

# **University High School Laptop Initiative U.S. Studies Lesson Plan**

## **Learning How to Think Historically**

**Submitted by Jim Kelly and Danielle Steele**

### **Introduction & Rationale**

In order to prepare students for a semester long project called “Doing History,” we introduced the concept of historical thinking. Sam Wineburg in his book, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, discusses his cognitive studies research that strongly suggests that among other things, thinking historically requires a system of thought that utilizes sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, historical empathy, and deliberation. Historical thinking is a cognitive method. Research has shown that scholars in the field of history necessarily think historically as part of their skills as a researcher. It will be the instructor’s job to try to teach these concepts and methods to students. We utilized the technology almost exclusively for three of the application activities: sourcing, corroborating, and contextualizing.

### **Objectives and Goals**

1. By the end of the unit students will understand the component parts of historical thinking.
2. By the end of the unit students will be able to utilize and apply the component parts of historical thinking by working through exercises and activities.

### **Learning Activities**

1. Define primary and secondary sources. Provide examples of each.
2. Define historical sources. Explain that the most common and abundant sources are print. Have students place on the board all of the varieties of print sources from essays and books to journals, etc. Explain that there are other types of sources including paintings, etc. Have students generate a list on the board of additional sources. (Music, photos, cartoons, artifacts, etc.)
3. Define the five important habits of mind utilized in historical thinking.

a) **Sourcing** – is the ability to assign an explanation regarding the origin of the document or source. Some basic questions that historical thinkers ask include who is the author, title, date, etc. Added questions include the type of document, main idea, audience, etc.

b) **Corroboration** – is the habit of mind that looks for additional sources that supports, refutes, or directly relates to another source or document. When historical thinkers employ corroboration they look for relationships between sources. For example, if you were using FDR's executive order regarding Japanese internment as an important primary source, you would want to surround it with other documents that were related. You could corroborate it with a letter from a general or a defense department report.

c) **Contextualization** – is the ability to ask questions that establishes the era, epoch, or realm in which the source is set. Historians look at events, people and ideas that were important during the time setting in question. Historical thinkers look at the setting that gives or establish context. Contextualization means understanding one small piece as it is surrounded by other pieces at the local, regional, national & international level. Historical events and actors do not occur in a vacuum. There is always a relationship to some other actor or event. For example when historians study the domestic impact of the 911 tragedy, they will look at what happened locally. Perhaps they will find a newspaper story about a prayer vigil. They will look nationally and maybe find a Congressional report about domestic impact. They will further contextualize by looking at the international scene.

d) **Historical Empathy**- Defined as the ability to avoid “present mindedness”, the historical thinker uses this skill to build in one of the most important components when understanding history especially in research. This component is objectivity. Historical Empathy requires us to pull away from our current value system. It requires us to interpret history by stripping away layers of contemporary cultural and political norms so we may view the past with unobstructed clarity. Utilizing Historical Empathy moves thinking about history out of the realm of the humanities and into the realm of the social sciences. Science is objective. Historical thinking needs to be objective also.

e) **Deliberation** – Historical thinkers suspend judgment until a satisfactory body of research has been assembled. Asking questions about a topic is part of deliberation. It is important not to latch on to the first explanation you may hear about an historical event. Clearly the attack on Pearl Harbor was horrible. There is no doubt that the Japanese are to blame. But should they carry all of the blame? Is it possible that a string of events could have made the Japanese leery about US presence and motives in the South Pacific? Was it a kind of pre-emptive or even defensive attack? Revisionist historians think deliberately. They go back and question the pictures that past scholars have

painted about historical events. Thinkers who question are reaching for the highest levels of cognition.

## Application Activities

1. **Sourcing** – Give students a short primary source. Ask them to brainstorm all of the questions that they could ask to develop the source of the document. Have them list on board. Minimum sourcing information would include title, author, date and type of source. Break the class into small groups. Give each group a different primary source. Have them answer the sourcing questions for their document. Can they think of additional sourcing questions and answers?  
Extension: Give some of the groups a non-document source like a photo or artifact.
2. **Corroboration** – Break the class into small groups. Give each group a topic to research and a document that is related to the topic. Use the internet to find additional sources that relate to the topics. Ask them to explain orally or in writing how the follow-on documents relate to the original source. Remind them to specify if the additional documents are primary or secondary sources. You will want to specify at least some primary sources should be used. Have a discussion about how sources “back each other up”.

Extension (extra credit): The idea of corroboration is most often applied to the law and to journalism. Attorneys try to get witnesses to corroborate testimony. Journalists try to get additional sources or interviews to corroborate a story. Have students write a short news story for the school newspaper. They must interview at least three people regarding the topic of the story. Did the people that they interviewed agree with each other? Was there corroboration? Pass the best stories on to the paper for possible publication.

3. **Contextualization** - This activity could be done individually or as a group. Supply a primary source or ask students to find one. Have them do additional research to find out the context in which the event occurred. They need to do this at three levels: local/regional, national, and international. The instructor should supply a worksheet that has a fill in the blank format.
  - a) Name of event that your primary source represents. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Describe related events, people, and ideas that were local or regional. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c) Describe related events, people and ideas that were national. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- d) Describe related events, people and ideas that were international. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- e) Give an example of how each of these is related to the primary source. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- f) Describe the overall context of the time. Was it peaceful, war-like, stable, fluctuating, revolutionary, progressive, conservative, inventive? Think of your own descriptors. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Historical Empathy and Avoiding Present Mindedness** – This habit of mind which is part of historical thinking necessitates the use of objectivity and understanding when viewing historical events.

Supply a primary source about a controversial historic topic or have the students find a source. Have them describe and summarize the source and then answer the following questions.

- a. What is the topic?
  - b. Describe the controversy.
  - c. Who are the actors or participants?
  - d. Describe how it was settled.
  - e. Describe how this controversy would be judged today.
  - f. What contemporary values or norms would be involved? Be specific.
  - g. Write a short empathic view for both sides of the controversy.
  - h. Why is empathy and suspending judgment an important feature of Historical Thinking?
5. **Deliberation** – Thinkers who question exercise the highest form of cognitive ability. We can't judge a situation until all of the facts are in. And even then it might be difficult. Historical thinkers suspend judgment; perhaps at times even foregoing judgment. They look at all sides of a question bringing together as much information and viewpoints as possible.

Use the same source that was used in exercise four above.

- a. In groups of three or four, have students make a list of questions that would need answers in order to make a judgment about the controversy.
- b. Where would they find the answers?
- c. Is it possible that the answer might not be found? Explain.
- d. After some deliberation, have the group leader call for a judgment. Have one student argue why judgment should be suspended.
- e. Have one student argue that judgment should be postponed indefinitely.

## **Laptop Implications**

The **sourcing activity** was enhanced because we could add the extension. Students could use the web to find diverse primary sources like paintings, photographs, music, newsreel clips, movie clips, etc.

The **corroboration activity** was enhanced because students could find related primary and secondary sources very efficiently.

Students were able to use the internet to provide rich and colorful **context** to the primary source they were trying to understand. For example, one source was called “The Buffalo Hunt.” was a diary entry from John C. Freemont. The group was able to add context to that document by finding a drawing from the same period that depicted a Native American hunt. They were able to add competition for the buffalo as part of the historical context framing the Freemont document.

Since many of the activities in this unit required searching for multiple related diverse sources, the internet was invaluable. The fact that students had access to the technology without leaving the room made the activities much more efficient for the students and instructors.

## **Role of the Teacher**

We differentiated the contextualization activity because we did not use the laptops initially. The instructors collected local/regional, national, and international resources from the library the day before. They were placed on a cart for student use. This small collection limited the ability of the students to truly understand the context in which their event was happening because the sources were limited. We continued the activity another day but this time utilized the laptops and internet. Instead of the teacher directing students to various parts of books, students were able to direct themselves finding everything from drawings to cartoons and newspaper stories to contextualize their original source. This allowed the instructors to meet with the various groups and talk with them regarding what they found and how their findings added context to their original source. The groupings by table and the technology made teaching contextualization easier and more efficient.

We worked on this unit every Friday in November. Not only was our full year intern involved but we also involved two additional ISU students who are part of the History Department 290 methods class. These three students helped to explain the concepts and facilitate the activities. They were able to partner with the classroom instructor and learn about teaching historical thinking in a laptop environment.

## **Student Reaction and Unit Assessment**

After the final activity we gave the students a survey to help gauge their reaction and measure the objectives. We asked them to give a group answer to three questions. The team of instructors worked with the groups to help them understand the questions. We have included a sample of some of the responses.

### **1. Can you better understand historical thinking now as a process? Give an example.**

“Now we are able to analyze not only primary sources but also the events surrounding it. For example we looked at a poster from WWII that features a woman as a factory worker for the war effort. We were able to look at the role of women around the world, in our country and in Illinois which is something we would not have thought of doing before”.

### **2. Have the activities helped you to analyze sources better? Explain.**

“Yes because we realized we can get a lot more information from certain things. For example we got so much information from a single political cartoon or picture. We never knew you could get that much information from a single source”.

“No. We are still a little unsure what to start on each source. The directions are not that clear and you should describe them better”.

### **3. Do you like the idea of doing activities that can help you think like an historian or history researcher? Why-why not?**

“Yes because historical thinking can help people even outside the classroom”.

“ This skill that we learn can help us our whole lives when we try to analyze a primary source. This could apply to writing a research paper or reading a historical novel in a college class”.

“Yes we like the idea of doing activities that make us think like historians. We would much rather do this than reading from a text book. We like thinking like a historical researcher”.

“We believe that sophomores are more than capable of doing a task such as this. We would enjoy doing it more and we think this was a great idea to begin with”.

No. We think we should stick with our research with books and computers. We think it is too complicated when student teachers come into our class and mess up our unit by trying to teach something new in a short period of time”.

## Student Resources

Links to digital libraries with primary sources

- [American Memory](http://memory.loc.gov/): Historical Collections for the National Digital Library  
[http://memory.loc.gov/]
- [Avalon Project](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm): Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy  
[http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm]
- [Making of America](http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/): 19th c. books and magazines  
[http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/]
- [New York Public Library Digital Library Collection](http://digital.nypl.org/)  
[http://digital.nypl.org/]

## Teacher Resources

Drake, Frederick and Lawrence McBride. "Reinvigorating the Teaching of History through Alternative Assessment." The History Teacher 30, no.2 (Feb., 1997):145-173.

LaFaye, A., "Teaching Students to be Historians: Historical Literacy through the Interpretation of Non-Fiction, Primary Sources, and Historical Fiction," *Yearbook* 2001 (2001): 56-63.

Spoehr, Kathryn T. and Luther W., "Learning to Think Historically," *Educational Psychologist* 29 (1994): 71-77.

VanSledright, Bruce A., "What Does It Mean to Think Historically... and How Do You Teach It?" *Social Education* 68 (Apr. 2004): 230-233.

Wineburg, Sam, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Zaccaria, Michael A. "The Development of Historical Thinking: Implications for the Teaching of History." The History Teacher 11, no.3 (May, 1978): 323-340.