

Empowering Students Through History: *The Giver* as a Metaphor and Preparation for Studying History in the Secondary Classroom

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“JONAS DID NOT WANT TO GO BACK. He didn’t want the memories, didn’t want the honor, didn’t want the wisdom, didn’t want the pain.”¹ As classroom history teachers, our students sometimes resist the history lessons we try to impart; challenging the purpose and relevance of the information being shared. However, reading *The Giver* can help to bridge the gap between students accepting and rejecting the lessons of history while learning to value the skills such as citizenship and awareness associated with the study of history. The story helps students see the ideals exemplified by the events in their textbooks. In this paper, I will summarize *The Giver*; discuss the metaphor of the Giver through the work of historians; give an overview of historical thinking skills² that will be used as a lesson framework; and offer suggested lessons plans.

Summary

Lois Lowry’s award-winning novel, *The Giver*, is a work of fantasy that takes place in the non-descript future in a utopian society: a world without crime, sickness, or poverty. The people in this utopian society highly value “sameness,” which takes the form of standard family units (mother, father, two siblings—one boy and one girl), all little girls wearing ribbons

in their hair, a common age at which children are given a bicycle, subdued adolescents whose sexual impulses are numbed by specially prescribed drugs, and elderly people who live in group homes and are “released” with great celebration at the proper time. Instead of individual birthdays, there is an annual ritual held each December during which all the children who were born during a particular year are declared one year older en masse and given commensurate privileges and responsibilities.

The protagonist in this story is a complacent boy named Jonas who is just shy of twelve years old at the opening of the novel. The story begins prior to the Ceremony of Twelve—an event that is part of the December ritual. During the Ceremony of Twelve, all members of the community who have reached the age of twelve are assigned to the respective jobs they will fulfill for the community and begin their training. Unlike his peers, Jonas is not assigned to a traditional job, but rather, he is selected to be the community’s sole Receiver of Memory: the person who learns and remembers all human history. The novel unfolds as Jonas trains for his rigorous, mysterious, and prestigious job assignment through an isolating and secretive method with an old man known as the Giver. He is known as the Giver because he must give all the memories he has been holding (as the Receiver of Memory) to Jonas. As his mystical training progresses, Jonas becomes both weighed down and enriched with society’s collective memories. As a result of the training, Jonas is privy to any and all aspects of the community, and he finds disturbing truths and struggles against the weight of its hypocrisy. Jonas discovers that when people are “released” from the community because they have broken a rule or they are old or weak, it means they are killed. With this knowledge and the burden of all human memories, Jonas flees the safety and security of the community for the Elsewhere.

Metaphor and Historical Thinking

The Giver serves as a metaphor for teaching history. Most simply, the memories of the community that Jonas grapples with throughout the novel are history in the grandest sense—not just his history or the history of the community, but the history of all humanity. Thus, the universality of the novel’s content provides multiple opportunities for use in a wide range of classrooms, e.g., introduction to world history or American history.

Traditionally, historians have recorded past events either in writing or through an oral tradition, and they have attempted to answer historical questions through the study of written documents and oral accounts. In *The Giver*, history is preserved through personal memory and passed on from the Giver to the Receiver of Memory through the laying of hands. The

Giver thinks of a memory he wants to transfer and puts his hands on the Receiver, who experiences and then holds the memory. In this metaphor, the Giver is the history teacher, who has great responsibility. As history teachers, we have great responsibility beyond a test or a quiz:

Being a teacher of history adds another burden: it's like being a parent in charge of memory, in this case, society's memory. And since our memories tend to be selective—remembering mostly what serves our purposes—the burden of the historian is to restore and retain that memory until it is as true and complete as we can make it.³

To continue the metaphor, the Giver is the history teacher, and he transfers his knowledge of the past to Jonas; Jonas, as the Receiver of Memory, exemplifies students of history who are given information about the past and try to make sense of it.

Similarly, as Jonas becomes the Receiver of Memory—as he does the work of a historian—he finds the work to be very challenging. Historians discover, collect, organize, and present information about past events in specific ways—such as narrative—to examine and analyze the sequence of these events and the patterns of cause and effect and to discuss how past events provide perspective on present situations and problems. In order to gain this historical perspective, students of history must employ historical thinking skills: (1) chronological thinking, (2) historical comprehension, (3) historical analysis and interpretation, and (4) historical issues analysis and decision-making.⁴

Chronological thinking is an integral part of historical reasoning. Students need a strong sense of chronology, both absolute (when events occurred) and relative (in what temporal order), in order to examine relationships among events or to explain historical causal relationships. Chronological thinking is a scaffold for organizing historical ideas and understandings. To develop students' chronological thinking, teachers can use well-constructed historical narratives to engage students and analyze the attributes of those narratives. In order to practice chronological thinking, the student may focus on what the narrator chooses to share: the temporal structure of events, the actions/intentions of the various characters, or the temporal connections between actions and consequences. In *The Giver*, Jonas struggles to create this narrative of the past because there is no a clear chronology of events. Rather, the Giver provides Jonas with various memories as he thinks Jonas can handle them, and he attempts to balance good and bad memories. As a result, comprehending the past is particularly difficult for Jonas, because everything known exists in the present. There is no sense or understanding of chronology.

The second skill associated with historical thinking is historical comprehension. In order to historically comprehend narratives, students

read historical texts (historical stories/fiction, [auto]biographies, and other narratives) imaginatively. They must take into account what is unveiled through the narrative about individuals and groups—their motives, values, strengths, and weaknesses. Comprehending historical narratives requires students to develop and to understand historical perspectives: the ability to describe the past in terms of the present as well as through the experiences of those who were there. Jonas has difficulty comprehending the past because of a lack of perspective—he has lived in and has knowledge of only the present. Having the ability to think chronologically and comprehend historical narrative leads students to be able to better analyze and interpret the past.

From comprehension skills, students can practice and develop their ability to analyze. Students assess evidence that historians use and evaluate the soundness of interpretations created from that evidence. Through historical analysis and interpretation, students can develop an understanding about why historians may differ in their narratives, which reinforces the fact that a study of history is not simply memorizing names and dates; studying history requires students to evaluate arguments and draw conclusions based on evidence. In addition, these analytical skills enable students to differentiate between expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence. As Jonas gains memories, he is able to more critically think about the community in which he lives and the decisions that are made.

Students' ability to think chronologically, comprehend the past, and analyze historical evidence enables them to pose their own historical questions. Historical inquiries (sometimes called “doing history”⁵) are investigations that can develop critical turning points in the historical narrative presented in a text. These inquiries might be generated by student encounters with primary and secondary sources. Students can formulate a set of questions that are worth pursuing as they engage with the additional source material: who created the source, when, how, and why? What are the author's points of view, background, and interests? What additional information is needed in order to construct a story, explanation, or narrative of an event? What interpretations can one make based on the data? In *The Giver*, Jonas models historical inquiry as he consistently asks questions and examines the community to try to better understand the memories he is given. Of particular interest to Jonas is what happened to the previous Receiver of Memory, a young girl who was selected but disappeared. As a result, he becomes personally involved and connected to the community's past.

Similarly, students can have a personal involvement in historical issue-centered analysis and decision-making. Teachers can design activities

that put students at the center of historical dilemmas and problems. For example, teachers may ask, “would you have supported the Patriots or the Loyalists during the American Revolution?” Placed in these historical situations, students (1) confront issues contemporary to the time period they are studying, (2) analyze the alternatives, and (3) evaluate the consequences of various options for action, comparing them with the consequences of those that were adopted in their hypothetical alternatives. These activities foster students’ deep, personal involvement in events and greatly enrich the teaching and learning of history in the secondary classroom.

Suggested Lessons

According to the National Council for the Social Studies Notable Tradebook, *The Giver* is commonly taught in middle- and high-school English classes, but it also provides a wonderful opportunity to introduce the concepts and purposes behind historical study. This book works on two levels to address history teaching and learning: the students and the teachers. For students, *The Giver* provides an opportunity to think critically about a community void of history—what are the implications if one does not understand the past? For teachers, *The Giver* provides an opportunity to critically examine the history we teach, the ways in which we teach it, and the goals we hope to achieve through the teaching of history; it also can help us develop cross-curricular experiences for students and use the Common Core State Standards of “Literacy in History/Social Studies.”⁷⁶

In *Linking Literature with Life: The NCSS Standards and Children’s Literature for the Middle Grades*,⁷ the authors assert that literature is a medium that can be utilized effectively to engender dispositions or skills (e.g., historical thinking skills identified earlier) that are desirable among social studies students. In addition, they suggest “literature in social studies classrooms energizes and nurtures concepts development.”⁷⁸ In the case of *The Giver*, concepts of memory, time, humanity, community, and power/authorship are most evident and provide an excellent introduction to historical study with middle school and high school students. Additionally, reading *The Giver* provides students the opportunity to be introduced to the historical habits of mind discussed above: chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, and historical research and historical decision-making.

As a middle school history teacher, I start the school year with a short unit called “Tools of the Historian,” in which students are introduced to the role of the historian and the ideas, resources, skills, and materials we will use throughout the year to study history. I explain that a historian is someone who studies and writes about history and is regarded as an

authority on it. Historians research past events of human history in order to develop a continuous and methodical narrative of human history. Presenting historians this way emphasizes more about how we study history, not necessarily why we study history: *The Giver* serves as the bridge between the how and why of studying history.

Lowry describes the Receiver of Memory as “the most important Elder...someone in a position of such importance lived and worked alone.”⁹ After reading the book, I ask students to identify the characteristics that qualify Jonas to become the Receiver of Memory. These qualities include intelligence, courage, integrity, and wisdom.¹⁰ Do we identify ourselves and our students with these adjectives? And do we use them as the purpose of our lessons and units in our history classrooms? How does thinking about these in the context of a history classroom address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of our students? Below are some ideas for ways in which one might use *The Giver* to promote these ideals in the classroom.

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Identify and analyze the impact of tensions between and among individuals, groups, and institutions.¹¹
- Evaluate how groups and institutions work to meet individual needs and promote or fail to promote the common good.¹²

Pre-Reading Activities for The Giver

In order to promote the skills of historical interpretation and point of view, students can engage in a personal investigation of their memories prior to reading *The Giver*.

Step 1: Before reading *The Giver*, ask students to complete a simple pre-reading chart (see Figure 1).

Step 2: After students have completed the chart, ask them to share various things they remember (Column 1) in small groups or as a whole class.

Step 3: As a whole class, ask students to share the different ways in which they remember these events (Column 2) and connect these examples to prior instruction on primary and secondary sources, e.g., the pictures of the fifth-grade graduation are primary source visuals that help one understand the past through observations.

Pre-Reading Chart		
Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
What do you remember?	How do you remember it?	Why do you remember it?
<i>Example: Fifth-grade graduation</i>	<i>My mom shows me the pictures.</i>	<i>It was important and happy event for my family.</i>
<i>Example: My grandpa's funeral</i>	<i>I see the people crying in my mind.</i>	<i>It was a sad day because I lost someone important to me.</i>

Figure 1: Pre-Reading Chart example

Step 4: As a whole class, categorize the reasons why students remember events (Column 3), such as emotion, experience, and/or repetition. Ask students, “how do memories make you feel?” Students may identify happiness, sadness, confusion, etc. Ask students to brainstorm what it would be like to live in a society in which only one person held the memories of everyone in the world.

Step 5: Introduce *The Giver* as a story in which all of the memories are held by one person in the community and share the following quote from Milan Kundera:

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.¹³

Ask students to dissect this quote. Do they agree or disagree with Kundera’s assertion?

During-Reading Activities for The Giver

In order to promote the skills of historical interpretation and inquiry, students will investigate the metaphor presented in *The Giver*.

Step 1: While students are reading *The Giver*, (re)introduce the concept of a metaphor: A metaphor is a figure of speech where a comparison is made between two seemingly unlike things without the use of “like” or “as.”

Step 2: Describe *The Giver* as a metaphor for historical study.

- a) The Giver is the teacher.
- b) Jonas/the Receiver of Memory is the student who is becoming the historian.
- c) The memories transferred from one to the other are the historical study/ thinking/understanding with which students should walk away from history/social studies class.

Step 3: As students are reading, periodically reference back to the guiding questions introduced during the pre-reading activities, but from the perspective of the book/Jonas.

- What do the Giver and Jonas/the Receiver of Memory remember? Why?
- How do those memories make them feel?
- Why can't everyone have/hold these memories? Do you agree or disagree with these reasons? Explain.

Step 4: Ask students to relate the role of the Receiver of Memory with the role/job of historians from ancient times to the present.

Post-Reading Activities for The Giver

Jonas was selected to become the Receiver of Memory because he embodies **intelligence, courage, integrity, and wisdom**.¹⁴ As teachers of history, we ask our students to exercise intelligence, courage, and integrity in the hope of gaining wisdom, as Jonas does during his training.

Step 1: Design a Socratic Seminar¹⁵ or Grand Conversation¹⁶ around the following reflective questions:

- What does it mean to have intelligence in historical study?
- What does it mean to have courage when you study history?
- What is courageous about studying the past?
- What does it mean to have integrity?
- Why is it important to have integrity when studying the past?

- What does it mean to have wisdom?
- How are wisdom and history related to one another?

Step 2: Ask students to reflect individually and in writing on the four aforementioned characteristics and respond to the following prompt:

It is the job of the historian to discover, collect, organize, and present information about past events. History is a field in which a narrative is used to examine and analyze the sequence of events, and the patterns of cause and effect. This includes discussing how past events provide perspective on present situations and problems. With this in mind, which of the four characteristics (**intelligence, courage, integrity, and wisdom**¹⁷) of the Receiver of Memory/Jonas is most important for a student of history to have and exercise? Why?¹⁸

Activities Throughout the Academic Year

The foundational ideas presented in this text and through the pre-, during-, and post-reading activities can be developed throughout the academic year. One possibility is for students to record examples (in a journal, blog, wiki, or on a co-constructed bulletin board) of intelligence, courage, integrity, and wisdom as part of their historical study. For example, a student might observe, “I have exhibited intelligence because I performed well on my American Revolution project,” or “Deborah Sampson was courageous because she fought for her belief in American independence, which meant she had to disguise herself as a man.” Another possibility is to have students periodically reflect on the wisdom they have gained as part of history/social studies, such as how students better understand relationships among countries.

Activities for the End of the Academic Year

After a year of studying history, ask students to think back over what they have learned. Use the following prompt for written reflection or group conversation: “Unlike Jonas, we learned about the past together. What was the value of sharing the experience of learning about the past? What is the value of entering into ‘Elsewhere’ or the unknown as Jonas did?”

Conclusion

As history educators, we want our students to study history reasonably well in order to acquire usable historical thinking skills: chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research, and historical decision-making. As history teachers, we want to engage our students with ways in which the lessons presented can help students reach the desired outcomes and how teaching historical narratives more generally can foster a richer study of the past. We want our

students to think beyond themselves in both time and place. Students who are given these opportunities to explore and critique emerge with relevant skills and an enhanced capacity for informed citizenship and critical thinking, arguably the most important educational outcomes of all.

Notes

1. Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf Books, 1993), 121.
2. National Center for History in the Schools, “Historical Thinking Standards,” <<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/historical-thinking-standards-1>>.
3. Robert Blackey, “Why Become a Historian? An Introduction,” <<http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/why/blackeyintro.htm>>.
4. National Center for History in Schools, “Contents of Historical Thinking Standards for Grades 5-12,” <<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/historical-thinking-standards-1/overview>>.
5. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
6. Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Literacy in History/Social Studies,” <<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards/history-social-studies/introduction/>>.
7. Alexa L. Sandmann and John F. Ahern, *Linking Literature with Life: The NCSS Standards and Children’s Literature in the Middle Grades* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2002).
8. *Ibid.*, 15.
9. Lowry, 14.
10. *Ibid.*, 62-63.
11. Task Force for the National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2010), 43.
12. *Ibid.*, 44.
13. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).
14. Lowry, 61.
15. A Socratic Seminar is a discussion among students around essential questions in which student opinions are shared, (dis)proven, refuted, and further developed. The purpose is for students to gain deeper understanding of ideas, issues, and/or values presented in text(s) through thoughtful dialogue.
16. Grand Conversations are discussions in which all members of the class participate and the teacher facilitates—but does not direct—the conversation.
17. Lowry, 61.
18. Students’ responses vary depending on their maturity and ability to see abstractly. Most often, students respond with “intelligence” with the reasoning that you have to be smart to study and do well in the class, or with “courage” because you may have to disagree with other students or make an unpopular decision.