

HISTORICAL THINKING AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING IN A FIFTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

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Helping students learn to think historically has recently become a significant goal for history instruction in the United States. The idea that history instruction has more to offer students than factual information is hardly new. Charles Beard argued more than half a century ago that history and the social sciences could help young people develop “rich and many-sided personalities,” which included the broader intellectual perspective that historical reflection made possible (Beard, 1932). In recent years, history educators in Britain have also focused attention on historical thinking. In the mid-1970s, the Schools Council History 13-16 Project designed and implemented a curriculum that abandoned survey courses in favor of a “discontinuous syllabus” that engaged students in historical inquiry (Shemilt, 1980). By then, British psychologists were also involved in research that focused on the cognitive processes involved in historical understanding. This is not to say that the recent interest in historical thinking among American history educators owes much either to Beard or to British curriculum reformers and psychologists. It is more a reflection of the rethinking of history teaching that took place during the education reform movement of the 1980s.

By the later 1980s, history educators in the United States were emphasizing the value of historical thinking as part of their rationale for justifying history’s place

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in the curriculum. The report of the Bradley Commission on History in Schools extolled the valuable “habits of mind” that the study of history makes possible (Bradley Commission, 1988). A year earlier, the *California History-Social Science Framework* (California Department of Education, 1987), had emphasized the importance of historical empathy to the study of the past. This was reiterated in a subsequent California publication, *With History-Social Science for All* (California Department of Education, 1992). Still more recently, the National History Standards Project has endorsed historical thinking. Its publication, *National Standards for United States History* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994), includes historical thinking standards, which are accorded equal status with the report’s more controversial knowledge or content standards.

What is historical thinking? A consensus about what should be included within this domain has yet to emerge. The thinking standards promulgated by the National History Standards Project largely refer to skills useful for engaging students in historical research and writing, including analysis and interpretation that takes the perspectives of historical actors into account. Tom Holt’s *Thinking Historically* (1990), a booklet for teachers published by the College Board, emphasized the importance of involving students in thinking imaginatively and creatively about the past. A recent article by Peter Seixas tackled the problem by defining a number of “critical elements of historical thinking” (Seixas, 1993). These include the ability to decide what historical events are significant and to refine, revise, and add to what one knows about the past. Students should also be able to deal with questions concerning human agency, empathy and moral judgment.

While there is not yet a consensus about what constitutes historical thinking, most of the definitions include empathy or perspective taking as a central component. Historical explanation is virtually impossible without some insight into the worldviews and cultural perspectives of the characters involved. It is difficult to explain conflict in human affairs without taking into account the interaction of people who have different values and interests. It is important, then, not only for students to be able to engage in perspective taking, but also to be able to shift from one perspective to another.

Perspective taking is central to historical thinking, but it is also highly problematic. It is certainly one of the most difficult aspects of historical reconstruction. How can one possibly step into the shoes of someone who lived in the past, when it is impossible to leave the present behind? Should perspective taking be thought of only as an exercise in understanding or does it also involve the reconstruction of feelings? Ashby and Lee describe the achievement of empathy as “where we get to when we have successfully reconstructed other peoples’ beliefs, values, goals, and attendant feelings” (Portal, 1987, p. 63). Whether the reconstruction of feelings is possible or even desirable has been a major bone of contention among history educators in Britain. While some maintain that empathetic or emotional identification is a desirable outcome, others insist that empathetic identification lacks validity and impedes historical understanding (Knight, 1898).

This paper will consistently use the term “historical perspective taking” rather than “historical empathy.” Perspective taking is a more limited term, and,

therefore, one that is somewhat less problematic. It denotes an understanding of a person's frame of reference, without assuming that one can or needs to share his or her feelings. The question is not whether perspective taking in this non-affective sense is fully possible, but, as Seixas suggests (1993), how can we confront the difficulties inherent in perspective taking in ways that help students become more expert at doing it?

Perspective taking is hardly an alien concept to elementary and secondary school history teachers. Many teachers use activities that engage students in imaginative reconstructions about how people lived in the past. Among those commonly used are writing assignments that involve roleplaying. Such assignments ask students to write first-person narratives from the perspective of some imaginary character who could have lived at a particular time. It may be a story about a "day in my life," mock journal entries or a letter writing activity. Writing activities of this kind are the most likely entrees for involving students in perspective taking, as teachers are familiar with the genre and students seem to like doing it. However, they do raise questions that need to be explored. Are such activities accessible to all students or is perspective taking constrained by students' level of cognitive development and language abilities? Do they present the specter of a two-tiered curriculum, in which the gifted and English-proficient students engage in historical thinking and do historical reconstructions, while the others memorize information and take multiple-choice tests?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research described here was part of a larger study conducted by the Writing to Learn History Project at the University of California at Berkeley in an Oakland, California elementary school. It was a class predominantly composed of Hispanic and African American students. Although the entire class of 31 students participated in the instruction, 17 students were selected as the focus of the research. All but two of the 4th grade students were excluded from the sample as well as the 5th grade students who could only speak and write in Spanish. The two 4th grade students who remained in the group were comparable in age and in language proficiency to the 5th grade students. As it was assumed that the quality of perspective taking would reflect differences in language proficiency, the 17 students were identified according to high, intermediate, and low levels of English language proficiency. This identification was based on their performance on an English writing sample and the teacher's assessment of their language proficiency. All but one of the students was born in the United States and all listed English as their primary language. However, Spanish was the dominant language spoken at home for 8 of the 17 students.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The two writing assignments were part of a 6-week curriculum unit on American Indians and Spanish colonization in the Southwest. The first was a "day in the life" activity, in which the students were asked to assume the identity of an American Indian and write a first-person account of what they did on a typical day. It took place during the second week of instruction, after the students had

completed a week's instruction that focused on comparative Indian cultures. It was explained that they were to take a "mind trip" back to the times when Indians were the only people who lived in what is now the United States. They were given a list of questions to which they were encouraged to respond. It included such items as: What did you do that day? What kind of dwelling do you live in? What kind of clothes are you wearing? They were asked to write in the first person, present tense and as they wrote they should keep asking the question, "Does this make Indian sense?" They were reminded that Indians belonged to pre-literate cultures and that they would not actually have written such accounts, but that it was important for the research project to have a written record of their responses. As resource materials, each student had an information packet on one of five different tribes. The character that they were roleplaying had to be a member of that tribe. These packets included pictures and other information about food, dwellings, and clothing. The students wrote for half an hour each day for three successive class periods. It was emphasized that their writing was to be a rough draft copy and that they were not to worry about erasing or spelling.

The second writing assignment was a mock correspondence in which they were asked to take the perspective of a Spanish colonist. This assignment came after ten 75-minute class periods in which they learned about the Spanish colonization of the American Southwest. It consisted of two activities. In the first, they were to write a letter to a cousin in Spain describing their life in colonial New Mexico. The question was whether they would be able to shift from the Indian to

the Spanish perspective? They were given a set of questions comparable to those handed out at the beginning of the Indian writing assignment:

1. Where do you live: village, far, rancho?
2. What is your name?
3. What does your house look like?
4. What does a room in your house look like?
5. What are you wearing?
6. What did you eat that day?
7. What did you do with your friends?
8. What did the grown-ups do (or children if they are taking the role of an adult)?

In the second activity, the students had to respond to a letter from the Spanish cousin received in reply to their first letter. In it, the cousin accused them of unfairly taking over the Indians' land and suggested that they all move back to Mexico.

The students wrote for almost 70 minutes over two days on the first part of the assignment, with three of the most promising papers read and discussed half-way through to serve as models for those having difficulty. They spent a comparable period of time on the second writing activity.

CRITERIA

What did the students have to do to demonstrate successful perspective taking? Three criteria were used to evaluate their roleplaying narratives. In the first place, they had to demonstrate that they could create a character or assume the role of a person whose thoughts and actions were historically and culturally

appropriate. They had to provide some evidence that their historical persona thought and acted like an Indian or a Spanish colonist rather than like an Oakland elementary student living in 1993. In other words, they had to differentiate between past and present. In the second assignment, they also had to differentiate between Spanish and Indian perspectives of the same historical period. Secondly, they had to place their character in a cultural context that was as fully developed as possible. They had to include enough descriptive detail to lodge the character in the appropriate place and time. The assumption was that contextualization and perspective taking were intimately related. Finally, the information they used to develop that context needed to be free from error and anachronism.

These are not exclusive categories, as there is a good deal of overlap between them. It is impossible for students to differentiate between their own views and those of an historical character in a contextual void. It is conceivable that a perspective could be created that stood in sharp contrast to the present, but which simply was wrong.

RESULTS

A. Assignment #1

The students' narratives for Assignment #1 differed greatly in quality. The most successful effort was Ibraheim's. He created a character named Washakie, who was a Shoshoni adult male. His first paragraph read as follows (misspellings and punctuation errors in the original will be retained throughout):

“ When I went outside acspecting to see the usual rouged land but to my surprise I see the eagle king of All birds A coyotay A big brown bear A few

tree right ther And there I knew I was blessed. I was whering my usual cloths made of fine be[a]r hide at breakfast that my wife had mde for me. I ate some Acron squash when the chief Aproach me and he ws saying, Washakie, you have been blessed by the Anamals therefore when I die you will take my place as chief, but until then we shall dance for our sellbrashon. The next day he died.”

Washakie’s encountering an eagle, coyote and bear on the same morning was a sign that he had been blessed and was the rightful successor to the village chief. After the death of the chief, Washakie became the new village leader.

The narratives ranged from Ibrahiem’s creation of a quite believable Indian character to a brief paragraph by Joseph that was little more than a list of things Indians did:

“They would play Indian Games. they wold hunt for foods. Rabbit, wolf, bird, deer. They lived in hogans. It would be fun to live in a Hogan. We didn’t have shoes. We didn’t have cloths. We work on getting food and cloths. They traveled from many places. California to Mexico. An the Indians would such to blood from deer and other animals.

As these two narratives indicate, there were clear differences between the three language proficiency groups. Ibrahiem was in the top group; Joseph was in the bottom group. There was also a quantitative difference. The more proficient students tended to write longer and more detailed narratives.

Describing the setting in which their character lived was the easiest part of the assignment for most of the students. They had little difficulty visualizing a

landscape much different than that which they see around them today. They could also reconstruct parts of the routine of everyday life, such as Indians bathing in a river and hunting with bows and arrows. They described food that was different from that of their own time, recognized that their Indian persona wore homemade clothes, and surrounded their character with historically appropriate artifacts:

“Me and my friends went to get berries to eat [for] dinner.” (Eric)

“My friend is gathering roots, seeds, and berries.” (Sharon)

“My wife made my clothes.” (Ricardo)

“So I got my bow and arrows and left my dwelling that is made of tree branches and animal hides.” (Sharon)

I am washing my her [hair] with the soap roth [root].” (Marisol)

While the narratives were not entirely free of historical error, the majority of the students created reasonably accurate historical contexts. However, that was not enough to ensure successful perspective taking.

As detailed and generally accurate as the narratives were, most of them stopped far short of perspective taking in any meaningful sense of that term. The most serious problems were not factual inaccuracies, but what might be called structural anachronisms. Students, as Seixas has written, “may mistakenly assume that people living in different circumstances nevertheless thought in ways essentially similar to themselves.” The problem lies in the students “failure to realize what they don’t know about the past” (Seixas, 1993). They also assumed that Indians acted in ways similar to them. No amount of context, however detailed and factually accurate, was sufficient to save most of the students from this pitfall.

The students had great difficulty disengaging their character's thoughts and actions from their own time. There were glaring anachronisms in their understanding of the processes of everyday life. The daily routines that were described were very much like the routines of present-day children. The characters got up in the morning, bathed, put on their clothes, ate breakfast and went out to play.

Shakira's character was an Apache girl, whose morning routine included waking up her sister and brother:

"Then I went to my sister tepee then my b[r]other tepee. I woke them and took them to the river to wash their hands and face."

She assumed that Indian children slept in separate tepees, just as many children today have individual bedrooms. David had the Indian children in his narrative celebrating a birthday with parties and gifts.

The students' narratives also were oblivious to the difficulties American Indians faced in finding enough food to stay alive. David's character and his friend killed a deer and a buffalo in the same day. "And then we took it home to eat it later on and then it was getting dark and we put a fire and eat the buffalo and deer all together." There was no sense of the skill required to hunt and kill wild game or of hunting as a large-scale communal effort. The same was true for Sharon: "I walk to the river. I see a bear. I'm running back to my dwelling.... I'm going to get my bows and arrow.... I shot him. I am going to pick him up and take him home...." Both students make hunting as easy as shopping for groceries at the local Safeway. Although Sharon wrote one of the most carefully detailed narratives, her character

thought and acted like a modern-day girl. "Today I wake up and ate a squirrel leg and drink a berrire drink," as if convenience foods and bottled juice were staples of Indian life.

Perspective taking does not inevitably emerge full blown from detailed and contextualized narrative. In most of the students' narratives, the amassing of exotic details about everyday life did not lead to an understanding that life also was structured in exotic ways. The students simply hung their factual historical information on a framework of assumptions borrowed from the present. This problem cut across the three language-proficiency groups. Students in all three groups had difficulty getting beyond the present.

ASSIGNMENT #2

Two narratives were written for the second assignment. Both were letters written by a Spanish colonist in New Mexico to a cousin in Spain. The first part of the assignment invited the students to describe what life was like as a colonist. It was comparable to the previous assignment about Indian life, presenting the students with an opportunity to write a detailed narrative about what life was like in Spanish colonial New Mexico. They were also asked, incidentally, to tell the cousin about the local Indians. The second letter asked them to respond directly to their cousin's suggestion that they give New Mexico back to the Indians. The research question was whether the students could maintain the Spanish colonists perspective when it came into direct conflict with their earlier commitment to the Indians' point of view.

As in the Indian assignment, the students wrote detailed descriptions of their house their clothing, and their daily routine. They had little difficulty placing their character in a reasonably authentic historical context. The following references are representative:

“The inside [of my house] has a few windows A fireplace And a low table And some pot and pans and beans. And I am wearing A subraro and some plan cloths A vest a pants and a white shirt.” (Ibrahiem)

“Today I eat tacos de carne and beans and chili.” (Alfredo)

“I have a big house. It is made out of adobe. “ (Augustin)

“The next day we have a rodeo and after the rodeo we dance all night.”

(Sharon)

Their papers were occasionally marred by errors of fact and by anachronisms.

Sharon’s adobe house, for example, had “3 rooms and 2 bathrooms;” while Ibrahiem’s village on the New Mexican frontier “has lots of houses and churches and lots of nice people and I like the restaurants.’ But for the most part, the students’ descriptions of the context in which their character lived was reasonably authentic.

In assessing the students’ ability to shift from the Indian to the Spanish colonial perspective, the critical test was their Spanish character’s perception of Indians. The first letter called for at least some mention of Indians. The second letter directly confronted the issue.

Several of the students had difficulty creating distance between their new persona and the Indians. Alma had foreshadowed this problem in the first letter to her cousin, by including the Indians among her friends and playmates.

“The Indians and us we are good friends. The Indians play with us is fun when you come to New Mexico I will tell. We are good family with all the pueblo Indians.” (Alma)

Even Shakira’s character, Elvira, whose family owned an Apache slave, wrote that “Indians are very nice I have some Indian friend.”

The resistance to placing themselves in opposition to Indians was decidedly more pronounced in the second letter to the cousin in Spain. Five of the students simply agreed that the land should be returned to the Indians. Alfredo and Joseph would do so immediately:

“Juan de Onate took land away from the Indians but I think I am going to give back their land and leave New Mexico I am going to come back to Spain.... I don’t want to take away the Indians’ land because we have our own land in Spain....but anyway this land is theirs.” (Alfredo)

“I think we should give New Mexico back to the Indians.... The Indians must be sad [sad].” (Joseph)

Shakira, Gerardo, and David also agreed that they should give the Indians back their land. But Shakira concluded that there was nothing she could do about it, and Gerardo and David decided that the other Spanish colonists would get mad at them if they made such a proposal.

However, six students made reasoned arguments about why they should not give back the land. They justified keeping it by making two quite different arguments, both of which reflected a credible Spanish perspective. Gabriella’s character would not leave because her family had a stake in the land.

“I am not going to leave New Mexico for anything. Its because this is wher I was rased as a small kid and my family came here. And ther is no way that anything or anybody is going to make me go away from my familys land!” (Gabriella)

Priscilla’s character took a similar stand.

“I know that the Indians were here befor us but we had to take it away because we didn’t have no place to live and now we live here and we are not giving it back.” (Priscilla)

The second argument was a justification based on the reciprocal relation that had, in fact, emerged between the Pueblo and Spanish villages in New Mexico.

Ibrahiem phrased it best:

“They said we can live on their land.... When Juan de Onate took their land and give the[m] nothing in return that was unfair and it fair because they give us land and we help them fight back when other tribe try to raid them.” (Ibrahiem)

This was also the position taken by four other students.

As the arguments for keeping the land suggest, more of the students succeeded in this assignment than in the previous one in creating characters who thought and acted in historically believable ways. Alfredo’s character liked to ride horses and enjoyed dancing.

“I went wihte my friends to dance la quebrodita that is a new dance that I like I have a horse that I call the black Rayo because is black and run so fast.” (Alfredo)

Gabriella invented games for her character to play that probably have no modern-day equivalent.

“We played with rocks and sang a song a[nd] [passed the rocks to the next person jut still singing the song.” (Gabriella)

The people in Shakira and Ibrahim’s family slept on the floor, presumably on pallets, and not in modern beds. Elvira, who was Shakira’s colonial persona, lived a thoroughly pre-modern existence. Her father was a Spanish soldier who was at home only at Christmas and on feast days, her family owned an Indian slave, and she did not go to school. Fully half of the papers had at least brief passages of believable perspective taking.

CONCLUSION

Perspective taking was a difficult challenge for these 5th grade students. In neither assignment did the majority of the group manage to see the world through the eyes of a person from the historical time period in any meaningful sense of that term. The Indian assignment proved to be more difficult than the Spanish colonial one in this respect, which suggests that the more remote the period and culture, the more difficult the challenge. However, some of the students did succeed in some measure, fully one-third of them with the Spanish assignment. That probably is a more significant finding than that the majority failed to do so.

Is it possible for 5th grade students with somewhat limited language skills to become engaged in perspective taking? This research suggests that at least some of them can. Language proficiency was a limiting factor. The six students who were successful with the Spanish assignment were equally divided between the two

higher language proficiency groups. None of the lower-group students succeeded in either assignment.

However, the failure of the majority of the students to engage in perspective taking may have resulted from factors other than language constraints. It may be a reflection of the way the assignment was structured. The assignment called for writing a first-person narrative. The use of “I” rather than “he” or “she” may have strengthened the students’ obvious tendency to read their own values and routines into the past. Perhaps a story written in the third-person would have been more successful. The anachronism of having a preliterate Indian character write a narrative also may have helped blur the boundaries between past and present. However, the most persuasive explanation may be that most of the students lacked sufficient knowledge about how things were done in the past to succeed in the assignment.

The detailed contexts in which the students placed their historical persona put them at the threshold of perspective taking. But most of them could not step across. For that they needed another kind of information. Details about shelter, clothing and food were not helpful. To take the next step, they also needed to know how their character might have thought and acted, ways likely to be quite different than people would think and act today. The students needed to know more about the fundamental structures and processes of everyday life. The instruction that preceded the writing activities had exposed the students to the details of what people did, but not to how they did it or how they thought about doing it.

This suggests that history instruction designed to help students engage in perspective taking and historical thinking should help students create distance between the past and the present. For example, Ibrahiem's Indian narrative let us see a bit of the world through the eyes of someone from a different culture and time. He did this by placing his imaginary character at a considerable distance from himself, in terms of age, natural environment, and values. History teaching for historical thinking should focus more on the differences than on the continuities between past and present. Teachers interested in promoting historical thinking could do worse than adopt as their motto the quote from L. P. Hartley, which David Lowenthal abstracted as the title for a book: "The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there (Lowenthal, 1985).

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