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Get in their Heads: Historical Perspective Taking Activities for American History Classes

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Abstract

This pedagogical article advocates for the use of historical perspective taking activities as teaching methods to encourage student inquiry and engagement. The author describes two activities designed to help students see history through the eyes of the people who lived it. The Historical Craigslist Ads activity asks students to think deeply about historical figures and to create digital advertisements for items they might offer for sale on “Historical Craigslist.” The Historical Letters of Recommendation activity encourages students to imagine themselves as historical figures making recommendations for their friends, contemporaries, and enemies. These fun and engrossing activities provide unique methods for teaching historical concepts in a context that creates the perfect opportunity to examine issues such as social justice and democratic education.

Key words: historical perspective taking, creative social studies methods, history-teaching methods, activities for social studies classes

After several years in the classroom teaching American History, I found myself in a quandary. State standards were evolving, and I needed activities that allowed me to teach my students specific historical concepts while also developing thinking skills. I refused to abandon, however, my personal dedication to using my classes to advance the ideas of democracy, social justice, and tolerance.

As I sorted through the prevailing thought in social studies research, I came across the idea of historical perspective taking. Defined by Lee and Ashby (2001) as a teaching technique that encourages students to place themselves in historical situations, historical perspective taking seemed to offer an opportunity to combine all these ideas into fun, engaging, inquiry-based activities. Over the next few years, I worked to create classroom assignments and projects that asked students to step into the shoes of the people who lived history. These activities changed my teaching and helped my students learn in exciting new ways.

Context

Historical perspective taking is not a new concept in Social Studies education. For many years, researchers and practitioners have utilized and refined a diverse array of specific pedagogical methods and teaching activities that are designed to encourage students to better see history through the eyes of the people who lived it (DeLeur, van Boxtel, & Wilschut, 2015).

These endeavors have established the usefulness of this concept to modern practitioners and identified subtle nuances that may lead to more targeted outcomes.

Though the activities themselves are as varied as the teachers who employ them, the benefits of perspective taking have been well established by educational researchers and experts. Lemisko (2010) advocated perspective taking as a means to foster historical thinking, critical reconstruction of the past, and understanding of the complex historical contexts in which people lived. Pellegrino, Lee, and D’Erizans (2012) promoted perspective taking activities’ abilities to encourage students to debate, deliberate, and grapple with complex historical situations. Additionally, perspective taking activities have been shown to help students become more socially aware and to improve student attitudes toward marginalized groups (Rios, Trent, and Castaneda, 2003; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003).

The use of historical perspective taking activities in class has been shown to result in students writing with more emotion, acknowledging both sides in a conflict, and including more elaborate narration in their writing (DeLeur, van Boxtel, & Wilschut, 2017). Sandahl (2020) reported on the ability of perspective taking activities to increase students’ understanding of viewpoints other than their own, and to improve student engagement. Additionally, Lemisko (2010) reported that historical perspective taking activities can spark conversations among students about beliefs and values, serve as entry points to debate complex and difficult topics, and provoke interesting questions.

An important study by DeLeur, van Boxtel, and Wilschut (2015) identified a subtle nuance of this concept that had yet to be brought to light. By studying the perspective-taking activities advocated by a variety of history textbooks, the researchers were able to identify two categories into which these types of activities may fall: “imagining in” and “supposing in”. Imagining in activities ask students to use their mind’s eye to put themselves in the places of historical characters and complete activities as if they are in the time period being studied. Supposing in activities do not require students to imagine themselves in history. Instead, these activities ask learners to describe the feelings, thoughts, and actions of people of the past. Since the activities below ask students to employ their imaginations in meaningful ways, both would fall squarely within the realm of “imagining in” tasks.

Relation to National and State Standards

The activities described in this article satisfy the requirements of a wide variety of state and national standards. The C3 Framework of the National Council of the Social Studies (2013) specifically refers to perspective taking as a point of emphasis, and calls for students to learn skills and mindsets that can be meaningfully developed utilizing the activities below. Some of the C3 Framework standards to which these activities relate are:

- D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

- D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives
- D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past

The Kentucky Academic Standards for Social Studies in high school US History (2019) hold enormous potential for the application of the perspective taking activities below. With very little modification, the Historical Craigslist Ads and Historical Letters of Recommendation activities can be meaningfully utilized with almost any of the specific content standards listed for US History. Likewise, these activities relate very well to the overarching concepts of using evidence and communicating conclusions emphasized throughout the standards. Specific standards with which these activities correlate include the following:

- Use appropriate evidence to construct and revise claims and counterclaims relevant to compelling and/or supporting questions in U.S. history (HS.UH.I.UE.3).
- Engage in disciplinary thinking and construct arguments, explanations or public communications relevant to compelling and/or supporting questions in U.S. history (HS.UH.I.CC.2).
- Engage in disciplinary thinking and apply appropriate evidence to propose a solution or design an action plan relevant to compelling and/or supporting questions in U.S. history (HS.UH.I.CC.3).

The Activities

Over the years, I found perspective taking activities valuable for most of the reasons previously described. Below I detail two activities I used to teach my students historical concepts while developing their capacity to see history through the eyes of the people who lived it. I believe that, with a little practice, any social studies teacher can develop useful perspective taking activities like these.

Activity #1: Historical Craigslist ads

Centuries ago, when I was in high school, it seemed that most of my time was spent thinking about one thing: cars. Before I was old enough to drive, I spent hours talking with my dad about restoring a vintage Galaxie 500 to be ready for my junior year. I could hear the thump of the 390 cubic inch engine. I could feel the wind on my face as I raced down the country roads. I argued with myself about the perfect color: would it be flame red or forest green? The dream was delicious, and still continues today, though my father passed away years ago.

When I became a high school teacher, I found my students, male and female, rich and poor, were every bit as car obsessed as I was. Only now, instead of prowling the back roads

looking for old Fords like I did with my father, students spend hours on Craigslist searching for the perfect car and the best deal.

Eventually, I decided to use my students' inclination toward and familiarization with Craigslist to my advantage in the classroom. I developed the Historical Craigslist Activity (Figure 1) to connect learning with students' interests and culture in a meaningful way. Over time, I saw that students valued the creativity in the project and loved the ability to take the perspectives of historical figures.

The Importance of Emphasizing Craigslist Safety

It doesn't take much searching to find heart wrenching stories of innocent people who have been victimized in relation to Craigslist. At first, I was apprehensive about introducing my students to the activity out of fear for their safety. What I quickly learned, however, is that this activity not only provides a fun and engaging method for teaching historical concepts; it also provides a perfect pretext for a serious discussion about Internet safety and Craigslist horror stories. By engaging my students in these discussions, encouraging them to watch educational videos about the dangers of browsing the Web, and having them read accounts of the victims of Internet-related violence, I was able to educate my students about the topic we were studying, and to relate the experience to the context of my students' lives.

The Historical Craigslist Activity is perfect for the computer lab, as students can use word processing or presentation programs to create authentic-looking ads. But if technology is not readily available, the teacher can create a simple assignment sheet (Figure 2) that will accomplish the same task. Basically, a Craigslist advertisement consists of several parts. They are:

1. A short title for the item(s) for sale, including price and location. The title should be in bold and a larger font than the rest of the text in the ad. I limit my students to 20 words in the title, all inclusive.
2. An image of the item. In many cases, the image can be found with a simple Internet search and copied and pasted (bearing in mind copyright laws) into the ad. In cases where this is not possible, students can showcase their artistic talents by creating their own renditions of the item(s).
3. A map to the item right beside the image. In some cases, the item may be totally lost or even imaginary. In that situation, students should use their imaginations to come up with the best possible map to the item.
4. Three small boxes for the condition of the item, the manufacturer of the item, and a link to more ads from the seller. I took the liberty to changing the "other ads" box to a "price" box, and the students never seemed to notice.
5. A large section for a full, detailed description of the item. I always asked my students to incorporate some drama and humor into the description, and to write the description in the voice of the historical character selling the item. Was he or she a southern

country boy, like my Alvin York? Was he or she British or Medieval? I found that asking students to write using the dialects of the historical sellers helped them to take the perspectives of the people they wrote for, and to see situations through their eyes.

- A section for the posting identification number, posting date, and date of last update. These should be very small, and located at the very bottom of the ad. At first I waffled about whether to include these items, but I found that students often showed great creativity with the identification number and the date of last updating. Also, the posting date allowed students to set their ads in the period we were studying and added historical authenticity to the assignment.

Figure 1.

Example: What would Alvin York sell?

Historical Craigslist

**For Sale: 132 Authentic German World War I Uniforms- \$10 each
(Pall Mall, TN)**



Description:

For sale: 132 authentic German World War I uniforms. I know they are real because I took them off the old boys after I captured them. They are in pretty rough shape, but most of them are still wearable. Just don't wear them around me or my trigger finger might get to itchin'! Any turkey feathers found among the uniforms may be considered a bonus and need not be returned. Profits from sales will be split among the Alvin C. York Institute, the Pall Mall Roads and Utilities Department, and the seven guys who helped me get the uniforms. Serious inquiries only. Please contact Sergeant Alvin C. York, Pall Mall, Tennessee. If I ain't home, leave a message with Grace. Thanks y'all!

Condition: Used, some severely soiled

Manufacturer: Deutsches Heer Co.

Price: \$10 each

Posting ID #: 12131887

Posted: 10-8-1918

Updated: Today

Figure 2.

Template for the Historical Craigslist Assignment:

Historical Craigslist

For sale: (short description; maximum 20 words)

<p>Insert a good image of the item here, or of a similar item</p>	<p>Insert a map to the location of the item here. If the item's location is unknown, use what you know historically and your imagination to come up with the best possible map to the item.</p>
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Description:

Write a good, detailed description here. Use some humor, write from the seller's viewpoint, and refer to the historical event pertaining to the item. Just remember to use sound historical reasoning.

Condition: Describe the item's condition

Manufacturer: If known

Price: Come up with a justifiable price

Posting ID #:

Posting date:

Date of last update:

Tips and Suggestions

Although my students tended to be highly familiar with Craigslist ads, they often struggled to create their own. To help them get started, I shared the Alvin York ad above and

modeled my thinking and actions in creating the example. I then worked one-on-one with those who still struggled to come up with a seller and item. It can also be very helpful to allow the students to work in pairs or small groups.

Activity #2: Historical Letters of Recommendation

In the fall of my students' senior year, the requests for letters of recommendation started. It seemed they needed a teacher's endorsement for every part-time job, college application, and scholarship on the planet. Though my right hand sometimes felt the pain of over-exertion, I never had the heart to turn anyone down.

One day, after spending a planning period writing letters, I began to think that I had used up with every possible way of saying that a student was a good student. As I sat there rubbing my hand, I began to wonder what George Washington would write in a letter of recommendation. This led me to consider what positions might require the recommendation of the first president, and who he might endorse. Thus was born one of my students' favorite activities, Historical Letters of Recommendation (Figure 3).

Tips and Advice

To maximize the impact of the historical letters of recommendation activity, encourage your students to get into the mind of the writer and to consider deeply the relationship between the recommender and the recommended. Students should research both persons in depth and possess a thorough understanding of how they viewed each other. Some relationships, as seen above, are negative and so the recommendation can be a negative one. In the example above, Theodore Roosevelt recommends Mother Jones for a teaching position to keep her from agitating the public for reforms that were uncomfortable to the President. Robert Johnson might recommend Blackbeard for any position (lucrative or punitive) that would keep him from raiding the city which he governed.

Encourage students to stay within the historical context when writing their letters. Students should think historically and refrain from referencing modern ideas, landmarks, and gadgets that weren't around during the period they are writing about. Also, remind students to use terminology that might be unique to the writer, such as "bully" above. What terms might Amelia Earhart have thrown out haphazardly? What about Richard Nixon?

Ideas for Topics

- For what position might George Washington recommend his longtime friend Henry Knox?
- For what position might Frederick Douglass recommend William Lloyd Garrison?
- For what position might Amelia Earhart recommend Anita "Neta" Snook, her flying instructor?

- For what position might Richard Nixon recommend Frank Willis, the Watergate security guard?
- Which member of the exploration party might Meriwether Lewis recommend for a job as head mapmaker for Lucas Brothers Maps?
- For what position might Robert Johnson, the Royal Governor of Charleston, South Carolina, recommend the pirate Blackbeard?
- Who might Ida B. Wells recommend for President of the NAACP?

Figure 3.

Example of Historical Letter of Recommendation

President Theodore Roosevelt
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

July 29, 1903

School Board President
Monroe School District
Monroe, Michigan 48161

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to recommend Mary Harris "Mother" Jones for employment as a teacher in your school district. As I am sure you will remember, Mrs. Jones taught for you previously. I would consider it a great favor if you could find a position for her in one of your schools.

Mrs. Jones has many of the qualities that make a bully teacher. She loves children (maybe too much), she can walk long distances, and she speaks very loudly. It is true that she disagrees with children working, but I am sure that viewpoint only applies to factories and not classrooms. She is a prolific letter writer, and she has a talent for working crowds into frenzies. I bet that talent would do her well teaching students.

Mrs. Jones definitely needs something other than me to occupy her time. Although she is presently engaged in Oyster Bay, her recent history indicates that she is more than willing to march long distances for the right opportunity.

Could you (please) find a teaching position for Mrs. Jones in one of your schools? If you do, I'm not saying you might find a cabinet position in your future, but you never know.

And if you're worried about me calling Mrs. Jones "the most dangerous woman in America," don't. I meant to say "the most STUDIOUS."

Sincerely, (VERY sincerely)

Theodore "Don't Call Me Teddy" Roosevelt

Assessment

I like for my students to know how they will be graded before they begin an assignment. I consider it the same as handing out the rule book before a football game. For this reason, I always tried to use a concise but specific rubric for grading purposes. Good historical perspective is a complex combination of creativity, historical context, and historical accuracy. Figure 4 is an example of a rubric that can be used to assess either of the above activities using these ideas

Figure 4.

Rubric for assessing Historical Letters of Recommendation

	1	2	3	4
Creativity	The writing, images, and maps are very basic and not interesting to the reader.	The writing, images, and maps have some level of interest, but creativity and reader interest is low. Only one of the writing, images, or maps shows creativity.	Two of the writing, images, or maps show creativity. Interest and creativity are approaching.	The writing, images, and maps show a great deal of inventiveness and interest for the reader.
Historical context	The project strays from the historical context and incorporates language patterns, thoughts, or references that are not appropriate to the period multiple times.	The project strays from the historical context a minimal number of times.	The project stays within the historical context, or incorporates appropriate historical language, but not both.	The project stays within the historical context. Historical language appropriate to the period or historical character represented is accurate.
Historical accuracy	The project shows that the student has several misunderstandings concerning the historical period being studied.	The project shows that the student has a minimal number of historical misunderstandings.	The project is either historically accurate, or shows no misguided thinking, but not both.	The project is accurate historically. No misguided or misleading thinking is displayed.
Overall quality and appearance	The project looks hurried, as if it was put together at the last minute. There are multiple typos or errors.	The project looks hurried and unpolished. At least one typo or error is present.	The project either looks hurried and unpolished or contains at least one typo or error.	The project looks professional and interesting. It is obvious that the student took a great deal of time and care in constructing the project. There are no typos or errors.

Supporting Student Research

I found that most of my students were able to conduct basic Internet research in support of these activities on their own. Some students, however, require more support. Though the actual sources may vary depending on the specific content, some Internet-based collections contain such widely-varied resources that their applicability is almost universal. The websites below serve as resources that could be provided to students who need a gentle nudge in the right direction as they search for primary and secondary sources for use in completing the activities:

- Library of Congress: *Primary Documents in American History*: <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/>
- Fordham University Library: *American History Primary Sources*: <https://fordham.libguides.com/AmericanHistory/PrimarySources>
- National Archives: *Finding Primary Sources*: <https://www.archives.gov/education/research/primary-sources>
- ushistory.org: (secondary source): <https://www.ushistory.org/us/index.asp>
- National Museum of American History: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/>

Lessons Learned

I used the perspective taking activities above to teach a variety of historical concepts. Over the years, the positive effects of these activities became clear. Like Lemisko (2010), I found that taking the perspectives of the people they studied improved my students' abilities to think historically and to understand the complex contexts in which they lived. Similarly to Sandahl (2020), I saw my students more engaged with the material and willing to consider other viewpoints when dealing with perspective taking activities. In the earlier years of my teaching career, I found that my students tended to look at the past through a modern lens. They seemed instinctively to evaluate past people and situations using modern ideologies and points of view. By using these activities, I was able to highlight and strengthen this facet of my students' thinking.

Though empathy for the poor and underprivileged was rarely difficult to foster in my poverty-stricken district, my students sometimes struggled to see events through the eyes of groups sometimes marginalized due to ethnicity, geographic location, or gender. I learned to tailor these activities to encourage my students to see through the eyes of these groups, and I found that many of the students who struggled with this concept improved their abilities dramatically (Rios, Trent, and Castaneda, 2003; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003).

For me, though, the greatest benefit was the dramatically increased engagement and participation I saw when I used these activities in class. Students often commented about how much fun they were and requested more perspective taking activities. After completing the activities, students tended to come to class the next day more excited and positive than normal,

asking “Can we do another activity like the one we did yesterday?” For an old History teacher like me, there was no greater compliment.

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