

Assignment 10 – Final Paper

The People Speak – A Unique Approach to History

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“If you look through high school textbooks and elementary school textbooks in American history, you will find Andrew Jackson the frontiersman, soldier, democrat, man of the people — not Jackson the slaveholder, land speculator, executioner of dissident soldiers, exterminator of Indians”, (Zinn, 2009). Zinn describes the limited perspective in which educational history has presented the story of mankind. He believes that history books often fail to tell the story of the struggle that helped to shape the world as we know it. He believed that through the knowing the story of the people, by the people, a deeper understanding of the shaping of America can be made.

Howard Zinn takes the position that America’s core values of liberty and democracy have been built on the social struggle of disinters and disenfranchised. With this recognition he wrote, *A People’s History of the United States* (2009), as a means to describe the story of human struggle in the formation of our liberties through the personal stories of the past. Zinn (2009) states, “Democracy doesn’t come from the top, it comes from the bottom” (Zinn, Moore, & Arnove, 2009). Published in 1980, this book sold more than two million copies. It has been mentioned in famous blockbuster movies, such as *Goodwill Hunting*. The notoriety of the book is second place to the message it entails. At the 2008 National Conference for the Social Studies, Zinn explains how although it is desirable to prepare a child for academic success and a productive future, it is more vital to create students who leave the classroom with a desire to positively change the world (Zinn, 2008). This is accomplished by changing the mindset to overcome superficial ideas that stifle student’s ability to think beyond themselves.

A People’s History of the United States (2009) was used as a springboard for *The People Speak* (2009), a documentary film that features performances to illustrate letters, diaries, and speeches of everyday Americans. The performances were either read or sung by well known performers, such as Matt Damon, Bob Dylan, Jasmine Guy, Marisa Tomei, Morgan Freeman, Eddie Veder, Danny Glover, and Bruce Springsteen, to name a few. Through this inspirational and poignant presentation, we are reminded of the human struggle and the truth behind the story of America. History wasn’t built on the three simple concepts of exploration, expansion, and

invention that typically articulated by academic history books found in classrooms. There were hardships that shaped the events of mankind and lead us to where our nation stands today. Injustices of prejudice and discrimination, social stratification, and infringements upon human rights, have always been a part of history, not just in the formation of our country, but in the history of every civilization. It is through painstaking, social movements that significant hardships begins to shape and change history. Furthermore, these accounts written, spoken, or sang by the downtrodden, yet heroic individuals that fought for change when it was ill-advised to do so, allow future generations to recognize the influence that everyday people have in shaping our world.

The People Speak, which was built from Zinn's book, *A People's History*, builds on the concept that greatness can be found within those who fought for social change. This change constantly reflected upon the democracy our country was founded on. As Zinn so eloquently states, it is the people who ultimately shape government (Zinn, 2009). Therefore, it seems to be a natural conclusion that we should study the *people* and their plight, when we study history. In fact, even historians who disagree with Zinn's historical perspective acknowledge him as a historian who was highly influential in shaping the way we study American history ("The People Speak: To Zinn or Not to Zinn"). This film illustrates famous individuals interpreting the material, which brings interest to the piece, while allowing for a more natural or realistic reading of the piece. This is consistent with Whitehead's theory, which stressed the importance of creating the Romance, Precision, and Generalization stages of the material within the curriculum so that students can establish an interest in the material and make connections that will encourage their emersion into the educational process (Walker & Soltis, 2009). Zinn outlines American progress through excerpts from individuals, such as Sojourner Truth, who spoke on women's rights, and songs, like "No More Auction Block," which articulates the plight of the anti-slavery movement.

Such activism is highly reflective of the theories described by Freire. Freire developed a pedagogy that reflected political and social activism (Walker & Soltis, 2009). He called out for individuals to gain social consciousness and suggested that educators create themes, that reflect the current reality of society (Walker & Soltis, 2009). This concept can carry over to an historical context, as educators can create themes, in which student's research and present

concepts through connections to the “words” or “songs” that reflect the theme. For instance, a student studying political changes, such as “who was and wasn’t allowed to vote” in the United States, may memorize or read a speech presented by Susan B. Anthony. This would allow the student to make connections to the individual and the hardships she faced. It would illustrate the true emotion of the historical context better than reading a chapter as a group and answering a handful of questions. Of course, this assignment can be added in conjunction to the material or it can be expanded upon in new and creative ways that allow the students to explore the subject matter in engaging ways. PowerPoint’s, posters, and debates can be incorporated and continue to reflect the spirit of this video, which is to gain insight into the historical acts that shaped democracy, through the words spoken by those who experienced it.

This type of lesson building is also reminiscent of Dewey’s theories on exploration and creation of a meaningful and rich education (Walker & Soltis, 2009). The cooperative democratic social learning environment he spoke of can be found in the collaboration of groups who could research the themes or persons of interests, as well as through the day shared while presenting the readings and songs. This lesson can also be shared within the larger community of classes or presentations, in which the children could perform, thus expanding their communication skills. It can also be shared on a more simplistic model of reviewing the DVD, followed by a reflection or sharing of the material, either verbally or through a written assignment. However, the implementation of acting, singing, and presenting provides a manner in which the student can immerse themselves into the character they are portraying. This allows them more of an opportunity to feel the emotions and conceptions of the piece, especially if the lesson was supported by the historical context in which it was written.

Lesson plans do not have to include the systematic reading of the school approved textbook and worksheets. However, they do need to reflect the curriculum’s goal. As we teach our students about the struggles that occurred throughout American History it should be important for educators to provide them opportunities to discover what the people were going through that created the changes they are learning about. Using arts within the curriculum provides an opportunity for the students to immerse themselves in the characters who lived the history, first hand. It also provides opportunities to engage the students in a new and exciting way to learn that breaks up the monotony of lessons and promotes their communication skills.

Lastly, this type of learning promotes a greater understanding of self and encourages social awareness and activism. Zinn was able to reflect on the true meaning of democracy and illustrate the power found within each individual by simply reflecting on the words and events of the past. This method introduced a creative and multi-faceted way of teaching and learning that can easily be adapted into any classroom environment, as well as utilized in other areas of study.

The hands-on experience that students are given through integrating arts into the history lesson is immeasurable. The goal is to perpetuate the ideas of the past, while allowing an opportunity for the students to understand the sentiment, emotion, and point of view behind the event. This concept is not new. In fact, every culture has utilized some form of storytelling as a means of education, entertainment, or cultural preservation. “Great leaders of all types (e.g., religious, political, educational, and military) have used stories as instructional tools in the form of parables, legends, myths, fables, and real life examples to convey important information” (Andrews, D., and Donahue J.A., 2009).

There are four different types of instructional methods, which are case-based, scenario-based, narrative-based, and problem-based instruction (Andrews, D., and Donahue J.A., 2009). The interdisciplinary approach observed in *The People Speak* video is reflective of the narrative-based method. The narrative-based instructional technique is multifunctional, as it relays information, while allowing for emotional engagement. Therefore, this method would be a highly useful feature to incorporate into social studies lesson or expanded upon into a unit.

I am currently a teacher in the eighth grade. According to the California Content Standards, the students will study United States History and Geography: Growth and Conflict (*Curriculum Frameworks & Instructional Materials*, 2012). Within this required curriculum is the study of the colonization of America, the Revolutionary War, and the formation of a new government. The War of 1812, the Civil War, and settling of the west, is connected through lessons that discuss emotional content, such as slavery and women’s suffrage. Narrative instruction could be utilized throughout much of the instruction of this material. For this lesson, I will focus on the rights we take for granted, which I will use as an introductory lesson as we transition into Civil War. The lesson will begin with a discussion on what society looked like, pre-Civil War. The lesson will begin with the instructor projecting an assortment of images on the overhead. The images will reflect accepted labor practices, living conditions, economic

disparities, women's suffrage, and slavery. As we discuss these topics, the instructor should lead the students to think about 'why' they think society reflected the assumptions they have made. In order to encourage the student's engagement of the process, the instructor will have color coded folders in the front of the class. Each folder will have a speech, diary, or letter written by or about the aforementioned struggles against adversity. The students will work in pairs. They will each choose one piece of literature and read it over. They will choose 5 lines or roughly one paragraph worth of text, which summarizes the main theme or strength of what they have chosen. Some of the works include:

Lucy Stone

The Progress of Fifty Years

World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893

Sojourner Truth

Ain't I a Woman?

Women's Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851

Eleanor Roosevelt

Speech on civil liberties to the members of the ACLU

Chicago, Ill., Mar. 14, 1940

Florence Kelley

On Child Labor and Women's Suffrage

Philadelphia, Pa., July 22, 1905

Mary Church Terrell

What It Means to be Colored in the Capital of the United States

Washington, DC, Oct. 10, 1906

Susan B. Anthony

On Women's Right to Vote

Monroe County, N.Y., 1873

This list is just a few of the many speeches and biographies that will be included within the folders. The goal is for the students to create a PowerPoint which will include four slides. The first slide should have a picture that represents the issue being presented and a couple of points of interest regarding the historical/society background (“Why did this person want change”, “What was happening in America at that time?”, “When did this even occur?”). The second slide should include the speaker or author of the piece the students have chosen. During the third slide the students will give the class a brief biography of the author for the piece they have chosen. The fourth slide will require the student’s to write the sentences they choose within the Literature they read.

I would like the students to perform the speech, sing the songs, or read the diary pieces, as if they were their own, but I know that the eighth grade students will not commit to such an endeavor to the degree in which they will assume ownership of the piece. Therefore, I chose to incorporate technology, interactive learning, pair and share partnership, and narratives, to describe a time, issue, real person, and emotion, that represents the theme they are ‘teaching’. This will allow the students to have a preview into the people and the struggle that represents the history they will be learning about within the next few weeks. This also serves as a transition between the two focused units of instruction. Thereby, providing a week to prepare ourselves for the up-coming sensitive discussion on human rights that will be raised within the unit that will discuss; labor practices, living conditions, economic disparities, women’s suffrage, and slavery.

At the conclusion of the unit, I would like to have the students take the picture they choose to represent the issue the speaker was addressing within their piece and write a short poem, that they will record collaboratively and post on VoiceThread. This would create an interdisciplinary lesson that will incorporate English into the lesson and provide a means of expression. I would require the students to post responses to two other posts from our class. I believe this will create an interactive environment and the students can immerse themselves into their interpretation of the picture, now that they have adequately studied the history of the piece.

References

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