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Engagement in the History Classroom: Problem-Based Learning and Primary Sources

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Many students today do not have an interest in nor do they comprehend the complexity of history. This has to do with a lack of engagement and ownership shown by the students in the material that is presented in many classrooms, especially when they are continually asked to read a textbook and answer questions of the reading. In order to help our students understand the past, they need to be engaged in learning about it. History is filled with controversy, which should make it ever more interesting. However, most students do not find it interesting to learn about something when they already know the result. It is crucial to the study of history to understand that individuals such as Thomas Jefferson would have made different decisions had they lived in a different time period and been surrounded by different circumstances. Unfortunately, students bring their understanding of certain events and time periods to discussions and use their views and morals to make judgments of the times. Despite this difficulty in the classroom today, teachers need to continually help students learn to think both historically *and* empathetically, making them aware of the thoughts, biases, and viewpoints of those who lived before us. The most beneficial way to help students understand a particular time period is to share with them an abundance of primary sources. These sources provide them with an insight into the past that textbooks cannot provide. Students will understand how decisions were made when engaging in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activities by using primary sources.

What is Problem-Based Learning (PBL)? According to the website *Enhancing Education*, "Problem-based learning uses dilemma and scenarios...used to stimulate interest, highlight conflicts, and feature abstract ideas in a more concrete setting."¹ Problem-Based Learning is student-centered, according the Problem Based Learning Faculty Institute at the University of California Irvine, which contradicts the common view of a history classroom as lecture-based.² The goal of PBL is to help students "think critically as they question their own assumptions, their classmates' assertions, and the references they consult."³ PBL activities are most often done in groups, in which each student is given a certain task, such as group leader, materials manager, or reporter. Teachers provide each group of students with a dilemma concerning a specific historical event or individual. When searching for a specific dilemma to pose to students, *Enhancing Education's* website

¹ "Additional Teaching & Learning Strategies," *Enhancing Education*, accessed November 30, 2011, last modified 2002, <http://enhancinged.wgbh.org/research/additional.html>.

² De Gallow, Dr., "What is Problem Based Learning?" Problem-Based Learning Faculty Institute, accessed January 28, 2012, <http://www.pbl.uci.edu/whatispbl.html>, pages 1-4.

³ *Enhancing Education*, 2002.



suggest a few common characteristics to remember, including that it needs to be 1) broad, 2) central to the content of the unit, 3) have no single or correct answer, 4) invite higher-order thinking, and 5) provoke student interest.⁴ The problems or dilemmas in Problem-Based Learning are often “cases,” or real-world challenges that would have posed a problem to individuals in the past.⁵ For example, a unit on World War II could include a dilemma posed to the students on Harry Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. In their research on the various motives and factors affecting Truman at the time, students could examine Truman’s diaries and letters found at The Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum.⁶ Teachers are to be a model for the students by asking them questions, such as “How do you know that?” throughout the activity.⁷ In addition, Kathleen Ferenz suggests in her article “Project-Based Learning with Primary Sources,” that teachers should model to students how to analyze primary sources and think as an historian would when questioning the past.⁸ PBL activities are often hard for the students to understand at first. Therefore, it is in the teacher’s best interest to share with the students a similar activity such as a Socratic discussion before introducing an activity such as this so they are aware of the techniques involved in the process.

Ben Stein’s character in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* is a stereotypical example of history teachers whom many of us have had in school. In the film, Stein spoke in a monotone voice, lecturing students who were dozing off at their desks. He does not show photographs nor does he have the students examine pieces of legislation from the Great Depression but instead asks them to fill in the blanks of his lecture. I can recall multiple instances in school when my history teachers would do the same as Ben Stein’s character. As a result, I knew quite a lot of dates and about the lives of important historical figures but I did not fully understand history as a discipline. My perception changed immensely as a history major at Illinois State University (ISU), where I was taught how to teach history by historians themselves. They helped me to understand that history is not inert but instead a complex, ever-changing discipline and it should be the goal of history teachers everywhere to create what educators Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson call a “history laboratory” in their book *Engagement in Teaching History: Theory and Practices for Middle and Secondary Teachers*.⁹ Students should be “doing” history and engaging in the past much as historians have done in their own research. Drake and Nelson argue that primary sources

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ De Gallow, “What is Problem-Based Learning?,” page 1.

⁶ “Personal Papers and Organizational Records,” Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, accessed January 28, 2012, last modified January 25, 2012, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/personal.htm>.

⁷ De Gallow, “What is Problem-Based Learning?,” page 2.

⁸ Kathleen Ferenz, “Project-Based Learning with Primary Sources,” *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly* (Spring 2010): page 2, accessed January 28, 2012, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/quarterly/pdf/TPSQuarterlySpring10.pdf>.

⁹ Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History: Theory and Practices for Middle and Secondary Teachers* 2nd Ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), page 4.



are a must in the history laboratory. Primary sources are first hand accounts of an historical event and include newspapers, interviews, photographs, music, film, and architecture. With such advanced technology available in today's society, teachers have access to thousands of primary sources on various websites and databases such as *History Matters*, *Digital History*, *Valley of the Shadows* and the *Library of Congress*. According to *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly*,

Primary sources can provide students with direct access to the record of artistic, social, scientific, and political thought and achievement produced by people living in the specific time period under study.¹⁰

We want our students to come away from a lesson understanding the relevance of a time period or historical figure in their own lives, not just a timeline of events and names, as the article above suggests.¹¹ Examining and questioning primary sources are one of the main roles of historians in our society. Instead of focusing on dates, historians look at the major themes and ideas across time to help the general public understand why things happened when they did and what we can do in the future to possibly change the course of events. Ferenz provides an example of a multi-disciplinary PBL activity centered on a unit on life during the late 19th and 20th centuries. In this activity, the students would have decide whether it would be in the best interest of the workers and consumers to implement food safety policies at that time by comparing Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* with a letter from Theodore Roosevelt criticizing Sinclair's work.¹² Students can create a presentation examining the different practices of the time or even write a letter as a concerned consumer to the government asking for the new laws to be put into place. Despite the significance of standardized tests in today's society and our constant pressure on students to spew out facts, activities such as these help students grow to think and understand beyond the classroom walls. They help to create engaged, responsible citizens who value multiple opinions and can make reasoned decisions by themselves.

History classrooms today cannot function without the use of primary sources. Drake and Nelson, cited above, argue that for history teachers primary sources "are the ore from which we mine meaning from the past."¹³ There is no easier way to get students engaged in the past than by asking them to examine and question primary sources by completing problem-based learning activities. These activities allow students to "do" history and help them learn to think empathetically, placing them in the shoes of a particular individual from the past who had a decision to make. As the American novelist Pearl Buck once said, "If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday."

¹⁰ Ferenz, "Project-Based Learning with Primary Sources," page 3.

¹¹ Ibid, page 2.

¹² Ibid, page 3.

¹³ Drake and Nelson, page 140.



History is an undervalued discipline in today's society and it is our duty as history teachers to help students comprehend the significance of past events and how they affect the daily lives of people around the world.

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