

Pay It Forward: Teacher Candidates' Use of Historical Artifacts to Invigorate K-12 History Instruction

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Abstract

As advocates of engaging students in historical inquiry and of the use of primary sources to aid in this inquiry, we support the claims of numerous student benefits, such as learning to detect bias, appreciating the interpretive nature of historical thinking, and the drawing of conclusions based on judgments about evidence (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Haeussler Bohan & Davis, 1998; Seixas 1998; Yeager & Davis, 1996). We developed a unit of study for our history and social studies teacher candidates that would address several issues: (a) motivate and inspire future teachers to use inquiry as a tool to build K-12 students' historical understanding and facilitate purposeful utilization of artifacts with ease; (b) help future teachers increase their knowledge of local history; and (c) present a unit that could be easily used in a secondary history course and, with some modifications, could be adapted for elementary and middle school history classrooms.

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Introduction

The history education literature is replete with a call to help teachers understand that history should be taught as being inquiry-based and interpretive. We are encouraged, and rightfully so, to *do history*, to *perform history*, to *do democracy*, and to motivate students for inquiry and action by using primary sources (Boyle-Baise, 2003; Fresch, 2004; Levstik & Barton, 2005; National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, 2013; Otten, Stigler, Woodward & Staley, 2004; Wyman; 2005). Research on teaching children history strongly supports theories of constructivism (Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Levstik & Barton, 2005; National Center for History in the Schools, 1996; National Council for History Education, 2007; National Council for Social Studies, 1994). This construction of knowledge is a focus point of robust history and social studies teaching and learning (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Grant & Gradwell, 2005).

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As advocates of engaging students in historical inquiry and of the use of primary sources to aid in this inquiry, we support the claims of numerous student benefits, such as learning to detect bias, appreciating the interpretive nature of historical thinking, and the drawing of conclusions based on judgments about evidence (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Haeussler Bohan & Davis, 1998; Seixas 1998; Yeager & Davis, 1996). However, classroom teachers may not use artifacts and primary sources for various reasons, including their beliefs about their students' developmental immaturity, feeling such materials are time-consuming and not getting enough *bang for the buck*, having difficulty creating appropriate lessons, or simply lacking a sufficient understanding of history themselves (Levstik & Barton, 2005).

In addition to our stances on the teaching and learning of history as being interpretive and inquiry-based, which therefore demand an investigation of primary and other sources including artifacts, we framed the work described in this article within the classroom realities of K-12 schools. Teachers often do not engage students in inquiry nor use artifacts in history instruction, and teachers generally have limited financial resources with which to purchase classroom materials.

As teacher educators, we set out to develop an assignment that would help teacher candidates strengthen their historical knowledge, increase their capacity to engage in historical inquiry, and provide them with a model and lesson plans that could be used in K-12 classrooms. This assignment was given to teacher candidates at three universities across the United States (two in the Southeast and one in the Southwest). The following sections address the specifics of the assignment, assessment and learning, and we provide suggestions for adaptations. What we wanted to know as a result of this study were:

1. Are our teacher candidates seeing the importance of engaging students in the complete processes of historical inquiry? In what ways do teacher candidates enact their understanding of inquiry into curriculum design and instruction?
2. Do these teacher candidates see the relevance in using artifacts and other visuals in instruction AND do they put theory into practice? In what ways do they make sense of theory and strategies learned in methods courses?

The Assignment: Pay it Forward

We developed a unit of study for our history and social studies teacher candidates that would address several issues: (a) motivate and inspire future teachers to use inquiry as a tool to build K-12 students' historical understanding and facilitate purposeful utilization of artifacts with ease; (b) help future teachers increase their knowledge of local history; and (c) present a unit that could be easily used in a secondary history course and, with some modifications, could be adapted for elementary and middle school history classrooms. The assignment was named *Pay it Forward: Invigorating Instruction through Local History*. This multifaceted assignment included the development of a lesson plan that would (a) demonstrate a robust understanding of engaging students in historical inquiry and local history, and (b) focus on an artifact that the teacher candidate would find as part of the investigation. Each teacher candidate was provided ten dollars with which to purchase artifacts for the lesson; hence, the teacher candidates were encouraged to search a variety of resources for artifacts. Specific criteria for the spending of the money were provided for the teacher candidates, as well as a lesson plan format. They were instructed to only use sources appropriate for their grade level of choice and to find items that would capture interest and hopefully necessitate conversation and further inquiry. Finally, the candidates were to teach the lesson either to K-12 students or peers within the methods course, and write a brief reflective narrative. The notion of *Pay it Forward* was enacted in various ways. For instance, the teacher candidates in one of the courses each kept their artifacts as thus began their own artifact collection for teaching; the candidates in another course gave their artifacts to the 'course artifact box' for use by future teacher candidates, hence *paying it forward*.

Preparation for this assignment included readings, course discussion, and in-class activities relating to the facets and importance of historical inquiry, use of artifacts, visuals, and other materials in history instruction. Also included was attention to lesson design. A significant strand throughout each methods course was historical inquiry or *doing history* that included local and community history, pedagogically sound uses of primary and secondary sources, and the use of artifacts in teaching (Dillon, 2007; Lindquist, 2002; Turner, 2008). Yet, we were also aware that teacher candidates enjoy and need practical examples of classroom teachers using historical artifacts with local history. Therefore, we included those in coursework prior to introducing the project.

Assessment of Assignment

In addition to the collection of the lesson plans for analysis, the purchased artifacts (ex. journals from the early 20th century, ration stamp books, comic books, antiques, etc.) also served as data sources. By using a variety of data collection methods, triangulation of data occurred (Denzin, 1970; Maxwell, 2005). Analysis of the lesson plans included adherence to the assignment criteria (a) evidence of historical inquiry, (b) a relevant historical topic, (c) a thorough knowledge of a local history topic, (d) grade level appropriateness, and (e) use of limited resources. In addition to basic analysis of the lesson plan, the content of the lesson plan and use of artifacts were analyzed. Lastly, the lessons were examined using four of the ten *History's Habits of Mind* from the National Center for History Education (2007) plus an additional criterion, that we constructed, related to the artifact:

- Distinguish between the important and the inconsequential.
- Develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.
- Comprehend the interplay of change and continuity.
- Grasp the complexity of historical causation, respect particularity, and avoid excessively abstract generalizations.
- Primary source artifact(s) is seamlessly integrated into lesson and enhances understanding of the content to be conveyed.

Each lesson was rated on a scale of 1-4 for each of the five criteria:

1=No evidence/focus

2=Minimal evidence/focus

3=Evidence/focus

4=Strong evidence/focus

The ratings were entered into spreadsheets and analyzed for overall mean scores. The researchers coded their respective data. A limitation of this study is due to interrater reliability. Although efforts were made to score assignments across institutions, this limitation remained likely.

Results

These teacher candidates were enthusiastic about the assignment and being able to “get materials” inexpensively, albeit creatively. Many were also excited about the opportunity to learn more about local history. In one reflection, a teacher candidate noted, “I’ve lived here all

my life and didn't know about this. By studying where we live, history is more real. The artifact helps students relate to history.”

Ninety percent of the teacher candidates located appropriate artifacts that met the assignment criteria. However, 10% of the candidates had a difficult time identifying *artifacts*. This was a surprise, given that significant class time had been spent using and developing artifact sets, using a variety of primary and secondary sources, and experiences with document and source analysis. We wondered if this might be due to difficulty defining or locating primary sources. Several participants spent their 10 dollars on items that would not support the content of the lesson or spent their money unnecessarily. For example, one teacher candidate purchased a copy of the U.S. Constitution from eBay days after a lesson showing students the *Our Documents* section of the National Archives and Records Administration (Bower & Lobdell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). This lesson was focused on showing students how, for free, they could access, save, and print digital versions of the Charters of Freedom. An additional concern was that the copy of the Constitution was not even utilized in this teacher candidate's lesson.

Analysis of the lesson plans indicated a working knowledge of state history standards and a general ability to address standards while designing curriculum that followed formats endorsed in *Understanding By Design* or *History Alive*, texts used in the methods courses. The artifact use was not always seminal to the lessons, however. Notably absent from nearly 80% of the lesson plans was historical inquiry and evidence—K-12 students reaching conclusions based upon evidence.

With a few exceptions, there was not a significant difference between the scores of the elementary and secondary candidates' lesson plans. The secondary candidates' choice of artifacts more closely aligned with the topic of inquiry than those of the elementary candidates'. However, across grade levels, there was often a noticeable lack of evidence related to engaging students in the process of historical inquiry (i.e. asking questions, gathering and evaluating relevant evidence, and reaching conclusions based upon that evidence). The following section presents the findings by habit of mind/artifact criteria ratings and provides narrative examples and excerpts from the lessons.

Distinguish Between the Important and the Inconsequential

There was evidence in 63% of the lesson plans that the teacher candidates endeavored to design curriculum that helped students attend to this criterion. For example, one lesson designed for kindergartners focused on the “structure and reasons for adobe houses in the southwest.” In addition to visiting adobe houses and Pueblos and making adobe bricks, the kindergartners learned about the characteristics of adobe and developed constructs for why adobe has been an important building material in their neighborhoods. A fifth grade lesson on “The Home Front during World War II” used a university yearbook from 1941 to engage students in a study of daily life during the war era. This lesson contained several authentic resources (photographs, newspaper articles, and pamphlets) for students to examine as they assembled a newspaper showing significant changes in society that occurred during the war.

However, not all of the teacher candidates were able to make these distinctions. In an attempt to highlight changes in a local farming community and to “help elementary students make connections between science and the community”, one candidate cut a hole in a stuffed toy cow to represent a fistula (a window cow). The window cow was the artifact for the lesson in which change was the dominant theme. Beyond drawing attention to a scientific anomaly, there was no arguable purpose for inclusion of the stuffed toy cow. The distinction between the important and the inconsequential was not evident in either the lesson design or in the work these elementary students were to do. In another lesson, entitled *A Look Back in History through Children’s Literature*, third grade students, as a class, were asked to read *Adventures of Sonny Bear* and discuss the words and subject matter that they had trouble understanding. Next, they would “find out what life was like in 1916”. A KWL was utilized, as they conducted research online. Lastly, the students were paired up to write and illustrate what they found to be the most interesting aspects about life in 1916. The completed pages were to be combined into a class book about life in 1916. There was no structure to the lesson, and there was no guarantee that any of the students completing this lesson would have any ability to distinguish between the important and the inconsequential in regards to life in 1916.

Develop Historical Empathy as Opposed to Present-Mindedness

There was mixed evidence across the lesson plans that focused attention was given to this habit of mind with only 46% providing a strong focus on this criterion. In a weak example teaching about the Great Depression, the creator of the lesson expected fifth grade students to be “paired off into groups and told they will have 10 minutes on the Internet to find specific

information on the Great Depression,” using only three web sites (Wikipedia and two others) assigned by the teacher. After some discussion of their findings, the students were asked to take on the persona of a child during the time of the Great Depression and to write a paragraph explaining what life is like for them. Although this individual found this as a time when the teacher could “get creative” by allowing the students an opportunity to “choose their level of wealth, family size, even if anyone in the family including them has an illness”, the students were not provided with enough information or instruction to adequately perform this task.

Although there was little to no evidence throughout most of the lesson plans, effort to develop empathy rather than present mindedness was strong in a few of the lessons. It is noteworthy that each of these lessons included role-playing. A fourth grade lesson, *Agriculture in the Upstate*, integrated a scythe as the artifact and had the students “take on roles of plantation owners, sharecroppers, etc.” A lesson on *Life in a Mill Village* clearly focused on developing historical empathy among second graders and emphasized roles taken on by children. A fifth grade lesson on *Agriculture after the Civil War* included several activities that asked students to take on the role of common people during this era. With extensive background information provided, students were to take on the role of a small farmer, plantation owner, or sharecropper and make a case for aid from the government.

Comprehend the Interplay of Change and Continuity

The data indicated that this criterion was the middle ground for the teacher candidates. Nearly 60% of the lesson plans provided strong evidence/focus of this habit. In the lesson *Stereotypes of Women in the 1950s*, students examined common household products created in the 1950s and looked at their uses today. Later in the lesson, students compared and contrasted advertisements from the post-war era to those in modern life and later created their own commercial focusing on the roles of women in selling these ads.

An example of comprehending the interplay of change and continuity was evidenced in the lesson *An Ad is Worth 1000 Words, A Look at Culture Through Advertisements*. In this lesson, eleventh grade students were asked to examine and discuss common advertisement themes in magazines, including how advertisements portray women, minorities, smoking, drinking, cars, colors used, slogans, etc. Using a scaffolding worksheet to record thoughts and observations, students examined current *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines. After a discussion about how magazines are considered to be an important information medium and how they have

changed over time, the students discussed what they think would be advertised in magazine in the 1960s and to whom these products should appeal. Students had an opportunity to examine various issues of *Newsweek* and *Time* from the 1960s. Further analysis and comparison was then conducted examining the current issues and those from the 1960s. Next, students went through and picked three advertisements for the same product in both the 1960s magazine and a current magazine, looking at differences occurring from culture changes, laws, and technology. The students focused on the following questions for each

- What is the Ad trying to do?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What strategies are used?
- What do Ads reveal or conceal about an era, etc.?

As a final part of the lesson, students picked a product and created their own vintage ad and contemporary ad for the product. Students were allowed to either draw the advertisement on a piece of paper or create their own on the computer.

Grasp the Complexity of Historical Causation, Respect Particularity, and Avoid Excessively Abstract Generalizations

Attention to this habit was missing from 76% of the lesson plans. We found this to be unfortunate, but not surprising. Many of the teacher candidates simply lacked the historical depth and breadth to help K-12 students make these distinctions. This may account for the no evidence/focus score for this criterion in most of the lesson plans.

A typical representation of this habit is illuminated in a middle school lesson about WWII. Among other topics taught in *The United States at Home during WWII*, students were asked to examine the following: taxes and controls, labor, labor unions, civilian support for war effort, the draft, population movements, rationing, the role of women and minorities, volunteer activities, and propaganda and culture during the Second World War. The creator of this lesson tried to avoid excessively abstract generalizations being conceived about life in the American home front through the examination of primary sources from the time. Thus, elements of this habit were clearly present in this lesson; however, other areas were entirely absent, such as historical causation.

A solid attempt to grapple with the complexity of historical causation was made in a fifth grade lesson on *Route 66: The Mother Road*. Using primary source artifacts, such as 1939 license plates, vintage Route 66 pins, postcards from the 1940s, period maps, and primary source newspapers, the elementary students eventually constructed working theories of reasons for the growth of Route 66, its impact, importance, and eventual demise.

Several students at one of the southeastern universities crafted lessons on life in the mill villages surrounding textile mills in the area. The main problems, with these lessons, were that students generalized life in one mill village to all villages in the area and weren't able to capture key elements of daily living.

Primary Source Artifact(s) is Seamlessly Integrated into Lesson and Enhances Understanding of the Content to be Conveyed

The use and integration of artifacts was the highest rated of all five criteria and the easiest for teacher candidates to understand; 90% of the lesson plans indicated strong evidence of attending to this criterion. One student purchased a series of picture postcards from the early 1900s to use in a second grade lesson entitled *Our City: Then and Now*. These postcards were used extensively in the lesson to describe city life 100 years ago, to discuss continuity and change among the downtown area of the town, and to assist students in developing their own postcards from the time period.

A third grade lesson, entitled *World War Two: the Sacrifices at Home*, required students to examine life in the United States during the Second World War. Students learned about propaganda, victory gardens, rationing, conservation, recycling, and other issues relevant to this time period. The artifact, a canning jar, was utilized by asking students to think about its uses and how canning could have helped with the war effort, as well as what else children could have done to help their communities with the war effort. After viewing primary source movies, advertisements, and documents about victory gardens, discussions were held focusing on what kind of plants can be grown in a victory garden and why the government encouraged people to grow their own food. An option for allowing students to can their own items was included. In the next section of the lesson, the teacher held up a Hershey's chocolate bar and put the chocolate to the side and the foil wrapper on the table. Next, she showed the class some rubber bands and placed them with the foil. The teacher continued, in the same manner, with a brown paper bag, pair of nylon stockings, and any scrap metal (hairpin, paperclip, wire, tin can, pots, etc.) until a

minor pile of *stuff* was accumulated. The students were then asked, "Does anyone know what these items have in common?" to begin further examination of recycling, conservation, and rationing, specifically focusing on efforts made by children.

Ten percent of the teacher candidates acquired artifacts that were not necessary to the lesson and were weak examples of artifacts. One student purchased a paper helmet and a gold paper crown for use in a fifth grade lesson designed to describe how contemporary and historical people/events have influenced communities in the southwest. The paper helmet was to shown to students and represented Conquistadors and the paper crown was representative of English colonialists. In this lesson, the students were also asked to list Christopher Columbus' ships and to choose a Spanish, English, or French settlement to investigate. Not only was the choice of artifact less than ideal, its use in the lesson was superfluous.

Summary

Most of the teacher candidates addressed the habits to some degree in their lesson plans, and nearly all of lesson plans seamlessly integrated a primary source/artifact. As we consider the findings in light of the original research questions: (a) in what ways do teacher candidates enact their understanding of inquiry into curriculum design and instruction? and (b) in what ways they make sense of theory and strategies learned in methods classes?, the findings inform us that inconsistencies exist within lesson plans. Teacher candidates attended to *distinguish between the important and the inconsequential* and *comprehend the interplay of change and continuity* the most frequently. The teacher candidates had the most difficulty with *grasping the complexity of historical causation, respecting particularity, and avoiding excessively abstract generalizations*.

The majority of the teacher candidates in this study did show evidence of, albeit limited at times, designing curriculum that encouraged K-12 students to engage in historical inquiry. Making the bridge between theory and practice, or showing evidence of *learning* from the methods courses, was clearly evident across the lesson plans.

Suggestions for Adaptations

This assignment and study sprung forth from our wondering, "Are our teacher candidates seeing the importance of engaging students in the complete processes of historical inquiry?" At the outset of the project, we were confident that in *our* courses, teacher candidates learn the importance of inquiry and teaching with artifacts and other visuals, but we were unsure if our intended curriculum becomes a learned or enacted curriculum. To some extent, this remains the

case. Several adaptations arise to better address this wondering. All students (K-12 and university) need more purposeful experiences with artifacts and historical inquiry. Within a K-12 history class, we suggest beginning these lessons early in the academic year and building upon them throughout the year. By the end of the school year, all students should be able to locate at least one artifact that will engage others and understand the significance of the source to understanding the associated historical content.

We had also hoped that by giving the teacher candidates the small stipend with which to purchase artifacts, they would see how inexpensively a teacher could actually find materials and build their own artifact library. The teacher candidates were creative in their *finds*, and several of them began a reference resource list that will serve them well, as novice teachers. As teacher educators, not only have we been able to support our teacher candidates and assist them in developing a different type of professional resource library, but we have also learned, once again, not to underestimate the willingness, creativity, and passion of our students. Within a teacher preparation course, we suggest giving more class time to deconstructing historical inquiry and to helping students differentiate between what is and what is not a primary source artifact. Clearly, within a K-12 classroom, a teacher is not doling out cash to students; however, K-12 students can be encouraged to gather artifacts from a variety of sources, especially in the study of local history---from family members, local historical societies, and field trips, to suggest a few.

Also of importance is the idea that solely using digital artifacts, rather than realia and digital artifacts, is an easy fix for lack of resources. As history teacher educators, we remain passionate about the integration of digital artifacts; however, there is much to be said for holding a postcard from 1945 in your hand and wondering about its journey rather than simply viewing a digital image of the same postcard.

Perhaps, too often, we teacher educators find ourselves shrinking from our roles as advocates of history education, as we acquiesce to the perceived marginalization of history rather than encouraging ourselves to maintain our critical stance. By giving our teacher candidates a bit more encouragement and scaffolding to build their agency, we found that our agency was shored up, as well.

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