

## **DOING HISTORY IN A FIFTH-GRADE CLASSROOM: PERSPECTIVE TAKING AND HISTORICAL THINKING**

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A major shift in thinking is taking place in the teaching and learning of history. Increasingly, history teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers are viewing history “as ‘an approach to knowledge’ as well as ‘a body of knowledge.’” (Shemilt, 1978). From the elementary grades up, more students are “doing history.” That is, they are using historical evidence to write family history, to present the perspectives of people who lived in other times, and to construct their own version of historical events. It is comparable to a shift in perspective that is taking place in other subject areas as well. The movement toward a “thinking curriculum” as it is sometimes called, is fueled by recent developments in cognitive psychology and constructivist pedagogy, and by teachers’ observations that the best way to help their students acquire knowledge is to engage them intellectually with the subject matter.

The British Schools Council 13-16 Project was the first major effort to implement a thinking curriculum for history in the schools (Samec, 1979). Initiated in the early 1970s, it approached history as an explanation-seeking, knowledge-constructing discipline and organized a four-year syllabus designed to explore different approaches to doing history. The project demonstrated that virtually all

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15-year-old adolescents were able to understand something of the nature of historical knowledge (Schemilt, 1980). Much of the recent theoretical and empirical work on historical thinking and its implications for the history curriculum also has been done in Great Britain.

The implementation of a thinking curriculum in history has received a much lower priority in the curriculum reform movement in the United States. Here attention has been focused on questions of content selection and organization. Questions of scope and sequence, depth vs. coverage, and whether there should be national content standards have been the dominant concerns. One exception has been the efforts of the College Entrance Examination Board to promote discipline-based thinking in several secondary school subject areas, including history. However, the College Board's initiative in history education has thus far produced only modest results. These include a pamphlet on historical thinking (Holt, 1990) and a model course in world history that is in the planning stage.

The shift of attention to historical thinking has also raised fundamental questions about the nature of historical thinking and learning in school settings. What is historical thinking and are children and adolescents capable of doing it are certainly the most urgent of those questions. While these questions are far from being answered, certain areas of consensus have emerged. One is that historical thinking consists of a number of discrete cognitive processes, although history educators do not necessarily agree about what these processes are (Schemilt 1980; Seixas, in press). It is also generally assumed that school children, even students in the lower elementary grades, are capable of doing historical thinking by engaging in

at least some of these processes (Levstik and Pappas, 1987). Nevertheless, there are many questions that have yet to be satisfactorily answered.

One such question is the role of empathy in historical thinking and its implications for teaching history in the schools. Many attempts to define historical thinking include the concept of empathy or empathetic understanding as an element central to historical reasoning. In Great Britain, especially, the development of empathetic understanding has become a significant goal in the history curriculum. The goal is to enable students to project themselves imaginatively into an historical situation and to let them use their “mind’s eye to bring intuitive observation and judgment into play” (Portal 1987). However, empathy is also said to have benefits ancillary to historical understanding. The disposition to empathize and strategies for empathizing, Ashby and Lee suggest, “have an immediate importance outside history” helping young people “to make sense of comprehensive ways of life which at first sight appear alien and unintelligible” (65). In other words, historical empathy may have transfer value for civic and moral education, which might also give added stature to history as a school subject.

The role of empathy in history education is also a subject of some controversy. Empathy is an ambiguous term, as several scholars have pointed out (Boddington, 1980; Knight, 19879). Boddington cites at least five different uses of the term in social studies education. These cover a spectrum that extends from largely cognitive to highly affective processes and outcomes. At one end empathy is a synonym for understanding others; at the other it seems to be used as “a rather mysterious way of knowing that goes beyond any normal modes of cognition” (p.

14). Knight (1989) argues that the term empathy is an obstacle to understanding. He sees it as a unitary construct that carries with it “the implication that there is a single, discrete operation, ‘empathizing,’ which the learner develops over time” (p. 46). However, it is more likely that children are engaged in a number of cognitive processes when they try to understand others who lived in the past. The focus on a unitary concept such as empathy may hinder their development of a more differentiated approach to understanding this aspect of historical thinking. Knight also points out that the ambiguity of the term is also a source of confusion to classroom teachers, who tend to confuse empathy with sympathy and substitute exhortations to “feel” and “imagine” for thinking. On the other hand, Ashby and Lee (1987) describe empathy as an outcome rather than a process. It is “where we get to when we have successfully reconstructed other peoples’ beliefs, values, goals, and attendant feelings” (p. 63). Nevertheless, Knight is probably correct in assuming that most teachers do think of empathy as a process that engages students in affective identification.

The concept of empathy also presents assessment problems. Empathetic assignments are likely to involve a wide range of cognitive and affective objectives. The former include knowledge gains, historical accuracy, causal analysis, and synthesis. But far more problematic are the affective outcomes that seem to be part of empathetic understanding. It is difficult to evaluate activities that invite highly affective and individualistic responses. Boddington (1980) suggests that it may be inappropriate to determine in advance what is a good empathetic response. “Since both the response of the student and the perceptions of the assessor are grounded

in different and unique experiences, it is quite possible that we might not recognize a 'good answer' when we see it" (p. 17). Whether appropriate criteria can ever be developed to assess the quality of students' empathetic understanding in the affective domain remains an open question.

#### THE RESEARCH AT HILL SCHOOL

In the spring of 1994, the Writing to Learn History Project conducted research in a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom in Oakland, California. The school was located in the Oakland hills, which is an area of middle-class and upper-middle class homes. A 6-week unit of instruction on the events leading up to the American Revolution had been developed for the purpose of the research. It was a combined social studies-language arts unit that included a variety of writing activities. These included role-playing exercises, written critiques of conflicting accounts, the written paraphrases of primary sources, list-making to order events in chronological sequence, summary writing and the writing of an historical narrative. While the activities addressed a number of elements of historical thinking, three of them either focused on or gave major emphasis to empathetic understanding, which will be referred to hereafter as perspective taking.

The Writing to Learn History Project attempted to avoid some of the problems posed by the concept of empathy by defining the term in its most limited, non-affective sense. To emphasize the limited scope of the definition, the Project uses the term "perspective taking" rather than empathy. The meaning of this term is similar to what Boddington (1980) has described as a "weak sense of empathy," rather than a more strongly affective kind. "Such an activity," he writes, "might be

seen then not primarily as a creative activity, but rather as a rational, intellectual activity concerned with explaining actions, attitudes, and concepts which are alien to our own" (p. 18). To engage in historical perspective taking is to attempt to understand a historical character's frame of reference, without assuming that one can or need identify with his or her feelings.

While the term perspective taking avoids the problem of confusing empathy with sympathy, it is not entirely free from ambiguity. Historical perspectives are not "taken," in the sense that photographic images are taken. That is, they are not out there waiting to be discovered and recorded. Rather, the perspectives of people who lived in the past must be constructed on the basis of historical information and evidence. "Perspective construction" might be a more accurate term, but it is a much less felicitous one. The term perspective taking will serve the purpose adequately, so long as it is not misconstrued as a single or simple process.

Even when defined in this limited, cognitive sense, perspective taking poses a formidable challenge for young students and for the teachers who must assess their performance. The challenge stems partly from the demands of the task and partly from the difficulty of the subject matter of history. Constructing attitudes and worldviews that are quite different from our own is one of the most difficult aspects of historical understanding. It is impossible even for specialists in a field of history to see the world as others in the past saw it because they cannot entirely escape from the present. The difficulties such a task poses to young students can hardly be overestimated. Moreover, the problems that students face in acquiring any kind of historical knowledge are not simply miniature versions of the problems

that historians face. “In part, this is because skills, knowledge and experience that serve as resources for the adult historian are not available to apprentices in the classroom” (Shemilt, 1980). That is one reason why expert and novice thinking in history represent differences in kind rather than in degree. Consequently, the task of developing criteria for evaluating historical perspective taking should be approached cautiously and without inflated expectations.

Evidence of successful historical perspective taking should include some indication that students realize that the past is different from the present. In historical thinking, explanations as to why events have certain consequences or why people saw things in certain ways are specific to time and place. The historian, Shemilt (1980) points out, reconstructs the past as a world distinct from the present. It is one of an infinite number of logically possible realities, each related to the present, but distinctly different. One must understand the past as a member of a set of logically possible worlds. Anyone who fails to grasp this point will see the difference between past and present as “the same sort of difference as that obtaining between two aspects of the present; that is the past is seen as nothing more than an extension of and variation upon the present” (Shemilt, 1980). Any version of the past constructed upon such an assumption will likely contain what we have elsewhere referred to as structural anachronisms (Downey, 1994).

Secondly, perspective taking must be assessed in terms of the students’ ability to differentiate between past perspectives. Just as they should not assume that people in the past thought as we do, neither should they assume that everyone in the past thought alike. They should recognize that perspectives within a given

historical context are relative, depending on the position and status of the historical actors. British officials and American colonists had quite different views of such tax laws as the Stamp Act. This should not be difficult for most elementary students to understand, as it helps to explain why the two groups were in conflict. It may be more difficult for them to see different points of view as being equally tenable, rather than to assume that one side was right and the other side wrong.

While empathetic identification demands some degree of emotional commitment to a point of view, perspective taking requires a more detached position. It is difficult to see how students can easily detach themselves from a perspective in which they are emotionally involved. Only by holding each perspective at arm's length will they be able to shift from one perspective to another, a process that is critical to historical explanation and understanding. This is one point at which perspective taking and empathy, at least in the more affective sense of that term, seem to be at odds.

Thirdly, students should be able to invest the perspectives that they create with explanatory power. Historical understanding requires more than descriptions about how people in the past saw the world. It depends just as much on explanations of why they saw things as they did. Students should be able to account for the perspective they describe. Likewise, they should also be able to explain the consequences that resulted from holding such a perspective (Knight, 1989, p. 45). That is, students should be able to use perspective taking to help them build links in the chain of historical causation.



Explanation in historical thinking is most commonly causal explanation. Perspective taking and causal explanation have a reciprocal relationship. In historical explanation, a person or a group's point of view can be seen as a causal factor of major significance. Understanding perspectives is a first step toward explaining human actions, and their need to account for human actions prompts one to examine the perspectives involved. In other words, the causal links would seem to be difficult to make without perspective taking.

Fourthly, the perspectives that students construct must be grounded in historical evidence. It is evidence as well as historical imagination that connects them to a particular time and place. Students could easily imagine that the colonists who protested against the Stamp Act and the leaders of modern-day tax revolts have much in common. In fact, the colonists' protests have no modern-day American equivalent. Students will only be able to grasp that difference through evidence that the colonists complained not of high taxes, but of taxation without representation. It is the paucity of direct evidence that makes the more affective kind of empathetic understanding so illusive.

Finally, the perspectives presented by the student should be factually accurate. It goes without saying that accuracy is a quality highly valued in any historical account. However, accuracy alone is not a good litmus test for successful perspective taking. Accounts that have few factual errors may still be badly flawed by structural anachronisms. However accurate the perspective may be, the major assumptions underlying it may be more presentist than historical.

In assessing the students' work, the Writing to Learn History Project assumed that it should satisfy each aspect of perspective taking to some extent. It also assumed that success in perspective taking is not an all-or-nothing proposition. An historical perspective constructed by fifth-grade students surely will be much less adequate than that of an historian who is a specialist in a field. The outcome may even differ in kind as well as in degree. That is, a student may well construct a world view for an 18<sup>th</sup> century American colonist that might be more appropriate to some other historical period. But to the extent that the above criteria have been satisfied, the student has begun the task of perspective taking. The result may not be historically correct, but the student I headed in the right direction.

#### PLAYING THE ROLE OF LOYAL COLONISTS

The first of the three perspective-taking assignments in which the students in the Writing to Learn History Project were engaged was a brief role-playing exercise. It focused on three short quotes from American colonists dating from the period 1764-1765. Each student received a handout that included the following statements:

“Are we not one nation and one people? We in America are in all respects Englishmen.” (James Otis)

“We all think ourselves happy under Great Britain. We love...our mother country, and adore our king.” (Francis Hopkinson)

“I rejoice in the name of Briton.” (John Adams)

The assignment was originally designed to provide baseline information about colonial attitudes. These quotes would help the students plot the changes in colonial attitudes that took place between 1765 and 1776. Although the three men would

later become prominent Patriot leaders, they were still loyal British subjects at the time of these remarks.

The materials also became the basis for a brief perspective-taking assignment. After the students read the excerpts, the teacher conducted a discussion about colonial loyalties and attitudes prior to the dispute with Parliament over taxation. It focused on the obvious expressions of affection for Britain reflected in these quotes. Why did they feel as they did? In the course of the discussion, the teacher pointed out that Britain in 1765 was the leading European power of that time. The colonists could well feel proud to be part of such a great empire. They were also delighted that the French had been kicked out of North America. Finally, the teacher pointed out that the British government had largely left the colonies alone up to this point. The students were attentive, with many of them engaged in the discussion.

With that by way of historical background, the students were given the following assignment. They were to write a paragraph about these comments from the point of view of a colonist of 1765 who shared Otis, Hopkinson and Adams' views. The paragraph was to explain why the three men felt this way. The assignment took only a single 75-minute class period.

#### PLAYING THE ROLE OF A BRITISH OFFICIAL

The second assignment focused on the change in imperial policies that occurred between 1763 and 1765. These included the Proclamation of 1763, the Sugar Act and Quartering Act of 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, and the more rigorous enforcement of the Navigation Acts to collect import duties. These were the

measures that provoked the first protests from the American colonists about violations of rights and about taxation without representation. The question was whether the students could defend these measures from a contemporary British point of view. This was a more elaborate assignment than the first. It took more class time preparation and it called for two written responses. The second assignment took up parts of three class periods.

The activity was introduced by a reading assignment that described some of the problems facing Britain in the colonies between 1763 and 1765. These included the need to pacify the frontier, where Indians were attacking frontier settlements; to pay for the defense of Britain's expanded holdings in North America, and to recoup the revenues lost through smuggling. The students were then asked to pretend that they were British subjects living in England, who had been asked for advice about how to solve these problems. They were given some possible choices, although not restricted to these alternatives. The choices included 1) leave troops in North America to defend the new territory or bring the troops home to save money; 2) get the money to defend the territory by taxing the people in England or get the money by making the American colonists help pay for their own defense; 3) drive the Indians out of British territory by force or order the colonists not to settle on Indian land; and 4) remove the import taxes and let the colonists trade wherever they wished or crack down on smuggling. They met in small groups to consider these and other possible solutions to the problems. Then they responded individually in writing.

This activity was followed by a day spent examining how Britain did, in fact, respond to these problems. The students worked in groups to become experts on one of the policies referred to above [the Proclamation of 1763, the enforcement of the Acts of Trade and Navigation, the Sugar Act, the Quartering Act, and the Stamp Act]. They read relevant paragraphs from their textbooks, consulted other reference books, and looked at excerpts from more advanced textbooks that I had photocopied for them. The students took notes on what the policy entailed and the reason it was taken. Each group then reported to the class, either by giving a formal report or by performing a skit. They took notes from the reports of other groups.

The final activity was an individual assignment in which each student was required to write a letter justifying the new policies. It called for persuasive writing from the point of view of a British official in London, whose task it was to explain to the colonists why these policies were necessary and fair.

After the British official activity, the focus of the unit shifted the perspective back to the American colonists. The readings and primary sources emphasized that the colonists protested against the Stamp Act and other taxes subsequently imposed by Parliament because the taxes were imposed without their consent. The threat to their liberties, to their ability to control their own legislative destinies, was far more important to them than the rate of taxation. Thereafter, the activities in the unit traced the sequence of events from the Townshend Acts to the Declaration of Independence, giving about equal emphasis to the British and colonial perspectives. However, none of the writing assignments that they completed during this time called explicitly for perspective taking, until the culminating assignment of the unit.

## PERSPECTIVE TAKING THROUGH NARRATIVE WRITING

The final assignment in the American Revolution unit called for the writing of an historical narrative. The students were asked to write a narrative to trace the sequence of eight events or clusters of events that took place between 1763 and 1776. This assignment differed from the preceding ones in several respects. It called for taking two perspectives into account, both the British and the colonial, keeping each in mind throughout the exercise. It also asked the students to explain the relationship between events as well as that between perspectives and actions and the connection between events. In other words, the assignment invited them to explain why the events occurred in this sequence as well as to describe what happened. Finally, the students were asked to explain, when appropriate, the role individuals played in these events.

This weeklong activity began with the construction on easel paper of an outline of the major events of the period. The students first used the outline to organize information that they had collected and filed in their history folders over the course of the unit. In their effort to fit everything in without creating too many headings, the outline went through several revisions. Outline revision was a whole-class activity that occupied part of several days during the early part of the activity.

The final version read as follows:

1. Britain's New Policies
2. The Colonists' Reaction to the Policies
3. Britain's Response to the Colonists' Actions
4. The Boston Massacre
5. The Tea Act and the Tea Party
6. The Intolerable Acts
7. The Colonists' Response to the Intolerable Acts
8. The Declaration of Independence

To make the task of collecting relevant information for each heading more manageable, the students worked in groups to collect information. They then outlined the information on wall posters to make it easily available for the rest of the class. The “research” was very much a cooperative activity.

As the postermaking proceeded, the teacher reviewed with the students aspects of historical thinking that should be worked into their narratives. These were items that had been touched upon on several occasions over the course of the unit, which were also posted on the wall on a large sheet. They included:

1. People Make History
2. People See things from Different Perspectives
3. Events Are Connected

One of the pre-writing activities was a review by each group of the headings in their outline from the perspective of these three elements. That is, the students responsible for each heading were asked to report which people had help shape the events in their topic, how perspectives had differed, and what connections they could see between their event and others on the outline. The students then spent four class periods writing first drafts. Many but not all of the students expanded, revised, and edited their drafts during the following week as homework.

## RESULTS

### TAKING THE ROLE OF A LOYAL COLONIST

Taking the perspective of colonists who were still loyal British subjects in 1763 posed a major intellectual challenge for 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students. This was evident from the very beginning of the activity, which was introduced by a discussion of how the students thought the colonists felt about being part of the British Empire. Their

responses during the discussion were almost entirely negative. The students assumed that the colonists would have “felt unfree,” “felt trapped,” “not liked it,” And “not enjoyed being ruled by a king.”

These responses had been foreshadowed by comments during interviews conducted with a sample of the students before the instruction began. Before beginning the unit, the investigator conducted 25-30 minute interviews with a sample of 12 students. The students in the sample were selected with assistance from the classroom teacher to represent top, middle, and bottom students in terms of achievement and writing fluency. Several of the questions probed for what the students already knew about the American War for Independence. Although they had never formally studied this period of American history, it was evident that the students were not beginning this unit on the Revolution with a mind that was *tabula rasa*. They had quite decided opinions about British authority in colonial America.

These included the following:

1. that the colonists were being “run by another country” and did not like it
2. that the colonists did not have freedom because they were ruled by a king
3. that the colonists could not “do as they wanted”
4. that the colonists “did not have religious freedom”
5. that the colonists wanted political freedom, but did not have it

Collectively, these opinions reflected a stereotype of 18<sup>th</sup> century British authority as autocratic and of the American colonists as freedom-loving democrats, who had always chafed under an oppressive royal authority. They were interpreting the history of the pre-Revolution period through the lens of the Declaration of Independence, the “reading the present back into the past” fallacy. As they had never studied the American Revolution in school, they must have imbibed this view



from the general culture, perhaps from the mythology that surrounds Fourth of July celebrations.

In the discussion that followed, the students' reaction was one of puzzlement and confusion. The most puzzling aspect of the problem was Hopkinson's reference to the king. They did not see how the colonists could feel good about being ruled by a king. It was an especially alien and repugnant idea to them.

The majority of the students had difficulty imagining that American colonists could have said such things. Their responses were guarded and skeptical. Some assumed that these three men were atypical; others that they had sold out.

"They probably don't do the kind of work requiring they must give most of it to the king. Or perhaps they're just trying to suck up to the king so they wouldn't have to pay taxes. I cannot put myself in one of those people's places because I completely disagree with them" (Meghan)

"I think these men are saying these things because they are getting paid to say them." (Robert)

"If I say that I love the king, I wouldn't have to pay my tax and I will be rich." (Sarah)

"I love my king because you are supposed to love and be loyal to your king." (Emma)

"I was getting money from Britain and rejoiced because of my richness. And I was greedy and did a job for Britain and they paid me for doing the job." (Jendai)

A few of the students did conclude that as colonists had legitimate reasons for saying good things about Britain, even about George III.

“He was nice, loyal, smart, and maybe he was perfect for a king.”

(Joseph)

“The King might be a nice person and he is nice to John Adams and treats everyone equally.” (Kaiya)

But these were their own comments, and not perspectives from 1765. As an exercise in perspective taking, the first activity was the least successful of the three.

#### TAKING THE PERSPECTIVE OF A BRITISH OFFICIAL

For the second activity, the students completed two sets of responses. The first were the solutions they proposed to the problems facing Britain in 1765. They were given alternatives to choose from or could make up their own. The second was the letter from the British official. The solutions that they proposed varied. Some merely endorsed one of the alternatives provided, which are described above.

Others were more creative:

“Start punishing the colonists who smuggled imported goods, and force them to pay the taxes.” (Anne)

“Put tax collector on boats so people couldn’t smuggle anything.... Hire more guards.” (Emma)

“They could stop taking the Indians’ land. Make the land more expensive.” (Kaiha)

“The Indians and the British could sent [set] down and desid [decide] something like give have [half] of the land to the Indians and have [half] to the British.” (Ali)

In every instance, the proposals took what was essentially the British government’s point of view. No one proposed that Britain bring the troops home, raise taxes on the people in England or declare the colonies a free-trade zone.

In their roleplaying or letter writing component of this assignment, nineteen of the twenty-six students who completed it presented a reasonably persuasive argument for the government’s new measures. Four students had difficulty getting into the writing, ending up with the incomplete outlines or fragments of disconnected paragraphs. Three could not make the leap to the British perspective, but argued the opposite point of view instead. The nineteen who argued in favor of the measures were not equally successful in making their arguments. That is, there were observable differences in quality of perspective taking.

The results were not uniformly successful. Two students played the assigned role in a perfunctory way. They managed to act out the role without giving the perspective that accompanied it much thought. It was more of a game than an intellectual exercise.

“Let me get straight to the point. You know those new acts, I think there so great.... The Quartering Act is marvelous. I love it, you should love it to.” (Jendai).

“You [will] love the Sugar Act. It will make more money and provide you more troops.” (Robert C.)

However, the other twenty-three students who completed the activity were much more thoughtful. As students, as well as in their role as British officials, several also recognized that multiple perspectives were involved and that points of view different from theirs could also be justified. They realized that their official view might not be very popular in the colonies. The characteristic mark of these papers was the recognition that the colonists might not like these new policies, but that they had to accept them for the common good.

“New laws have been made by the King of England. Laws that will help your nation grow bigger and stronger.... Please help your country.” (Vanessa S.)

“As we are deep in dept [debt], as you well know, we have brainstormed a few taxes that will help us all out of our predicament [predicament].... All of these taxes are going to pay for the care of the troops protecting the colonies. These taxes will not only help us, but you will benefit from them as well.” (Anne)

“The Acts are all fair and good. They will help both America, and Britain. These are very good rules. Everybody in Britain would appreciate your cooperation.” (Meghan)

“This is a really good deal. These laws are fair and necessary. We know you probably don’t like these laws but you have to go along with it.” (Joseph)

The most difficult task that the students faced was to justify the tax increases represented by the Sugar Act and Stamp Acts. They usually did so by explaining how the new revenues would benefit the colonists.

“I know it [the Sugar Act] sounds horrible, but it is not. The tax money will be used to pay for the troops that help and guard you. If we did not have these taxes, there would be no soldiers to guard you and then, if their [sic] was an Indian attack, you might all be killed!” (Meghan)

“These acts...are a good thing because it will give the government money to pay for the troops food and drinks, the Indians won’t mess with us any more.” (Alexander)

The majority of the students were able to present the official point of view and explain why, under the circumstances, it was a reasonable and fair position. That is not to say that any of the papers presented it adequately or as an historian who was a specialist on the period would have. They were much more solicitous of American feelings than George Grenville had been. There were other errors of fact. Many assumed that Britain drew the Proclamation line out of a fair-minded concern for the Indians, whereas the act was motivated at least as much by Britain’s desire to avoid the costs involved in Indian wars. As the United States government would discover in negotiating Indian treaties in the 19th century, there were cheaper ways to secure Indian land than fighting for it. The students also saw the Indians rather than other European powers as the major threat to British security in North America. However, these errors reflected a lack of historical knowledge rather than any lack of willingness or ability to entertain a British perspective. The hostility that

references to the king had provoked in the previous activity was largely absent. Presumably, the background presented made the British government's perspective believable, whereas loyalty to the king remained unfathomable. Or perhaps the students were willing to entertain a British perspective so long as it involved policy issues rather than questions of political loyalty.

#### PERSPECTIVE TAKING IN NARRATIVE WRITING

For this assignment, the students were asked to write a narrative history of the events that took place between the end of the French and Indian War and the Declaration of Independence. The students' principal task was to describe the sequence of events. They were also asked to examine the role of individuals in these events, present the perspectives of the actors involved, and, when appropriate, to make connections between events. In presenting the perspectives of the people involved, they were given wide latitude. They were not given a model for doing it systematically. They took this aspect of the assignment seriously, but none approached the task as if perspective taking was an item on a list that had to be checked off for each event.

The students' narratives that were collected after three class periods of writing varied in length and in quality. All the students were still in the process of writing a first draft. None of the drafts were yet complete. Six students found the writing to be such a struggle that they had barely got beyond a topical outline. Sixteen others had written at least one paragraph on most of the eight topics. Although their narratives represented work in progress, enough had been completed to see how they had approached the several tasks involved.

The papers of the sixteen students who had described the perspectives involved in at least some of the events varied considerably in terms of how fully the perspectives were developed. The most frequent references to perspectives were brief statements about how the colonists felt about British policies and actions. In some of the papers, it was limited to such descriptive statements as:

“The colonists didn’t like this.” (Tonesha)

“The colonists did not like it.” (Mike)

“The colonists hated it.” (Andre)

“The colonists got mad.” (Joseph)

Merely descriptive and not explanatory, such statements have limited value for historical understanding. However, other students did write statements that were more extended and revealing. For example:

“The colonists really hated these policies because they felt they should tax themselves.” (Emma)

“A group of colonists got mad because of the fact that they had to pay extra money to get legal documents.” (Kaiya)

“This law [the Tea Act] drove the American tea companies out of business so most of the Americans hated this new law.” (Shannon)

These students at least attempted to account for the perspective they were presenting.

Whether or not the students explained the reason the colonists felt as they did, they tended to use the perspective they had presented to explain what happened next. There were causal links, implied or explicit, between the colonists’

frame of mind and their subsequent actions. The students whose statements were merely descriptive usually left it up to the reader to infer the causal link, as the following excerpts indicate:

“One of Britain’s new polociies [sic] were the Stamp Act. That was when you couldn’t buy anything enless [sic] you had a stamp...the colonists didn’t like this. They went down to the store that provided the stamp and with the wood from the building and made a bon fire.” (Tonesha)

“George Grenville had the idea for the stamp act. The colonists did not like it. There was a riot.” (Mike)

“Parliament made the Tea Act. The Colonists hated it so they through [sic] a Tea Party by throwing all of the tea in to the ocean.” (Andre)

“Colonists god mad, they boycotted the tea and then dumped it in the harbor, and that was called the Boston Tea Party.” (Joseph)

In contrast, the students who wrote the more explanatory perspective statements also tended to be more explicit about the repercussions of that frame of mind.

“Parliament aloud [allowed] British [East India] tea shops to sell tea cheaper than what the American tea shops were selling tea for. The Americans were very upset so that led into the dumping of tea at the port of Boston. The colonists showed their anger by dressing up as Indians and going down to the port of Boston and dumping the tea off the ships.” (Emma)

“The colonists responded strongly to the Stamp Act. They hated it!... Virginia wrote other colonies about how unfair the Stamp Act was. They said



that only the colonists should have the right to tax the colonists. A popular motto rang out through the colonies. It was, “No taxation without representation!” (Ceinwyn)

Whether or not the connection was explicit, the students used perspective taking to establish motivation and to build causal links.

While most of the perspective statements referred to the colonists, all but one of the sixteen students included at least one instance of a British perspective. These were most often included in either one or both of two places in their narratives. They typically presented the new imperial policies in the mid-1760s from the British point of view.

“Now Britain didn’t like this [the Stamp Act protest].... They also put taxes on things like tea, paper, lead, and glass [and] they also stopped smuggling to save money which they badly needed.” (Tonesha)

“They were losing money because colonist[s] began to smuggle and Britain needed the money. So they made new acts such as the sugar act which raised taxes on sugar. That’s how they got there [sic] money.” (Ryan)

The Boston Port Act of 1774 was also usually presented from a British point of view. This act of Parliament, which was one of the so-called Intolerable Acts, closed the port of Boston to shipping until the town paid for the tea it had destroyed in the Boston Tea Party.

“Britain [closed the] Port of Boston to all colonists merchants until the city of Boston payed [sic] back the East Indian Tea Company for all of its damage. The tea was worth thousands of dollars.” (Meghan)

“The Boston Port Act was an act where parliament closed the port of Boston to all the colonists and their merchants until the city of Boston paid for the tea that was dumped overboard by some angry colonists because that was like flushing down about ten thousand gallons of tea down the drane [sic].” (Emma)

The student narratives were also examined for passages in which the student shifted from one perspective to another. When such passages were found, the following questions were posed. Was the student able to remain sufficiently detached to present both perspectives as tenable positions? Was he or she able to explain how actions that are the consequences of one perspective led to reactions by those who have different perspectives? In other words, could the student use perspective taking to help construct causal connections between events?

While nearly all of the students shifted from colonial to British perspectives once or twice during the course of their paper, only four of them managed to do so within the space of a paragraph or so. The following narrative shifted from one perspective to another in describing the antecedents of the Boston Massacre.

“They also mad[e] a new law called the Townshend Act of 1767. This was a tax on tea, paper, lead and glass. Britain was afraid that the colonist[s] would start a war about the new law so they sent the troops to Boston. This made the colonists very angray [sic]. But Britain guessed well. There was a fight in Boston on March 5, 1770.” (Shannon)

Another student shifted perspectives in the course of a carefully reasoned explanation for the Tea Act of 1773 and the subsequent troubles in Boston.

“The Tea Act allowed the E.I.C. [East India Company] to sell their tea straight to the E.I.C. Tea shops in the colonies. This would make their tea a lot cheaper. Parliament thought that the colonists wouldn’t be able to resist such a deal. How wrong they were. Colonists wouldn’t buy the tea. They knew that this would put the colonists’ tea shops out of business. And they thought that if Britain could monopolize the tea business, couldn’t Britain just as easily put other businesses out of business. So Britain’s great deal turned into a flop. Nobody would buy their tea. From this great commotion arose what we know as the Boston Tea Party.” (Ceinwyn)

In this instance, the shifting of perspectives creates a dynamic that carries the story forward. The differing points of view become the tug and pull of political conflict. In both of the above passages, the perspectives seem to be equally tenable. And in both, the taking and shifting of perspectives moves the account from one event to the next.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the perspective taking activities in the Oakland fifth-grade classroom suggest a number of observations. One is that perspective taking is a difficult task for fifth-grade students. Perhaps for that reason, brief perspective-taking assignments do not work very well. For example, the students’ failure in the loyal colonist activity can be explained by both the difficulty of the assignment and the brevity of the activity. Asking the students to place themselves in the position of 18<sup>th</sup>-century monarchists was the most difficult of the three perspective taking tasks. The information that they were given about the colonists’ political sympathies

was clearly inadequate. They did not even know that the British monarchy was limited and not autocratic. Basically, the students were adrift in an unknown sea of 18<sup>th</sup> century political loyalty and identity, without enough information to find their bearings. The information was certainly insufficient to offset what seem to be tenacious stereotypes about British rule in colonial America. The students also had inadequate time to do the assignment. Even had they had more information, they would not have had time to assimilate it.

The second assignment, the writing of the letter from the British official, provided the students with much more information. They knew that Britain faced serious financial problems; that standing armies cost money; and that the colonists would directly benefit from keeping British troops in North America. They also had more time for the second assignment, nearly three class periods instead of one. Given additional information and time, the students were more successful in constructing a believable perspective.

However, the point is not that adequate information and time inevitably produce successful perspective taking. The students were more successful in the latter assignment not because they had amassed a greater quantity of information. Rather, those who succeeded did so because they had sufficient information and time to account for the perspectives they were asked to present. They knew why the official thought the way he did. The most successful perspective taking passages in the third or historical narrative assignment also explained why the colonists and the British felt or thought as they did. Perspective taking, it would seem, involves the construction of explanation as well as the description of a point of view.

The student writings in the narrative history assignment linked perspective taking and historical explanation in another way as well. The most successful perspective taking passages in the students' narratives developed the perspective in order to explain subsequent actions by the colonists or by the British. By shifting from one perspective to the other, the most successful of these students were able to account for a sequence of actions, one leading to another. They used multiple perspective taking to explain causal relationships.

Still another observation is that perspective taking and language facility go hand-in-hand. Most of the students who succeeded in the narrative writing assignment, the most complex assignment of the three, were among those whom the classroom teacher had identified as belonging to the top group in achievement and writing fluency. The students assigned to the bottom group were least likely to succeed in these assignments. This is not to suggest that history students should be divided into separate "historical thinking" and "fact memorizing" groups or tracks. It points rather to placing great emphasis on language development, especially fluency in writing, in history instruction. When students are engaged in "doing history" in an elementary classroom, history is as much a language art as a social science.

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