personal communication by talking about ideas found in cultural centers. The museum experience is less formal than what is described by the inquiry arc. However, the idea is a powerful addition to the inquiry arc suggested by the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013). Students arrange displays, write interpretive labels for artifacts, and provide docent services for real audiences that visit their museums. Students communicate the importance of collections and the excitement of learning when they talk to peers and family. Students discover collections, and at the same time they perform an important role in the introduction of museums to the community.

Teachers find many ways to assess students in elementary social studies. First there must be time allotted to social studies where knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions can be practiced. While mandated integration or scheduled English Language Arts and social studies integration does not always work adding instructional time for social studies does not hurt students (Heafner, 2018). The thinking and analysis done in historical tasks enhances the students experience with other subjects. The skills of reading informational text in secondary sources and examining primary sources augments their skill set. Students who learn skills in elementary social studies and history demonstrate their new proficiencies through assessment (Brugar, 2016). Assessments might be formal or more informal. The evaluation continuum extends between more abstract and authentic assessments that get students in front of real audiences. Students were evaluated on the physical maps of Egypt they constructed. Students were evaluated on their transcription of hieroglyphics. Furthermore, students wrote in their portfolio about what they learned each week. Some teachers use WebQuests to get their students to explore Washington, D. C. where they find the purpose of two major documents (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) and why the national anthem is a symbol of the nation (Bennett & Cunningham, 2011). Getting students in front of their peers or their parents is an example of an authentic assessment. Students display their knowledge and skills before the community. When students take on roles as arbiters of knowledge they are using the skills they have learned about in class.

Young people develop curatorial competencies as they engage and embrace digital culture. They develop narrative platforms that exhibit skills in analysis, balance, clarity, consistency, content type, and sources (Mihailidis, 2015). Their story telling skills operate person to person in collaborative spaces that are creation driven and illustrate core digital literacy. Relevant digital curation tools provide enhanced media analysis. Effective online content is curated by student driven pedagogies that engage the competencies of the user. Students create a social memory based on the heritage of place when they curate artifacts, photographs, and video clips (Cotterill et al., 2016). Students gathered information and built concepts from informal community sources as well as archives and museums as part of an inquiry project. Students presented their website content as an exhibition. Older students continue to use curation to learn social science content. More recent curation involves students using digital imaging to record information and then using the discernment of the user to prioritize content that is most important to share. Individuals curate lasting descriptions about physical locations when they combine their data with a documentary. The social act of documentary creates a curated narrative for a public audience, and the result is a commentary on the location. Public gallery that exhibits the combine data of a place may preserve aspects of place longer than the duration of the actual physical location (Erickson, 2010).

Students curate and interact between multiple digital resources. Digital learners find opportunities to link to peers in ways that they find amusing in addition to creating and sharing content. Learners construct several social media tools to interact between multiple felicitous settings (Hollett & Kalir, 2017). These types of experiences contribute to autodidactic situations.

However, students with peers and mentors also create knowledge from these experiences when they develop content. Students interpret information in multiple ways from graphs, maps, photographs, and political cartoons (Thacker et al., 2019). Data interpretation come from visual images when students analyze them. Students practice with content to make sense of graphics, information and text. Students need more practice with analyzing, creating, and reading graphics.

Topic Implementation and Impact

As part of the introduction to the topical study of Egypt the second-grade students do a small play, and they practice the play leading up to the first Saturday School Day. In the fall, parents accompany their students to Saturday School on two different weekends: one in September and one in October. The parents do activities with their children in the morning and are involved in station rotations. The morning activities also include mini plays that the children perform for their parents. In the afternoon, while their children are learning in their classrooms with their teachers, parents participate in special topical meetings.

At the beginning of each of these rotations parents read short narratives to their children about the Nile River, the Fertile Crescent, the Nile Delta, and what visitors see now in Egypt. In the four rotations students make the landforms of Egypt. The students paint a mural together with their parents about Egypt, and the students learn about the animals and plants in the area. Finally, the students make a salt dough map of Egypt. Mrs. Inkrott says, “It is amazing how well integrated the Egypt study is, so it makes sense that they are doing the study of the past. They very purposefully include art and reading.” Students use non-fiction text to develop their projects and to learn context about what they create. The students look at concepts such as culture, elevation, kingdom, landforms, river, resources, and ruler.

After Saturday School the students continue to use their reading time to learn about Egypt. Students read stories and study books in class about Egypt, and there is also a daily assessment when they are reading nonfiction books. Mrs. Inkrott asks them to, “Find three interesting things or three things they did not know from reading the book.” For four weeks the students do activities that support their readings. Four parent volunteers come in at these times to help. The first week the students paint their salt dough map, and the students make their own name in hieroglyphics. They also compare the seasons in Egypt to their Indiana climate, and there is also a note to parents with a story about hieroglyphics for families to read together.

The second week the students try foods of Egypt such as dates, pomegranate, and flat bread. These foods come from both cultivated groves of trees and planted and harvested field crops. Getting food from the field to the table is difficult, and the people work hard to make sure they have enough to eat. The students use a model that shows how the people of Egypt move water into their fields for irrigation. There is also a note to parents with a story about foods of the Middle East for families to read together.

The third week students learn about preservation of the body as a prerequisite for the possibility of immortality. As an iconic representation of this idea they create salt dough

mummies which they wrap in wet plaster strips that dry and harden. They insert sequins into the mummy to represent jewels and amulets, and they create a decorated cardboard case for their mummy. In this way the body is protected. In another illustration of preservation of the body the students place an apple in salt which draws the moisture from the fruit and the apple hardens as it dehydrates.

The fourth week the students continue reading about mummy burials. To create models of what they have read, the students create canopic jars from self-hardening clay. The students also create the four organs that go into the jars and create them from self-hardening clay before putting them in their proper jars. This is a good connection in helping the students to understand the organs within their body and what they do, and what they are reading about from informational text about Egypt. Each of the activity engages the student in forming concepts through iconic representation.

Fortunately, the teacher is also supported by her art teacher, and the art teachers provides the students with Egyptian art experiences. The students try their hand at drawing the Egyptian stylized birds and papyrus fronds. The students also make drawings of a pyramid, temple cat, and scarab in their art class, and all of these are projects are part of the body of work the students display at the end of their unit of study.

Students also engage in other experiences to learn about Egyptian culture. In the literacy block the students cut out and color representations of their representations of the Egyptian pantheon. As part of their reading activities they perform a readers theater version of a play about Set and Horace before the students draw them. Another part of the classroom experience for the students is when the teacher reads a novel entitled *The Sword of Egypt* set in ancient Egypt to the students across multiple days. Finally, students also contribute to their yearlong portfolio when they write about pyramids and mummies.

Assessments

The students enjoy playing a game called “scoot” to review for assessment (<https://www.superteacherworksheets.com/scoot.html>). When the students come into the room there is a question on each desk. They answer the question and move to the next desk. The second-grade students have a test about Egypt read to them and there is word bank on their paper for hard to remember terms. It includes big ideas that they have been studying such as, “What are the three seasons of Egypt?” “How did the Nile River help Egypt?” “How did the people of Egypt use the Nile River?” There is also a docent test for the students that is set up the same way.

The Egyptian Museum

The culminating activity for this unit of study concludes when the students create a museum and set up their exhibits as curators. In their museum they become the interpreters

helping their visitors to understand the exhibits and create new knowledge for themselves. Mrs. Inkrott says,

We talk a lot about what it takes to be a good docent in the museum. First, they need to talk; we need our students to be knowledgeable. You cannot leave your friend; you need to take them to the different exhibits. Get your friend to do things such as let them wrap the mummy and talk about how they did it. Be patient they are younger than you and remember when you did this when you were smaller kids. I always pair siblings together because that is fun to watch. The students are very excited about being tour guides.

The students learn to interpret their museum for their visitors. The students practice going to all the places they will show when they set up the Egyptian Museum. The goal is for each student to talk about each section, and students take a guest with them to share about each section of the museum. From nine to eleven the three sections of kindergarten and three sections of first grade tour the museum with their second-grade docents who lead them on tours. Parents are invited to tour the museum during the recess time for a private opening.

The teacher sets the date on the school calendar for parents, guests, and teachers of younger students to know when they can come and visit the museum. Invitations are sent and times for classes are staggered so everyone does not arrive at the same time. The students review how they built their exhibits and what they learned about Egypt so they can pass it on to others. Each project the students create is stored in the classroom until the museum which means that a three-dimensional portfolio of the work of each child needs to be stored safely until the event. Students talk with the teacher about how to make people feel welcome and how to explain the museum to younger visitors. Prior to visitors arriving students practice in class by giving partners a model tour and talking about what visitors can see and do.

The second-grade student docents give their tours in volunteer-made costumes. The second-grade docents show their parents a tent set up to represent a tomb. The docent shows their guest a stuffed person for the visitors to wrap. All the student projects made in preparation for the museum are on display, and guests are invited to write their name in hieroglyphics. The guests also take turns performing the traditional measure for eternal life when the Egyptian god weighs the merits of the heart of the departed against a feather.

The second-grade students learned about being a tour guide as they practiced interpretation. The interaction with their visitor was important in listening to what the visitor was interested in exploring.

Visitor Understanding

Madelyn observed, “You always need to listen and stay with your guest, tell interesting facts, and try to answer their questions. Practice and be ready.” The student docent needed to prepare for guiding the visitor through the exhibit. Furthermore, the second-grade docent realized they played a role in visitor education. Madison stated, “We can teach people new things. Listen

to your guy [student]. Make sure you learn it, make sure that you say everything right, ask them, ‘What do you see in this picture?’” The student docent realized that they needed to help the visitor focus on elements of the exhibit by raising questions for discussion. As student served as a docent, they learned about being a tour guide which was another way for people to learn working with people. The tour guide worked with the visitor to help them understand what they were experiencing. The tour guide practiced interpretation with the visitor to the Egypt museum to develop understanding about what they learned.

Construction of Artifacts

The second-grade students thought the museum experience was important. For some people the focus of the museum was on the artifacts created by the second graders. Joseph explained, “Everyone is excited, and people are interested in things that are old and ancient. At our museum you can use your imagination and pretend they [the artifacts] are old. A lot of people are interested, and people enjoy seeing the creations.” The second-grade students enjoyed the process of artifact creation.

Preparation for Generativity

However, other second-grade docents saw the importance of the museum as a function of generativity. Phillip articulated that, “The Kindergarteners and First Graders can learn about what they will be learning, so they can be prepared. We can learn more, to talk about the stuff on the tour. We can be a good example.” In addition to the preparation of the next generation by modeling knowledge and skills, there was also a layer of the docents themselves learning from the experience. Students found the museum important because they learned knowledge and skills from the experience. Student also found the museum important because of the artifact construction and generativity.

Skill Transferal

The second-grade students also saw the role of docent as preparing them for the future. Some students saw the role of tour guide as preparation for an actual career in interpretation. Anna said, “It can help you if you want to be a tour guide when you are older, like at the Children’s Museum.” She was interested in monetizing her experience into a career at another museum she was familiar with. Other students found the skills of being a docent helpful in future situations. Joseph noticed that, “It can help about looking people in the eye [and] get me used to talking to people you don’t know very well. Some people can be shy.” He observed that the skills of being a docent helped people to become more extroverted. Skill transference whether for a career or for interpersonal communication were important results the students carried into the future. These students prepared for future interaction because of their experiences.

Recommendations

The Egypt museum is important because it shows how primary students learn elementary social studies that is meaningful to the students. The students actively engage with ideas in an interdisciplinary format with content from geography, history, and economics. It shows how students can mix social studies, language arts, and art; in addition, to the mixing of knowledge, skills, and values. Mrs. Inkrott says, “The students are capable of comparing past with the present. They also get excited about the history of another country.” By working together, they are engaging in challenging work to bring knowledge to other people. That function of communication is important to the students.

Students are using important assessment ideas by demonstrating how second graders can teach siblings, peers, younger children, and members of the community. Second-grade students interpret their exhibit to people. Joseph explained, “To be a good guide, be kind and helpful. Always be with your kids and let them do the things.” Students understood the importance of helping their visitor participate in exploring the exhibit. When the students curate their social understandings, they analyze their knowledge to put it on display in front of the community. This is authentic and a powerful measure of community affirmation of what they have accomplished. Madelyn said, “If you are really shy you can get used to talking to people at school.” Students display and interpret the results of their learning under the evaluation of the community through public performance of their knowledge. Students construct powerful interpretation that they must share with their guests when they lead docent walks through the museum. Students knew they needed to tell an interesting story and engage their guest in the museum. Anna said, “To be a good tour guide you should add a lot of detail about Egypt. Let the kids do the stuff themselves, like wrap the mummy.” The museum was exploratory, and the docents worked to interpret the exhibit to people.

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