

PERSPECTIVE TAKING: WHERE CONTENT RELEVANCE AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MEET

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Abstract

This article provides two creative, engaging activities for the American History classroom. Using perspective taking as the primary pedagogical method, these activities ask students to adopt the mindsets of historical figures to create historical classified ads and letters of recommendation. These activities engage students in blending history and imagination together in ways that are fun and thought-provoking for both students and teachers.

Introduction

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 advocate 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 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.

Historical Perspective Taking

Activities involving perspective taking have been used in social studies classes for many years. 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, & Castaneda, 2003; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003).

Over the years, I found perspective taking activities valuable for all of these reasons. 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 high-quality 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, to be 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 as a way 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.

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 provides a fun and engaging method for teaching historical concepts while providing 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.

Execution

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 that will accomplish the same task. An example, *What Would Alvin York Sell?*, is provided in Appendix A.

A Craigslist advertisement consists of several parts:

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 mind.
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.
6. 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.

A template for this activity is provided in Appendix B.

Tips and Suggestions

Although my students tended to be highly familiar with Craigslist ads, they sometimes struggled to create their own ads. 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 signature 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. This idea eventually became one of my students' favorite activities: Historical Letters of Recommendation. See Appendix C for an example.

Other Ideas for Topics

- For what position might George Washington recommend his longtime friend Henry Knox?
- For what position might Abraham Lincoln recommend General Joseph Hooker?
- For what position might Amelia Earhart recommend Anita "Neta" Snook, her flying instructor?
- For what position might Richard Nixon recommend Watergate security guard Frank Willis?
- Which American general might Adolf Hitler recommend for a job at McDonald's?
- 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?

Tips and Advice

In order 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. Hitler might recommend General Eisenhower for a position at McDonald's to keep him from planning the Normandy invasion.

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?

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. A sample rubric for assessment of this activity is provided in Appendix D.

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. 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.

Conclusion

Historical perspective taking can be a fun way for students to actively engage in history classes. The Historical Craigslist and Historical Letters of Recommendation Activities can help students get into the minds of the people they study and bring their lessons to life. Of course, no single activity can be a "magic bullet" that cures all the ills of modern education. But the perspective taking activities I provided always seemed to be a hit with my students. And if we can learn together and have fun at the same time, that's a win for both sides.

References

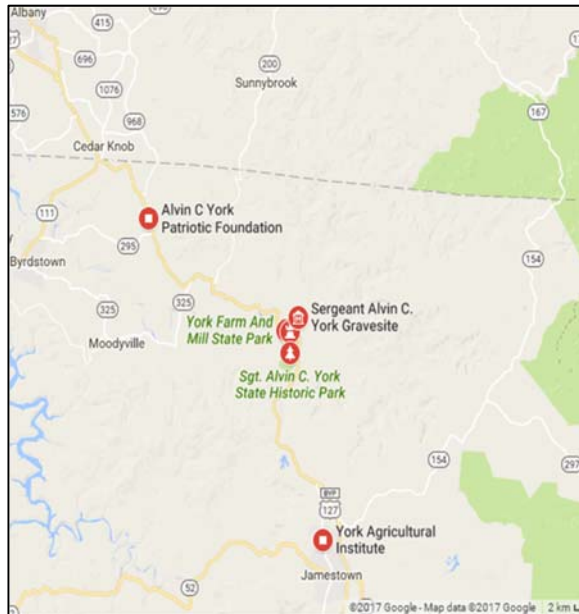
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Appendix A

What Would Alvin York Sell?

Historical Craigslist

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



Condition: Used, some severely soiled

Manufacturer: Deutsches Heer Co.

Price: \$10 each

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!

Posting ID #: 12131887

Posted: 10-8-1918 Updated: Today

Appendix B

Historical Craigslist Template

Historical Craigslist

For sale: (short description; maximum 20 words)

Insert a good image of the item here, or of a similar item

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.

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:

Appendix C

Example 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

Appendix D

Rubric for Historical Letter 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.