

The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl Blues

A critical and creative experiment

A U.S. Studies Lesson

By:

Andrew Davis

Overview of lesson: In this 3-4 day experiment, students will analyze historical documents (photographs, texts, film, and music), and apply their understanding of life during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl. Further, they will apply that understanding as they create texts of their own and in small groups. The project will engage students by challenging them to compose documents of historical analysis and also a piece of creative, musical writing. This lesson is based on Nancie Atwell's premise that "writing is thinking" (*In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998, p.116).



I. Objectives:

A. Content Objectives:

- a. Students will sharpen their analytic skills as they analyze various texts (Photographs, primary sources, secondary sources, music, film, and lyrics).
- b. Students will experience the challenge of working in a group to produce an original piece of creative writing (song lyrics) dealing with a specific historical period (Dust Bowl/Great Depression).

B. Technology Skills Objectives:

- a. Students will use various technological tools to achieve a stronger understanding of life during the Dust Bowl/Great Depression. Through this process they will utilize technology as a tool for historical research and composition.

II. Goals:

A. State Goals:

- a. 17.D.4 Students will be able to explain how processes of spatial change have affected United States history (e.g. natural disasters).

B. Vital Themes/Narratives:

- a. Humans interacting with the environment (Bradley Commission on History in the schools, 1984).

C. National Board Standards:

- a. (Standard 4) Teachers will develop lessons that advance disciplinary knowledge and understanding.
- b. (Standard 5) Teachers will develop lessons that promote social understanding.

D. National Council for the Social Studies Standards:

- a. (Standard 4.2) Students should be exposed to sources of information that includes conflicting perspectives on controversial issues (NCSS position statement revised, May 2004).

E. Caine Learning Institute **Capacity #5:**

All students can learn more effectively when appropriate emotions are elicited by their experiences. [Relaxed alertness](#) can be facilitated by educators who fully grasp the relationship between the role of various emotions and learning.

III. Learning Activities:

A. Analyzing Photographs of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression

- a. The teacher breaks students into groups of four and provides them with a link to the Library of Congress that walks them through the process of analyzing a photograph { <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/dime/pguide.html> }
- b. Students go to the LOC American Memory link and analyze 4 (one per member of the group) photographs from the Great Depression. They then confer as a group about the data they each collected.
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/dime/photo.html>
- c. Each student in the group analyzes three Dust Bowl photographs from the following LOC link:
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/99/dust/photo.html>

B. Analyzing Primary Texts

- a. Students read the front page of the 10/29/1929 New York Times from Digital History
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/1029.html#article>

- b. Students then in their groups analyze various documents from President Hoover's Papers (primary sources):
http://www.geocities.com/mb_williams/hooverpapers/1930/paper19300805.html
- c. Students will analyze Hoover's concept of "Rugged Individualism" as presented in Digital History (secondary source)
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=466
- C. Analyzing Contemporary song lyrics
 - a. Students will read and analyze several songs (Dust Bowl Blues, Hard Travelin', and This Land is Your Land) by Woody Guthrie about the Depression and the Dust Bowl:
<http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Lyrics.htm>
- D. Analyzing short films (primary sources)
 - a. There are two know films of woody Guthrie. Students will view them as a group and discuss how they depict life in the depression as compared to the photographs.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AD-GHye9ohA>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5NJKx8ObDY&mode=related&search=>
 - b. I also ask students to on their own time view a short film about the last days of Woody Guthrie. It is easy to think of the composer of "This land is your land" as some simple hobo song writer. He struggled with his existence just like many of us do. Kids relate to him more than I originally thought:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ok3aw36PsQ&mode=related&search=>

IV. Laptop Implications:

- a. This project is not possible without access to technology. The laptop classroom is the perfect environment for this kind of archival and creative project.

V. Role of the Teacher:

- a. Role of the high school teacher: The teacher's role is to model research methods and to create an environment where students can apply historical understanding to a creative end product.
- b. Role of the teacher as a pre-service mentor for ISU students taking Curriculum and Instruction courses:
 - i. As a teacher educator I encourage C&I students to participate in the small group activities so they can get to know the high school students.
 - ii. This interaction makes the activity relevant to C&I students (*c.f.* Brian Sevier, "'What does this have to do with us?': Pursuing Transformative Possibilities and Cultural Relevancy in a Social Foundations Teacher Education Course." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33:3 pp. 347-375.)

VI. Student Reaction:

- a. Student reaction has always been strong with this unit. They engage in so many different analytical and creative activities that there is a resonance that lingers in their minds. While they are not always happy with the songs they compose, most students indicate that they have an understanding (dare I say empathetic?) of life during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl.

VII. Assessment:

- a. Students will turn print out and turn in their document and photo analysis.
- b. They will also turn in a “Dust Bowl Ballad” that they compose in their group.

VIII. A Few Parting Thoughts:

- a. This project is informed by Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences:
 - i. Visual: Students analyze film and photographs
 - ii. Verbal: Students analyze text (both primary and secondary sources), as well as song lyrics
 - iii. Musical: Students listen to dust bowl ballads and compose their own.
 - iv. Social: Students work in groups to research, write, and if they choose, perform original compositions.

- b. This project is also aligned with Bloom’s Taxonomy of higher order thinking:
 - i. Knowledge: Students learn common terms from the Great Depression. They also will be able to identify and define common themes of the period as well as name names of key individuals.
 - ii. Comprehension: Students will be able to translate material from one form into another (a photograph will inform a song lyric).
 - iii. Application: Students will “Relate” photographs to texts and indicate how each conveys information.
 - iv. Analysis: Students will recognize logical fallacies in reasoning (this will, hopefully, come about after reflecting on President Hoover’s statements).
 - v. Synthesis: Students will synthesize data (photo, text) which will generate themes which will inform their own creative writing (lyrics).
 - vi. Evaluation: Students will gain skills in “judging” works of art and texts and then apply that ability to their own art (creative writing).

In my wonderings I’ve seen many strange men,
Some will rob you with a six gun,
And some with a fountain pen.

Woody Guthrie, *Pretty Boy Floyd*.

