

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN GRADE 12 BOYS BY RECONSTRUCTING STORIES OF RACIAL TERROR IN VIRGINIA

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Abstract

In this action research project, I sought to explore how students' critical thinking skills could be strengthened by requiring them to do the work of historians: to research extensively and then produce an important and compelling story for a general audience. I was curious about the extent to which the process of actively constructing a story about events in the past, rather than passively reading and hearing about those events, might result in the development of critical thinking skills. Over the course of the project, the ten students in my Grade 12 US History course were asked to locate newspaper articles that covered a particularly disturbing and understudied phenomenon in the history of Virginia and of the United States; the lynching of African Americans between 1870 and 1920. In doing so, students grappled with the notion that all primary sources are inherently biased and that to piece together a story, a good historian must think critically to corroborate disparate accounts of the same event. After discovering how newspapers in the late 1800s and early 1900s told these stories, it was then the boys' turn to re-tell these same stories, but for an audience in the present. To this end, each boy produced a narrative account of what happened to a particular victim of a lynching in Virginia. As each student created his story, he had to make a number of decisions about how to make the narrative compelling, but also succinct and as true to fact as possible. The final product, a museum-style display at the school, showcased the results of the students' work and allowed me to conclude that this approach to teaching History did indeed strengthen the boys' ability to think critically.

Introduction

The research question I set out to answer was: "How can investigating and re-telling the forgotten stories of racial violence in Virginia develop critical thinking skills in Grade 12 boys?"

I was particularly interested in this topic because over the last few years as a History teacher, I have had to grapple with some serious personal doubts and misgivings about the way we have structured History education in high school. I worry that we have been overly focused on content and not focused enough on empowering students to develop vital 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, that will be necessary for them to navigate college and the workplace. I wanted, therefore, to conduct an action research project that could help me and my colleagues better understand what a History class might look like if the balance between skills and content were altered so that each became equally important.

Action research provided an appropriate and ideal method for investigating my research question because it put student voices and student work at the center of the study. This allowed me to reach conclusions not just based on what I observed, but based on the experiences of students, which are the most important thing to consider when developing lessons or curriculum. In this project, I attempted to adhere to the “Gold Standard” of Project Based Learning, a pedagogical approach that we are trying to incorporate more of at Blue Ridge School. This approach has been proven particularly effective with boys because it allows them a large degree of “voice and choice,” and the opportunity to collaborate, be creative, and take ownership of their work.

Literature Review

History instruction in American high schools is at a critical juncture. Shockingly high numbers of students report that History class is boring and it is hard to blame them for feeling that way. Too many History classes emphasize the recall of facts over the development of skills and remain what Cutler (2014) has labeled, “a callous exercise in regurgitation and rote memorization” (para. 1). Fortunately, some changes in pedagogical approaches toward teaching History at the secondary level can transform the class from a pedantic experience into one that develops and strengthens some of the most essential skills that students will need as they head off to college and into the workforce in the 21st century.

At the heart of this action research project is a belief that harnessing the power of stories is one approach that can make History class both more engaging and more skills-based. Piecing together a coherent story from disparate sources, each with its own agenda, is a challenge. To do it successfully, students need to develop and deploy critical thinking skills to decide what

details and information will, and will not, go into the stories they create. It is through the process of constructing a story that students can sharpen their skills as historians and as critical thinkers. Stories have a power that no other form of communication holds, certainly not charts and graphs. Peter Guber (2011) puts it well when he says:

PowerPoint presentations may be powered by state-of-the-art technology, but reams of data rarely engage people to move them to action. Stories, on the other hand, are state-of-the-*heart* technology – they connect us to others. They provide emotional transportation, moving people to take action on your cause because they can very quickly come to psychologically identify with the characters in a narrative or share an experience – courtesy of the images evoked in the telling. (para 3)

Fadel, Bialik, and Trilling (2015) identify the four skills that students most need to develop while in school to be prepared for life, work, and higher education: creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. While each skill is essential, the action in this project focused on the development of critical thinking in Grade 12 boys. Fadel et al. (2014) go on to note that teaching critical thinking in secondary schools can come in many different forms:

From an explicit curriculum devoted to identifying and practicing the necessary component critical skills, to projects that involve interpreting information, analyzing parts and wholes, analysis and synthesis, evaluating evidence, taking multiple perspectives, discerning patterns, and grasping abstract ideas (p. 117).

In a History class, the development of critical thinking can be achieved by making it possible for boys to not merely learn about the past, but to actually "do" history and to engage in exactly the kind of work that a historian does. This involves digging through primary sources in order to construct an argument, telling a compelling story, and conveying important and relevant information about the past to the public. My action required students to do just what Fadel et al., (2014) urge: interpret information and look at it from multiple perspectives and evaluate the quality of evidence. Additionally, recent literature regarding History pedagogy suggests that this kind of work is engaging and interesting to students. For example, Lesh (2010) states, "for a course in history to be a useful and thought-provoking experience, it must engage students in the application of evidence to make a reasoned argument about the past" (p. 3).

A key feature of this project was that it took much time, more time than I would have used to cover lynchings in Virginia in a more traditional, teacher-centric way comprising lectures, note-taking, and a lot of facts and figures. The literature confirms, however, that a "depth over breadth" approach is one of the most effective pedagogical strategies to promote student engagement (Lesh, 2011; Milo, 2017). Milo (2017) asserts, "breadth won't capture the imagination. We're setting our students up for failure and boredom by requiring them to follow us on a tour of history lite" (p. 20). Similarly, Lesh (2010) notes, "central to a re-envisioned approach to high school history is the idea of the 'history lab,' or historical investigation process" (p. 4), by which he means teachers should delve deeply into one topic at a time, even if it means sacrificing the scope of a course. Too often, History teachers feel obligated to cover a vast amount of content in a very short period and, as a result, none of it is particularly interesting or captivating to students. Instead, the literature suggests that what does excite students and does capture their imaginations are the fascinating stories that emerge when the class takes a deep dive into a single topic.

Another major component of my action research was using the student created stories to produce a museum-quality exhibit or display that artfully, thoughtfully, and respectfully communicated some of the largely forgotten stories from the past that students had pieced together. This part of the action relied on some of the tenets of Project Based Learning (PBL), mainly that students are more engaged when they are producing a product for public consumption. Larmer (2015) states:

A public product adds greatly to PBL's motivating power and encourages high-quality work. Think of what often happens when students make presentations to their classmates and teacher. The stakes are not high, so they may slack off, not take it seriously, and not care as much about the quality of their work. When students have to present or display their work to an audience beyond the classroom, however, the performance bar raises, since no one wants to look bad in public. (para. 13)

A project-based approach to teaching has proven successful in a variety of environments, but it has been especially effective with boys and in boys' schools. Hawley and Reichert (2009) found that teachers in boys' schools across the world reported consistently that "the creation of products [is] especially effective with boys" (p. 12).

The literature is clear that for high school History classes to be relevant in the 21st century, the paradigm must change from having students memorize information to having them use the content as a vehicle to strengthen vital skills such as creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. Creating compelling stories about the past is one way to achieve this goal.

Research Context

Blue Ridge School is an all-boys, all-boarding, Grades 9-12 college prep school located at the base of the Shenandoah National Park and the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. Charlottesville, the closest city, is a 30-minute drive. The school enrolls approximately 190 students each year from all around the United States and the world. We currently have students from 15 US states and 18 countries. The school's curriculum is centered on preparing boys for success in college, but also on teaching them how to be good men of character who are forces for positive change in the world. The small class sizes, structured program, and support for students with learning differences allow boys who might not have found success in other academic environments to thrive here. The participants in this research were ten boys in Grade 12, who were in my US History course. This research took place over the course of our Fall 2018 trimester. The topic we studied as a part of this research project, "Lynching in Virginia," was not a random choice on my part. Many of the horrific events that students uncovered took place not very far from the school. This research also took place in the aftermath of the white nationalist rally that rocked Charlottesville on August 12, 2017. Virginia's dark, troubling, and often overlooked history of racial terror, was very much on the minds of Americans and Virginians while this project was carried out.

The Action

The central action of this project was the implementation of a unit on "Lynching in Virginia" that was student-centric and active. Instead of reading from the textbook and listening to me lecture about this subject, I enacted a change that required students to instead do their own research and piece together stories to create an exhibit that we would put on display for our school community at the end of the Fall trimester. At the heart of this project, was the expectation that each student would identify multiple, disparate, and often conflicting or differing newspaper accounts of the same event, and then use those sources to create a coherent narrative about the event for a contemporary audience. Another key piece of the action, which

was intended to result in increased skepticism of primary sources, was a class trip to nearby James Madison University to meet with a professor who has studied the history of lynchings in Virginia extensively. In describing his work to my students, he explained that many of the newspapers he relied on as sources had strong motivations to “mischaracterize” lynch mobs and cast them as peaceful arbiters of justice. We spent every Friday during the Fall trimester, our weekly 85-minute period, working on this project. We spent longer on this subject than we would have had we not done the project, but the effect of taking this “depth over breadth” approach, which is supported by the literature, was part of what I hoped to investigate.

Data Collection

I relied on four methods of data collection so that I could triangulate my data, which is important as “this enables the researcher to get a better handle on what is happening in reality and to have a greater confidence in research findings” (Mertler, 2017, p. 11). My data collection methods were:

- Participant-generated questions
- Participant journals
- Post-project participant surveys
- Field notes

Data Analysis

When the project was complete and all the data were in front of me, I started by coding my first source, the student-generated questions. At the beginning of the project, students completed an activity in which they read an article about a lynching that occurred in Charlottesville. I then had them record as many questions as they could about it. Following Mertler’s (2017) recommendation, I created a binary coding scheme in which these questions either reflected critical thinking or they did not. At the end of the project, students read another article about a different lynching in Virginia and again recorded as many questions as they could. I used the same coding scheme to identify questions on their lists that reflected critical thinking. I wanted to know whether the number of questions increased as a result of the different teaching and learning approach I had implemented. Next, I looked for evidence of critical thinking in the

journal entries that students recorded periodically throughout the project. When a student asked a question about the veracity of a source he had identified, or compared the source he was examining to another one that he or the class had studied, or used multiple sources to corroborate an account, I understood the student to be exhibiting critical thinking. I also looked in the field journal that I kept for any observations that I had recorded of boys exhibiting critical thinking skills. Finally, I read each student's responses to the questions on the post-project survey.

Discussion of Results

The goal of my project was to study the extent to which challenging students to conduct research into overlooked episodes from the past and then piece that research together in the form of a story would develop their critical thinking skills. After reviewing the data, the following three themes emerged and it was clear that the boys who participated did indeed develop and use critical thinking skills.

Developing a Healthy Skepticism of Sources

As the project progressed, every boy in the class demonstrated an ability to be more skeptical and critical of primary sources and learned to pay closer attention to the biases inherent within them. This is one of, if not the most important skill, a historian needs to master. The major challenge confronting the boys was that it was difficult to know what was true and what was false when reading multiple accounts of the same event that each provided a slightly, or extremely, different version. I hoped this project would teach the boys both to question the biases inherent within every source automatically and to always question the motivations of authors, and not simply taking everything they discovered at face value. The data I collected show that this project was successful in achieving that goal.

Regarding the article I gave the boys at the start of the project about an 1898 lynching in Virginia, where I asked them to write down as many questions as they could about the event, most of the boys recorded fairly simple questions meant to clarify the events. Some common examples of questions were: "What happened to the body afterwards?"; "How could a mob get away with doing this in broad daylight?"; and "Why didn't the police do anything to stop it?" While these were important questions, only three of the ten boys wrote any questions that in some way challenged the validity and trustworthiness of the source they had just read. While

one student asked, "Was this newspaper read by black people or by white people?", no student asked about the newspaper's political motivations, its stance on racial issues, how it had covered other lynchings, or what it stood to gain by portraying the event in the way that it did. These were the types of questions I hoped to train students to ask by the time the project was complete.

As we went about our work on the project and each boy investigated a different instance of a lynching in Virginia, we routinely discussed the necessity to interrogate the motivations and biases of the authors of all primary sources. This project provided most boys with the experience of reading widely differing accounts of the very same lynching, depending on which newspaper's coverage they read. As evidenced in their journal entries, they quickly got into the habit of asking questions about every newspaper article they uncovered. Boys were able to interrogate what the article said against the sources they were uncovering on their own.

At the end of the project, I gave students another article about a 1920 Virginia lynching that no one in the class had studied and asked them to record as many questions as they could about it. This time, eight weeks later, every boy asked multiple questions about the motivations and political leanings of the newspaper from which I had extracted the article. This indicated to me that they had become more critical consumers of information and that they had developed a better appreciation for the fact that every source contains some level of bias. Additionally, I asked each boy to write as his final journal reflection on the topic, "What should a historian do while working with a primary source?" Every boy provided a thorough answer. One boy listed just three things a historian should do, while another boy listed 13 and the rest of the students fell within that range.

The Power of Turning Research into Stories

A good historian does not simply publish a list of bullet points with accompanying charts. Rather, a good historian tells a compelling story. After conducting research, this was the next task for my students to complete and it resulted in my second major finding: that the act of creating a story for a contemporary audience, based on primary sources from the past, was an effective way to engage boys in critical thinking. The boys were not permitted to simply make things up; their task was to create historically accurate narratives of the events they researched. Therefore, they were repeatedly tasked with practicing the skill of corroborating information.

Perhaps the best example of this was when one student found a number of sources that identified the victim of a 1904 lynching as a small boy, while another source identified him as a strong, aggressive, and muscular teenager. This student had to think about why each of these sources had an incentive to speculate so differently about the age of the victim. In the end, he found several corroborating accounts that the victim was indeed a child and not a young adult, and had to confront the fact that the state's largest newspaper at the time had possibly mischaracterized the victim to further its political agenda. The student wrote in the post-project survey that, "I felt like it was my job to tell the story of what happened to this boy and provide the best possible explanation I could...it was the most challenging but most rewarding part [of this project]."

After gathering information, students had to think about how to present the facts they uncovered in a way that would be compelling to an audience in the present. Asking the boys to present what they had learned in the form of a written story made them think about what the elements of good historical writing are. We completed an activity in which each boy was asked to write a journal entry describing the elements of a "good story" and then we discussed those elements as a class. Each boy wrote on the board the two or three elements he felt would be most important to include in his story. As a class, we chose one boy's definition of good historical writing as the best and most succinct: "A good story hooks the reader very quickly. It utilizes a consistent tone, dialogue, and vivid descriptions to characterize the actors, allowing readers to feel a sense of connection with the story's main characters." When our exhibit was complete, I was pleased to see that every student-produced narrative included these elements and each had worked hard to convey the results of his research through a compelling and engaging story.

Critically Appreciating the Craft and Value of History

While my research was focused on studying the development of critical thinking skills in boys, one of the most rewarding results of this project was that by the time it was over, the boys reported they had gained a much better understanding of, and appreciation for, what historians do in their profession. They also recognized that thinking critically is perhaps the most important skill a historian must possess. This project required students to do the work of historians and, in reviewing the post-project questionnaire students completed, this became evident. One boy wrote, "[Before this project] I wasn't sure exactly what historians did at all ... I

have a newfound respect for historians of every time and place.” Another boy reported that “working like a historian was one of the more exciting parts of the project ... it is definitely a hard job as you have to go through all the resources you can find and be able to piece a puzzle together.” I was particularly struck by yet another student’s response in which he expressed joy and satisfaction in having brought the story of a seemingly unknown and forgotten person into public view: “Nobody knows much about the life of Charlotte Harris (a lynching victim) and having the opportunity to bring that story to life was amazing.” Finally, a student noted that “When we unveiled our exhibit to those who came to see it, I saw the way people reacted to the information on our exhibit and I could clearly see that it had touched their hearts which added to the pride I felt in the work....I have never been more proud of any school project I’ve contributed to.”

Conclusion

Asking high school students to conduct research and then challenging them to put that research into the form of a story to be shared with the school community was an effective way to foster the development of critical thinking skills and to build an appreciation for what history is and what historians do. The stories my students created were powerful, moving, and highly educational to members of our community who knew little to nothing about a sad chapter in the history of the place they call home.

I also concluded that this sort of assignment was worth the large amount of time it required. The literature about History education suggests that a “depth over breadth” approach is superior in teaching History and, after completing this project, I fully agree. While it is true that I covered less content during the Fall trimester this year than I did last year, it was worth it. To allow enough time for this project, I had to condense the other units I teach. This project, however, was the most exciting, interesting, and rewarding thing that I have done in my nine years as a US History teacher. It has changed the way I think about teaching History and about History education, and I look forward to assigning similar projects to my future students.

Reflection Statement

A few years ago, I started to really question why we teach high school History the way we do. As I reflected on the classes that I taught, I concluded that they were far too concerned with memorization and repetition, and that there was not enough of a focus on skill development. I

looked around at the other departments in my school and observed that in Math class students were asked to be mathematicians, in their Science classes they were asked to be scientists, in English class they were authors, but in so many History classes they were not being challenged to do the kind of work that a historian does. I found that most of my students did not even know what a historian does at all. So, I began looking for opportunities that would allow my students to be a historian, and that search forced me to question many aspects of what I do in the classroom. I feel lucky that the IBSC action research topic “Boys and Stories: Pathways to Learning” appeared when it did because it provided me with a well-organized and formal means of experimenting with some of the ideas about History education that I was tossing around in my head.

I did not know what action research was before I immersed myself into this work and while I probably will not write 10-page reports about any future projects my students complete, the ideas at the heart of action research will inform everything I do, going forward. My participation in this cohort has made me more aware of the need to purposefully question what I do in the classroom, explore alternatives, and carve out ample time for reflection. Becoming part of this research cohort was one of the most professionally fulfilling experiences I have had in the nine years I have been a teacher. I felt connected to the other researchers and their work, and they, along with my team leader, kept me motivated to see this research through to the end. I have made wonderful friends and meaningful connections through this work and feel proud to share it with my school and the IBSC network.

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