

Connecting Narrative and Historical Thinking: A Research-Based Approach to Teaching History

When he began using inquiry methodology in his teaching during the 1970's, Dr. Mayer was initially disappointed. He later evaluated those early experiences and discovered two shortcomings: he was unable to merge the documents with the facts already derived from other classroom materials, and the students did not appear to have the analytical skills necessary to fully utilize them. Following this realization, Mayer read Keith Barton's study and concluded "Inquiry generates an authenticity which fuels genuine excitement...this authenticity is due to at least three factors" (97). First, the documents must be carefully selected and contain human elements. Second, the inquiry method is authentic; it is what "real" historians use, however, students and teachers need training in this area. Lastly, using the inquiry methodology effectively provides students with invaluable experience in "making their case" and supporting it with evidence—skills they will use long after they leave the classroom.

After reviewing three recent studies (McKeown and Beck, Levstik, and Wineburg), Mayer provides some insights into teaching analytical skills within the history curriculum. McKeown and Beck's study showed the most effective texts were those that demonstrated a clear "causal chain of events" (97). Students in Levstik's case studies appeared to be most interested in rich narrative history and looked for the "humanness" of the story. Historical novels held great appeal, primarily because "...the conflict within historical novels often revolves around moral issues. Students identify with a character who is confronted with such moral dilemma" (98).

Wineburg observed eight historians as they studied primary and secondary source documents asking who created it, what was their bias, and what was the purpose of this document? In addition, Wineburg noted professional historians also considered the 'human' aspect of the document, that is, as human instruments, these sources revealed something about the author. Using this model, Wineburg created lesson plans for a unit on Reconstruction based on two artifacts: the diary of a planter from South Carolina, and the Senate testimony of a former slave. This model "...offers teachers a means of helping students to get inside historical documents so they can gain a sense of immediacy as they become familiar with the people and viewpoints in one particular narrative" (99).

There is no doubt that the narrative is crucial to the learning of history. In addition, Mayer concludes that effective use of documents can greatly enhance historical thinking and learning.

Mayer, Robert H. "Connecting Narrative and Historical Thinking: A Research-Based Approach to Teaching History." Social Education 62.2 (1998): 97-100.