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Examining African American Experiences in the Early 1900s: Developing Historical Empathy Skills by Discussing Public Issues

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Abstract

A hallmark of democratic societies is the discussion of issues that impact the common good. Activities that foster historical empathy provide students with the skills to discuss such issues because they learn how to recognize and appreciate multiple perspectives. In this article, the author provides two activities that use historical empathy skills to discuss public issues in the high school social studies classroom. Public issues are social and political dilemmas that involve multiple points of view, and as such, require the analysis of evidence before drawing informed conclusions. The historical empathy activities in this article highlight the experiences of African Americans in the early 1900s as a vehicle to examine the impact of enduring public issues on historical figures. Each activity is designed to provide high schools students with the skills to recognize perspectives and understand that people's perspectives, actions, and decisions are influenced by their values, beliefs, and biases.

Key words: Historical empathy, public issues, perspective recognition

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has charged 21st century social studies teachers with preparing students to become productive citizens that make meaningful contributions in a democratic society. According to the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013), this is accomplished by providing students with the skills to pose thoughtful questions, conduct thorough research using multiple sources, analyze evidence, and communicate their interpretations and conclusions through writing. The development of high school students' historical empathy skills is one key to actualizing the goals of the C3 Framework.

In this article, the author discusses two activities to explore African Americans' experiences in the early 1900s. These activities examine how historical empathy skills can be used to teach public issues. First, the author provides a brief literature review defining historical empathy. Then, she gives two activities that utilize primary sources in order to evoke an affective connection to understand the unique experiences of oft-marginalized groups in American history. Each activity aligns to the educational goals of the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013). The steps and resources to implement the two activities are provided.

Brief Literature Review of Historical Empathy

Historical empathy is a cognitive and affective process that allows students to take a figurative walk in a historical figure's shoes (Colby, 2008; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Yeager & Foster, 2001). Students come to understand and consider how the customs, values, and beliefs of an historical time period influence how historical figures behaved in certain situations and made decisions (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Endacott, 2010, 2014; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Yeager & Doppen, 2001; Yeager & Foster, 2001). Activities that foster historical empathy with primary sources teach students to interpret the past through the political, social, and cultural lens of the time period (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Perotta & Bohan, 2017; Yilmaz, 2007). When students comprehend how emotions and factors such as religion, socioeconomics, race, and gender can affect how others see the world, they are less likely to think that historical figures' decisions and actions were irrational (Colby, 2008; Lee & Shemilt, 2011).

Primary sources help students grasp the nuances and complexities of historical peoples, events, and eras (Nokes, 2013; Yeager & Doppen, 2001). Analyzing primary sources provides an opportunity for them to develop historical empathy skills (Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Endacott & Pelekanos, 2015). Analyzing the first-person accounts of events by people from an historical era provide a glimpse into the author's world view (Austin & Thompson, 2015). Many times students are led to think inferentially as they have to interpret what is being said and sometimes, what is not being said. Historical empathy skills aid in this inferential and investigative process (VanSledright, 2004; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Yeager & Foster, 2001).

Historical empathy skills key to the analysis and interpretation of the past are perspective recognition, contextualization, and the use of evidence to support conclusions (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Endacott & Pelekanos, 2015). Perspective recognition is the ability to appreciate another person's beliefs, attitudes, and biases in order to grasp how the person may have felt about an event that is under study (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Endacott, 2010; Davis, 2001). Contextualization is the deep understanding that people are a product of their time period and should be examined by the social, political, and cultural norms of that era (Colby, 2008, Lee & Shemilt, 2011). Finally, students analyze a variety of sources with alternate perspectives to draw informed conclusions about historical peoples and events (Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Nokes, 2013).

Social studies content is more meaningful when the teacher incorporates the stories of people "from below," or counter-narratives (Nokes, 2013). Many times, students are not provided the opportunity to read about the experiences and perspectives of ordinary people, as many history books tend to highlight the larger-than-life figures (Nokes, 2013; Sánchez & Sáenz, 2017). For example, history textbooks tend to focus chapters about the 1960s Civil Rights Movement on prominent figures, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. There are rarely stories from the foot soldiers of the movement, such as the people that conducted voter registrations, who were often in mortal danger but risked their lives in the name of

disenfranchisement. Social studies classrooms must include the stories told by the oft-marginalized groups whose stories are either minimized or left out of history books. These accountings serve the purpose of disrupting the master-narratives, which are the dominant stories of White western culture or that only focus on the leaders of a movement (Hawkman, 2017; Hawley, Hostetler, & Chandler, 2017). By including the words and lived experiences of people of color, students hear the voices of others who were oppressed or victimized by a society (Woodson, 2016).

The 21st century social studies classroom is an environment where students should be exposed to the experiences of all races, ethnicities, and cultures. Students may be able to relate to historical figures' lived experiences, such as oppression and injustice (Brooks, 2014). They recognize that although historical figures may have lived in another time period, issues such as racism and inequality tend to evoke similar emotions, actions, and decisions across time (Endacott & Pelekanos, 2015; Retz, 2015; Yancie, 2018). This may be especially true for students who are of the same gender or members of groups that have been marginalized or misrepresented in history. The experiences of oft-marginalized groups must be brought forth in the history curricula and not regulated to the background (Woodson, 2016). The following two activities may be used to explore racial discrimination African Americans faced during the early 1900s. These tasks aim to develop students' historical empathy skills by discussing public issues and how they have the power to impact oft-marginalized groups.

Using Historical Empathy to Teach Public Issues

The social studies high school classroom should be a place where students explore public issues that affect their communities. Oliver and Shaver (1966) define public issues as persisting social and political dilemmas and value conflicts that are related to historical and contemporary public policies. Using activities to develop students' historical empathy to teach public issues leads them to make meaningful connections between the past and the present. It is easier to see how questions and issues that concern humanity and the common good tend to persist over historical eras and even develop over time (Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Metro, 2017).

The text *What a Colored Man Should Do to Vote* (African American Pamphlet Collection, 1900) is ideal for an activity that allows high school students to explore how early 20th century racist policies affected African Americans. The South's Jim Crow laws dictated the steps African Americans had to take to vote. Many of the requirements were created to discourage African Americans from voting. The teacher begins the activity by providing students with excerpts from the text, which can be accessed from <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbaapc.33200/?sp=1>. Students are separated into pairs to read and annotate the text. Annotating the text allows students to further understand the author's purpose, main points, and most importantly, provides an opportunity for them to put the text in their own words. The teacher provides the following instructions for annotating the text:

1. Highlight and define the words that are unfamiliar.

2. Underneath each law, summarize the text in your own words.
3. Underline the laws that you believe were meant to restrict African Americans from voting.
4. Circle the laws that you believe were fair and were probably applied to everyone.

After students have annotated the text, the teacher brings the class together for a discussion about the laws they underlined and circled. Students should share their reasoning about why they selected certain laws and explain how some were meant to disenfranchise African Americans. Annotating the excerpts of this text is beneficial for students because they become active readers by summarizing the text and thinking through the author's words and meanings (Monte-Sano, 2010).

Then, the teacher gives each student a document analysis sheet. The purpose of this activity is for students to deconstruct the primary source. Students continue to work in pairs to complete the document analysis sheet. The document contains three questions that require students to think about the purpose of the text. Students use the text to support their thinking. They also cite the page number from the document, showing where the textual evidence can be found. The teacher models how to answer the questions. This allows students to see how to use the annotated text to complete the document analysis sheet. The first question asks, "What do you think is the purpose of the text?" The teacher may want to ask the class guiding questions to help them understand her reasoning. Examples of guiding questions are below:

1. Who wrote the text?
2. What was happening in the South around the time the text may have been written that might have influenced why the text was written?

Students use the teacher's example to work together to complete the remaining questions on the document analysis sheet provided in Appendix A.

After students complete the document analysis sheet, the teacher brings the class together to discuss their responses. They share their thinking about why they selected specific textual evidence and how it illustrates the perspectives of the Southern states. To guide students to think more deeply about this text, the teacher may want to include several probing questions in the discussion. Examples of guiding questions are provided below.

1. How might African Americans in the South may have felt when they read the states' requirements for being allowed to vote?

2. How might the Southern culture have affected perspectives about African Americans having the right to vote?

Discussing their responses and ideas as a class allows students to listen to and learn from each other. They may also understand how culture, politics, traditions, and prejudices can influence people's perspectives.

Historical Monologues as a Learning Tool to Address Public Issues

High school students can write a historical monologue to articulate their knowledge about racial discrimination African Americans faced in the early 20th century. A monologue is a dramatic written or spoken speech where one person directly addresses an audience (Turner & Clabough, 2015). In this type of writing activity, students write from the perspective of a historical figure and expresses his or her ideas, thoughts, and feelings based on evidence. The teacher provides students with instructions on how to write a monologue. It is written in a script format with several basic instructions. These instructions are as follows:

1. Select a name for your character.
2. Choose a time and setting. When is this story taking place? Where is it taking place? Provide this information at the beginning of the monologue.
3. If the character makes any hand movements, facial expressions, or verbal noises (i.e., a sigh), write it in parentheses in the monologue.

It would be beneficial for students if the teacher provides an example of a monologue as a model of how the elements listed in the directions appear in written format. The annotated text and the document analysis sheet are used to write the historical monologue. The class is given the following prompt:

Pretend you are an African American who is living in the South during the early 1900s. You have read the laws that determine if you can vote. Explain the obstacles you face in attempting to vote. Provide at least two examples from the text. Describe how it makes you feel to have to go through so many challenges to be able to vote. Why do you think you are being disenfranchised? Finally, explain what you plan to do in the face of Southern disenfranchisement. Remember to write in first person and stay in character.

This writing activity provides high school students with the opportunity to write using historical empathy skills. This means students are recognizing multiple perspectives, contextualizing the past, and using evidence to support their writing. The drama that is inherent

in monologues allows for students to make affective connections with historical figures. They express the emotions that African Americans must have felt being denied a basic right that should have been afforded them in a democratic society (Colby, 2009; Monte-Sano, 2008; Turner & Clabough, 2015). A possible student example of an historical monologue using historical empathy skills is provided in Appendix B.

Historical monologues are learning tools that can be used to develop high school students' historical empathy skills. Using drama as a pedagogical strategy engages student with historical figures and leads to the idea that people from the past are *human*. They are more than just names in a social studies textbook (Clabough, Turner, & Carano, 2017).

Conclusion

Stepping into the proverbial shoes of people who lived hundreds and thousands of years ago is not always a comfortable task, and may be feel unnatural for students (Wineburg, 2001). There is a comfort in viewing the past through perspectives that are similar to one's own. When students are asked to consider multiple perspectives, some that may be in conflict with their own, students are entering into uncharted territory. Essentially, they are viewing the past in a way they have never done so before (Endacott, 2010; Retz, 2015; Wineburg, 2001; Yeager & Foster, 2001).

Perspective recognition is important when students examine public issues. Public issues are controversial by nature and tend to evoke emotions that are connected to people's values and belief systems (Ochoa-Becker, 1996; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Therefore, there are bound to be conflicting perspectives about issues that concern the resolution of social and political problems. Some public issues are enduring, such as racism and inequality. They span historical eras and are rarely easily resolved. Units that examine the African American experience in the early 1900s may appeal to students for this reason. It tends to be easier to make affective connections to issues such as injustice and discrimination because these topics are still relevant today. When students use historical empathy to analyze a public issue, they not only recognize perspectives, but they examine what factors influence peoples' views (Endacott 2010; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Endacott & Sturtz, 2014; Lee & Ashby, 2001). Therefore, even if the views conflict with students' own, they learn to be more tolerant and less judgmental. These are ultimately skills that help students to become productive and contributing members in a society; citizens that make informed decisions based on evidence and not biases (Brooks, 2011; Clabough, 2020).

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Appendix A

Student Document Analysis Sheet

What do you think is the purpose of the text? (i.e., why was the text written?)	What evidence from the text supports your answer about the purpose of the text? Give at least two details to support your answer.	What were the Southern states' perspectives regarding allowing African Americans to vote? Cite at least two details from the text as evidence to support your answer.

Appendix B

Possible Example of a Student's Historical Monologue

TIME: May 31, 1910

SETTING: Downtown courthouse, outside the registrar's office in Birmingham, Alabama.

MATILDA BAKER: (*Sadly shakes head*) Why did I come down here, to this office? These laws tell us what we have to do to vote. But I can't help but feel like, they keep us from voting.

(*Walks down the hallway toward the outside doors.*)

MATILDA: I have never voted in my life. I thought this would be the first time I would be able to make my voice heard. But when I went in there, the lady at the desk looked down her nose at me. She asked me if I knew how to read or write.

(*Turns around and looks back at the registrar's office.*)

MATILDA: I had a little schoolin', but I had to leave to earn money for my family! (*Turns and continues to walk outside*) I know how to write my name, and I know who should be speaking for me to make my life here better. I want to vote! Hmph! And if I can't read or write, I have to own 40 acres of land? I'm a maid! How would I ever have the money to own that much land? (*Steps out into the sunshine, closes eyes, and lifts face to the sun.*)

MATILDA: There are times when I feel powerless in the face of such racism and injustice. I think some White people don't want us to have a voice because then we might get the power to change things to make life better for ourselves. (*Lowers face and starts to walk down the street.*)

MATILDA: Even though it would be easier to give up, I'm not going to do that. I'll be back next year. My spirit won't be broken. God willing, change is going to come.