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The End of a War and the Rise of a Nation: A Lesson on the American Revolution

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Introduction

A long-standing goal for many teachers is to create good citizens. Although the definition of a good citizen is debatable, many contend that a good citizen learns from their previous actions. To take it a step further, a good citizen learns from others' previous actions and that is why it is important that students are equipped to learn history. After all, history is a means to categorize past events in order to create meaning for present circumstances (Doolittle, Hicks, & Ewing, 2004-05). Students at the elementary level lack opportunities to master and understand history (Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006 & Turner, et al, 2013). The goal of the article is to aide upper elementary teachers in their employment of historical inquiry. First, we build a rationale for the inclusion of the historical inquiry and then we provide a sample lesson, on the American Revolutionary War, that utilizes primary and secondary sources.

Rationale

There are numerous reasons why students are not taught with the historical inquiry process but none are more influential than the marginalization of social studies curriculum and instruction at the elementary level (Jensen, 2001; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; McEachron, 2010; Russell, 2009; Van Fossen, 2005; Vinson, Ross, & Wilson, 2011; Vogler & Virtue, 2007; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Much of the narrowing and marginalization of social studies can be blamed on the standards-based educational reform that American school districts across the nation have implemented (Vinson, Ross, & Wilson, 2011; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). At the heart of the standards-based educational reform is accountability and school districts must proctor various high stakes tests in order to document the learning gains of students primarily in reading, writing, and math. What is noticeably missing is the lack of accountability associated with social studies, perpetuating further the marginalization of the subject (Kenna & Russell, 2014).

Gail McEachron (2010) conducted a longitudinal study where she analyzed the intended allocation of social studies time based on written timetables provided by elementary classroom teachers ($n = 72$) in the state of Virginia from 1987-2009. The data revealed that allocated time for social studies averaged less than two hours a week, the smallest amount of time among the core subjects. In 2008, Virginia added social studies to the list of high stakes tested subjects and McEachron (2010) was able to show evidence that the allotted time given to social studies increased that year to approximately four hours a week. The findings may not come as a surprise for experienced elementary teachers but the study implies that the fate of social studies is tied to high stakes testing.



As a means to combat the marginalization of social studies at the elementary level teachers supplement their time with an interdisciplinary approach. That is, they use historically themed texts during their reading instruction time (McEachron, 2010). In the seminal work *Decision Making: The Heart of Social Studies Instruction*, Shirley Engle (2003) contends that social studies educators “...should emphasize decision making as against mere remembering” (p. 7). Social studies should lead students to be self-sustained learners who analyze and synthesize information in order to make decisions for their lives. Linda Levstik (1996) further suggests a shift should be made “...from an emphasis on a 'story well told' to an emphasis on 'sources well scrutinized'” (p. 394). A place where students ask questions, organize and analyze sources, struggle with significance, and ultimately build their own interpretations. We do not suggest that teachers reframe from using an interdisciplinary approach. After all, narrative forms of history provide the framework where questions are posed and answers developed (Pendry, Husbands, Arthur, & Davison, 1998) but students often switch off when they fail to connect with abstract alienating details (Counsell, 2000).

It is pertinent to point out that getting students involved in the process of inquiry takes more than asking a question, offering sources, and setting them on their way (Yell, 2012; (Clabough, J. et al, 2015). Teachers need to become guides and facilitators who scaffold the historical analysis process and use various strategies along the way. It is easy to understand why an elementary teacher might hesitate to use historical inquiry; however, there are several resources available to them (See Appendix A). Furthermore, we hope the sample lesson, “The End of a War and a Rise of a Nation” will illustrate how a historical inquiry lesson might be implemented at the upper elementary level.

The End of a War and a Rise of a Nation

Standards

- United States History Content Standards for Grades 5-12
 - Era 3 – Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s) – Standard 1C: The student understands the factors affecting the course of the war and contributing to the American victory.
- C3 Framework:
 - D2.His.16.3-5. Use evidence to develop a claim about the past.
 - D3.3.3-5. Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources in response to compelling questions.
 - D4.3.3-5. Present a summary of arguments and explanations to others outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays, letters, debates, speeches, and reports) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).
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Lesson Objective

- Students, after analyzing historical evidence, will be able to evaluate claims that identify the factors leading to the American colonists’ victory.
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Compelling Question:

- How did the American Colonies win the war for their independence?

Prerequisite Knowledge/Skills:



- A basic understanding of colonial life and the various events that lead to the American Revolutionary War such as: The Stamp Act, Taxation without Representation, The Intolerable Act, The Townsend Act, and The Boston Massacre.

-

Key Vocabulary

- Revolution
- Hessian
- Alliance
- Treaty
- Patriot
- Redcoat

Assessment

- Students will demonstrate evidence of their ability to interpret and analyze documents by creating a poster that communicates their evaluations.

Opening the Lesson (Day 1)

Begin the lesson by having students read a handout in small groups; the goal is to have students be able to describe the advantages and disadvantages of the Continental and British forces at the onset of the war. Be sure to have groups complete a graphic organizer noting the advantages and disadvantages of each military force. After a few minutes, fill in a graphic organizer using the groups' responses on a projector or white board. The handout can be retrieved from (<http://www.ushistory.org/us/11a.asp>). See Appendix B for an example of a completed graphic organizer.

After compiling the list of advantages and disadvantages, give students three scenarios (see below) that might explain how the colonies were able to win their independence. Then ask students to pick the one they feel best describes history and have them explain their choice. After entertaining several responses, tell students that they all gave great answers but their job now is to find evidence to support those claims.

1. Although small in size and wealth the Continental Army proved to be a vastly superior military force to the British. Coupled with the geographical separation Britain faced from the colonies, the Continental Army simply over powered the British until they surrendered.
2. Although not as superior to the British, the Continental Army was well adapted to their geography. Due to their grand cause, the Continental Army slowly pecked away at the British until the war became too costly for them to fight any longer.
3. Although the Continental Army was fighting a superior military foe, they felt they were fighting for a grand cause of independence, which was recognized by other nations who later came to their aide. Additionally, the geographical separation Britain had from the colonies placed an economic strain on them. After some time, the British realized the war was no longer worth fighting.



Continuing the Lesson (Days 2-3)

When analyzing primary source documents teachers may find a document analysis worksheets helpful, such as the ones found at the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, or Digital History. Links to worksheets are provided in Appendix C. Additionally, it is usually helpful to print the documents out, in color, and provide a magnifying glass, sticky notes, and colored writing utensils. If the teacher is able to laminate the documents, students may also be given wet or dry erase markers to better interact with the documents. We further recommend the use of the gradual release method when introducing the analysis process. Below are the documents we recommend using for this lesson. Due to copyright issues we simply provide links to the documents and a brief description.

- **Declaration of Independence:** This document, describes the grand cause of the war, independence. A digital copy of the document can be retrieved from <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=2>.
- **A New and Accurate Map of the English Empire in North America:** This primary source shows how large an area the Thirteen Colonies were and students should ascertain the difficulties the British would have managing a rebellion in such a formidable and foreign territory. Furthermore, the map also reveals how far apart the Britain was from the Thirteen Colonies and students should conclude the difficulties in providing supplies and orders. The digital copy of the map can be retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/resource/g3300.ar006200>.
- **Map of Côte de York-town à Boston: Marches de l'armée:** This map depicts French General Rochambeau's march from Providence, Rhode Island, to Yorktown, Virginia. Students should see how many camps were set up along the route and again conclude how vast a territory the American colonies actually were. The map can be retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/resource/g3716s.ar074300/>.
- **Treaty of Alliance:** This primary source should show that the American Colonists were not fighting alone and in fact were promised aide. A digital copy of the document can be retrieved from <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=4>.
- **News of the Battle of York:** This primary source proves that the Treaty of Alliance was more than mere words on a page and that the French actually aided the American colonists. Furthermore, this document verifies that the British utilized Hessian mercenaries and American loyalists in order to stop the rebellion. A digital copy of the document can be retrieved from <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/war-for-independence/essays/no-way-out-lord-cornwallis-siege-yorktown-and-america%E2%80%99s-v>.



- **Map of the Siege of Yorktown:** This primary source again proves that the French upheld their promise of alliance to fight the British. A copy of the map can be retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/resource/g3884y.ct000189/>.
- **Casualties of the American Revolution:** Although not a primary source, it does show the length of the war as well as the efficiency of each military force. It is important to note that just because a military force had a higher number of casualties for a particular battle it does not mean they lost it. Furthermore, this list is rather long and so it may be prudent to shorten it to only include the major battles of the war such as the Battles/Sieges of: Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, Quebec, White Plains, Fort Mifflin, Fort Mifflin, Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Saratoga, Charleston, Kings Mountain, Cowpens, and Yorktown. The list can be retrieved from <http://www.revolutionarywararchives.org/warstats.html>.

Closing the Lesson (Days 4-5)

After examining the documents, students should be able to select one of the three claims and be able to support it with evidence. To better facilitate the process, we recommend having students create a poster, in small groups. The first step is to have students write down the compelling question, “How did the American Colonies win the war for their independence?” at the top of the poster. Next, students ought to write their thesis statement. In this case it can be a simple rephrasing of one of the three claims. Then, students can cut and paste the documents to the poster and provide a brief summary next to it that explains how it supports their answer. We often provide students a day to complete their posters but teachers may find that an extra day is necessary.

Challenges and Successes with the Lesson

As with every lesson there are challenges and successes that arise. When using primary source documents the most common challenges faced dealt with students’ analysis of the documents and managing their behavior when in small groups. In order to address that challenge we recommend the use of the primary source analysis worksheets coupled with the use of the gradual release method. Additionally, we encourage teachers to plan to use an extra day to analyze the documents. Pushing students to go faster often times makes the remaining steps more difficult to complete. Providing visual examples for the students, including the document analysis worksheet and poster, also helps. We also found that doing a carousel activity helps some students because it allows them to build off of each other’s work.

Conclusion

Many feel that analyzing documents is too complex an activity for elementary students and we do not claim that the process is easy. The goal of the lesson is to help students learn how to make an informed decision using evidence to support their position. We do not expect students to master the process after one attempt in the fifth grade but students must begin grappling with it. The



historical inquiry process is not a panacea for all social studies instruction. After all, there are a variety of strategies such as brainstorming, jigsaws, role-plays, simulations, or an interdisciplinary approach that have a place in the elementary classroom too. However, the historical inquiry process should not be ignored either.

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APPENDIX A: HISTORICAL INQUIRY RESOURCES

- Digital History (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>)
 - A resource designed for students and teachers, Digital History provides example inquiry-based lesson as well as hundreds of digital primary sources.
- Historical Inquiry (<http://www.historicalinquiry.com/>)
 - A resource that is focused on teaching the historical inquiry process.
- Historical Thinking Matters (<http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/>)
 - A resource designed to teach students how to critically read primary sources and how to critique and construct historical narratives.
- Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/>)
 - A resource with millions of digital primary sources and example lessons on several history topics.
- National Archives and Records Administration (<http://www.archives.gov/education/>)
 - A resource a teacher may visit time and time again with several links to other pertinent resources.
- National Park Services' Teaching with Historical Places (<http://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/>)
 - A resource that suggests that historical inquiry can occur outside the classroom during field trips.
- Reading Like a Historian (<https://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh>)
 - A curriculum resource with 72 American history lesson plans designed around the historical inquiry process.
- UMBC Center for History Education: History Labs (<http://www.umbc.edu/che/historylabs/>)
 - A resource designed to teach students the historical thinking process and it provide several example lessons.



**APPENDIX B:
EXAMPLE OF A COMPLETED GRAPHIC ORGANIZER**

	Continental Army	British Army
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fighting for a grand cause (liberty and independence) • Geographical vastness of the colonies • No direct capital city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger and more experienced military force • More weapons and ammunition • Wealthy •
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly untrained and small military force • Fewer weapons and ammunition • Poor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fought far from home • Geographical vastness of the colonies



**APPENDIX C:
LINKS TO DOCUMENT ANALYSIS WORKSHEETS**

- The Library of Congress
 - http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Primary_Sources.pdf
- The National Archives and Records Administration
 - <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html>
- Digital History
 - <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/teachers/worksheets/worksheets.cfm>