

# The Efficacy of Living History in an Educational Setting

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LIVING HISTORY, and/or reenactment, brings the lives and experiences of a past age into the modern era to provide a contextualized interpretation of long-gone cultures. Academic literature suggests that presentations by properly trained living historians at historical sites and museums are connected to more positive visitor experience and learning. The use of expert living history in classroom settings is less common, however, and represents a significant gap in the available literature. Additionally, educators have identified that history education is in dire need of new pedagogical methods that will make history relevant to students.

In this article, we review the ten-year-long Viking Living History Project (VLHP), which utilized an expert living history encampment as a teaching tool. Analysis of ex post facto evaluation of student participants suggests that participation in a classroom-based encampment was connected to growth in knowledge of Viking culture in elementary- and high school-age students. Additionally, in-service teachers who participated believed that both their knowledge and their students' knowledge about the Vikings increased significantly. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest that expanded utilization of classroom-

based, formally trained living history may provide necessary context to the interpretation of history and better engage students in an educational setting.

### **Statement of Problem**

There is little academic literature on the subject of expert reenactment in the classroom as a teaching tool. In 2014, Bradley Fogo sought to create a core set of history instructional best practices by utilizing a Delphi panel survey of twenty-six “expert history educators-teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers.”<sup>1</sup> Although the study included the use of “Re-Enactments and Simulations” as one of the core best practices in the original survey, experts ranked it as 9 out of 10, with only “Test Preparation” performing worse.<sup>2</sup> By the end of this first round of revisions, the panel removed it altogether. The biggest concerns for practices related to reenactment were that, while they might have been effective for engaging students and teaching empathy, “the potential for trivializing history and encouraging presentism” made the practice too dangerous and, thus, the panel demoted it from being a core practice.<sup>3</sup>

One reason why reenactment may be seen as trivializing history is that in the discipline of social studies education, reenactment usually takes the form of students recreating the past as a classroom exercise by researching a person and imitating them for their classmates. For example, the Delphi study described “Re-enactment and Simulations” as “opportunities for students to assume the identities of historical actors and experience historical events and phenomena.”<sup>4</sup> However, expert-driven reenactments differ significantly from those performed by students who are still learning the material. Expertly trained living historians, whether they are visiting the class or giving a presentation during a school-approved field trip to a heritage site, bring a level of authority and authenticity to the experience that amateurs cannot. While both might be trying to fill the shoes of a real or imagined historical person, only the expert is knowledgeable enough to contextualize the historical content adequately for their audience.

Whether or not it was the Delphi panel’s intention to include experts in their definition of reenactment is unclear, but its orientation does appear directed towards student research rather than expert portrayal. Conversely, museums and heritage sites often utilize expert

reenactment and have a vested interest in determining its impact. In 2004, Jane Malcolm-Davies compared the perceived contributions of costumed interpreters from twelve historic sites across four countries. Her survey revealed that sites providing extensive training for their interpreters, defined as one to three months (with regular additional training and evaluations over time), saw “significantly more visitors report[ing] that the costumed interpreters contributed educational benefit... (with a 99% confidence level).”<sup>5</sup> The use of experts for the dissemination of information during living history is a fundamental part of this current study because the authors believe the distinction is significant based on Malcolm-Davies’ findings and museums’ reliance upon the practice.

One of the biggest obstacles in studying the impact and efficacy of reenactment is that there is little agreement upon terms and definitions, since teachers often use the concept as a catchall. While Freeman Tilden’s classic *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957) may have begun the academic interest in historical interpretation, albeit in the vein of public history at parks and museums, history educators only began to study reenactment in earnest by the late 1970s. Much of their interest focused on the use of “active” learning, which allowed students to take part in the learning process by discovering things for themselves rather than just being talked to by authorities.<sup>6</sup> While educators of all stripes ardently supported the learning potential of interpretive historical performance since that time, it was not until the dawn of the twenty-first century that academics seriously started studying the subject.<sup>7</sup>

The usage of the term “reenactment” to include the idea of expert participation also has a number of names associated with it depending upon the discipline, such as “living history” or “historical performance.” Even here, though, a multitude of uses abound since some professionals also use the term “living history” to denote student-researched presentations.<sup>8</sup> Some broadly define “living history” as “any bodily interpretation of the past.”<sup>9</sup> It is due to these discrepancies of terminology that Joyce Thierer, both a Professor of History and historical performer, tried to establish a taxonomy of “Performed History Interpretation.”<sup>10</sup> Her attempt still did not clear the muddled waters, however, because (by design) it focused almost wholly on first-person interpretation by experts in the subject matter who rigidly utilized a prepared script.<sup>11</sup> First-person interpretation is when a person assumes the identity of a historical figure and strives to

maintain the illusion that they are indeed the said individual, regardless of the nature of the interaction with the audience. For instance, they speak using the first-person voice, saying things like, "I'm a blacksmith." While Thierer did prefer that "intelligent, well-trained interpreters" slip into third-person interpretation, her method largely disregarded any actual practice and/or participation by the students themselves.<sup>12</sup> Third-person interpretation occurs when reenactors openly acknowledge that they are a modern individual fulfilling a role and either will not pretend to be a person from the past or will slip out of character (as a historical person) and into the present (as a modern expert about the past). Second-person interpretation has the students engaging in historical activities themselves, whether trying on the armor and clothes, playing historical games, or working a bellows to help manufacture a piece of iron. It is the authors' belief that the inclusion of the students in the activities is what truly makes reenactment shift from passive to active learning, since it adds a level of expected participation. Otherwise, students are still left in the position of simply listening to another expert, albeit one in different clothes, rather than "doing" history themselves.

For decades now, educators have lamented the sorry state of history education, especially in the primary and secondary school systems.<sup>13</sup> One has even said it is "seriously, urgently, in crisis."<sup>14</sup> The result is a generation of students who find social studies to be "boring," that it "doesn't apply," and is "useless."<sup>15</sup> The most likely culprit in the United States is the implementation of laws referred to as "No Child Left Behind," which prioritized reading and math at the expense of history, among other subjects.<sup>16</sup> By tying teacher evaluation systems directly to student test scores, which usually rely on the passive and rote memorization of historical "facts," interactive opportunities in and out of the classroom have decreased.<sup>17</sup> The result is that experts fear that teachers emerging from college immediately abandon active and experimental methods when they enter the workforce.<sup>18</sup>

Legislative changes prioritizing time-saving, "factual" data may have produced an over-reliance on traditional text and teacher-centered instruction that fails to "engage students actively and imaginatively in social studies."<sup>19</sup> Such a portrayal of history as inert, factual information runs counter to the very nature of historical inquiry, which is analytical and interpretive at its core.<sup>20</sup> Rachel Mattson suggested that traditional history education only rarely

“teaches the critical analytical skills that most historians would agree are among the central, driving features of historical study.”<sup>21</sup> Stacy Roth also questioned the applicability of testing only for “factual details,” since the “sensory, social, and emotional components” have been shown to have a more lasting impact.<sup>22</sup> While the use of primary sources should absolutely be an integral part of historical education in the classroom, studies are proving that traditional instruction is not enough. As David Thelen noted, some 32,000 students across twenty-seven European countries claimed that an “alienated body of facts,” which usually centered on the “official” narrative of their nation-state, took priority in their history classes.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that 57% of high school seniors in the United States did not even have what amounted to a “basic” knowledge of history upon graduation.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the Delphi survey’s findings, which produced core practices that relied heavily on traditional modes of instruction, may simply be a result of the “old guard” being unable to recognize that change is necessary in the face of continued suboptimal educational outcomes.

Part of the challenge is that academics are approaching reenactment through the dialogue of their own disciplines. Interestingly enough, many have come to the same conclusion: experts presenting some form of living history meet the challenges of pedagogical reform and produce measurable results in student learning. Thierer discussed historical interpretation from a theatrical perspective, finding that excellence in the craft is rare due to the perceived difficulty in finding someone who has both acting and historical preparation, but she did believe that both are possible without extensive training.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, she believed the effort is worth it because the dramatic aspects can create an emotional impact that is conducive to long-lasting learning for both children and adults. Mattson advocated for the pedagogical method of process drama from theatre in the history classroom, where teacher and student take up roles that use “a series of embodied and narrative intellectual activities to pose critical intellectual problems.”<sup>26</sup> According to Jack Zevin, Professor of Social Studies Education at Queens College, such dramatic turns in history have experts engaging in multiple roles to help convey meaning. They can combine their position as an authority (didactic role) with that of a catalyst and questioner (reflective role), while dramatically introducing new perspectives (affective role).<sup>27</sup>

As for museums and heritage sites, there has been much resistance to using a theatrical definition of living history, emerging from the fear that scholars, visitors, and financiers might consider theatrics and costuming fake and/or frivolous. It is here that the aforementioned fear of the trivialization of history by reenactment is most palpable. As such, costumed interpreters have favored scholarly presentation over theatricality.<sup>28</sup> Yet newer research is showing that museums should take play more seriously as a form of learning. In a study geared towards understanding the culture of learning in museums, Emanuela Marchetti determined that the more children immersed themselves in the fantasy play of theatrical reenactment and role-play in museums, the more their active participation created “space for self-expression and a meaningful grounding for critical thinking about historical knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Malcolm-Davies recommended that those with an educational mission should invest heavily in costumed interpretation, in part because “education and entertainment cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive,” especially since visitors to these places want to have fun while they learn.<sup>30</sup> It is the flexibility of living history that Ceri Jones saw as one of its major benefits for museums and heritage sites. Living history can be used to “convey the intangible elements of the past and to address gaps in historical narratives or present alternatives to conventional views,” its physical nature makes history more tangible, and as a form of play is a more natural way of learning, especially for children.<sup>31</sup>

If educators want their students to become empowered agents in the process of their own learning, then teachers must confront traditional pedagogy head-on by exploring alternative approaches.<sup>32</sup> Interaction with people purportedly from another time infuses reenactment with “the open-endedness of human experience” while teaching students that history is not over, or closed to their interpretation.<sup>33</sup> Educators surmise that the kind of role-playing involved in historical recreation created a personal bridge between students’ lives and the past, permitting them to think more critically about history as well.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in a synthesis of research on the use of role-play and simulations in the secondary history classroom, Tracy Worthington believed that educators who sought to get past the didactic method of facts acquisition should use simulations as substitutes for more expensive field trips and that teachers who used them clearly valued critical thinking more so than memorization.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, teachers

should employ “real life” objects to create a memorable, fun lesson, because “A student holding a musket ball is more likely to understand the impact of this item on the human body.”<sup>36</sup>

As should be evidenced from the above, expert historical reenactment as an educational tool has wide-ranging support from multiple disciplines. Perhaps most importantly, living history already meets the standards for quality history education from within what scholarship exists on best practices. The Delphi study was correct in tying their conclusions to such prior research, but the authors of this work believe its dismissal of reenactment was simply premature. Reenactment seeks the same goals, but approaches them obliquely and actively. For instance, Peter Seixas and Tom Morton’s “Big Six” concepts for historical thinking (historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and ethical dimensions) are all present in historical reenactment.<sup>37</sup> While Fogo noted the lack of reflection on contemporary ethics in the Delphi panel’s final product of core best practices, a palpable part of living historical reenactment is the interaction that provides an opportunity for such ethical conversations to take place. As Professor of History Ronald Morris pointed out, one of the most important aspects of reenactment is that it offers opportunities for students to discover what people from another time valued by synthesizing the information the students learned from such active and dramatic historical experiences.<sup>38</sup> Here, Morris tied historical reenactment to the National Council for Social Studies standards for powerful social studies teaching—that learning must be meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active—while lamenting that no research on reenactment programs has been conducted. This study in part seeks to remedy the lacuna he identified.

### **Viking Living History Project**

The Viking Living History Project (VLHP) operates out of the northern panhandle of West Virginia in and around the city of Wheeling. Much of its financial support comes from various mechanisms within the West Liberty University (WLU) community, whether in the form of faculty research grants or student activities funds, but many volunteers have graciously donated their time, expertise, and money to the group as well. Volunteers originate

from many sources: most are WLU students or alumni, some are friends and family of the volunteers, and others are from the region's reenactment community at large. Dr. Darrin Cox, a full professor of history at WLU and longtime Viking reenactor, is the project's leader (or "jarl," as many of the volunteers refer to him) and impetus behind the project. As faculty adviser to the WLU's History Club, a student organization dedicated to all things historical, Dr. Cox suggested a foray into living history as a club activity, which ultimately spawned the Viking Living History Project.

Additionally, the VLHP straddles the line between classroom education, living history museums, and historical scholarship. While it draws from all three, it is something of its own beast in terms of implementation. For instance, volunteers usually come to the project through Dr. Cox's classes (fifteen weeks long), meaning they have completed at least one introductory world history course, as well as upper-level medieval and Viking history classes. As such, they are well-steeped in the history of the time period. Dr. Cox recruits these students to participate in History Club, where they get specific, hands-on instruction in the creation and use of the materials for the demonstrations. This provides access to primary, secondary, and community-oriented sources for their reconstructions in History Club's weekly meetings. Furthermore, WLU has a reputation as a top-notch teacher preparation institution and most of the volunteers have completed classes on K-12 pedagogy, whether they are studying to be math, science, or social studies teachers.

Thus, before volunteering for a demonstration, most members have training in educational theory, historical content, and living history reenactment. This should assuage some of the fears related to each of the forms of presentation. K-12 teachers might not have the same depth of historical content knowledge or practical living history experience and skills. Reenactors might not have the educational or historical training to guide their interpretations. Museum employees might not have the educational training or practical living history experience and skills. The Viking Living History Project addresses concerns arising from the multi-disciplinary field of living history by embracing training from all of them.

Dr. Cox arranges "free" demonstrations at local schools in the K-12 system, no more than twice a year. The only cost to the facility is lunch for the dozen or so volunteers who show up that day, although one



high school did voluntarily design and give T-shirts to the volunteers to commemorate the event. This often mirrors the same costs borne by heritage sites who employ amateur historical reenactors. Depending upon the number of grade levels that each school has, Dr. Cox works with principals to arrange the day's schedule. Most groups are arranged by grade level and usually contain fifty to eighty students in 30- to 45-minute sessions, along with their teachers, aides, and any other school personnel who might be interested. The VLHP learned early on that when numbers are greater, when time is shorter, and when fewer school personnel are present than this, demonstrations became more unwieldy and challenging for the volunteers.

The demonstrations start by Dr. Cox presenting a PowerPoint lecture for a few minutes to orient the audience to the historical context of the Vikings. Dr. Cox dispels myths by showing slides with popular culture references like the comic strip *Hägar the Horrible* or characters from the movie *How to Train Your Dragon* and then pointing around the room to the lack of horns on display. Maps and timelines contextualize the period under scrutiny. Images from graves, artwork, and literary descriptions demonstrate how we know what we know. After their orientation, Dr. Cox states two rules: students are not permitted to play with the weapons (just like how the Vikings in Vinland refused to traffic in weapons with the natives), yet they can and should touch anything else. From there, students are literally turned loose upon the encampment.

The encampment contains a series of informal "stations" that are determined based upon available volunteers and the school's particular interests. On most occasions, a demonstration has around eight to twelve reenactors and anywhere from five to ten stations. Additionally, the VLHP has two tents that students can explore, each based upon those found in archaeological remains. Each tent adjoins the stations, such as clothing and grooming, forming the central point in a "V" shape. Stations devoted to games, mercantile activity, jewelry, leatherworking, portable blacksmithing, textiles, military materials, and more, line the interior of the V. The interpreters arrange physical materials for the students to interact with that lead to probing questions about Viking culture and life. Each interpreter will then shift from first- to third-person interpretation as the situation and students' questions demand, while practicing second-person interpretation whenever possible.

For instance, the military station has various weapons like spears, swords, and axes alongside shields, helmets, and chain armor. These items stimulate discussion about class and wealth, since freemen (karls) would have far less metal available to them than the aristocracy (jarls) due to their cost and function on a working farm. These discussions take place while interpreters help students try on chain armor or while they form a shield wall (a battlefield tactic of overlapping shields). Likewise, the “kitchen” station has a tripod with logs, pots, kettles, utensils, and various foodstuffs that lead to discussions about diet and gender roles. The textiles station has raw flax and wool, as well as the materials needed to process them into useable cloth, which leads into discussions regarding farm life and trade.

Students work their way from one station to the next in no particular order except for their own interests. All the while, Dr. Cox roams the room interjecting historical tidbits and role-playing his part as the group’s leader, perhaps loudly asking the principal which students are for sale or which students have demonstrated a proclivity for physical competition in order to add another layer of historical inquiry to the interactions.

Although not an ideal location, most presentations take place within the hosting school’s gymnasium. If the weather cooperates, demonstrations can and have been held outdoors. Even though the VLHP usually presents in a gym, uses computers and projectors, and might employ rawhide mallets with modeling clay to simulate blacksmithing (schools frown upon open fires indoors), the participants had no problems “getting into” the historical elements of the presentation. Even the teachers asked more than once if volunteers actually lived this way as relics from history, comparing them to the Amish that populate the region. It did not matter to the audience if Dr. Cox introduced himself as a professor of history at a local university, as an actual Viking, or if he shifted between the two. In all cases, the audience was willing to ignore such inconsistencies of time and logic, eager as they were to enjoy the experience.

In order to make sure the visit falls within the curriculum standards and objectives established by West Virginia, the members of the VLHP usually claimed to be newcomers to this land—Vinland, which was recently “discovered” by Leif Eriksson. They are, in essence, a scouting party from Greenland that the fourteenth-century

*Saga of the Greenlanders* and *Eric the Red's Saga* mention in some detail. None of the volunteers claim to be a specific historical person (such as Leif himself), as is often used in first-person interpretation, although they do claim to know him and adopt a period name for the character they portray. This is a blend of first- and third-person interpretation, where volunteers claim to be *from* the past, but might occasionally slip into the perspective of an interpreter *of* the past should the situation call for it.

During the ten-year implementation of the VLHP, only one school (elementary level) was allowed to schedule more than one presentation, with concern to avoid overexposing student populations to the information contained within the presentation. A gap of four years between visits to this school allowed the majority of the students who had previously participated to move on to junior high. This restriction had the result of limiting the duplication of individual student evaluations of the project.

## Methods

### *Student Population*

The research team did not have access to student level data as part of this project. The students who attended VLHP presentations were almost completely of Caucasian heritage and an even mix of men and women, based on observation. The racial characteristics of students who attended VLHP presentations was consistent with the population demographics of West Virginia, which is 93.5% white according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

### *Student Data Collection*

The primary data collection method used to judge the efficacy of the VLHP program was student evaluations. Student evaluation forms were provided to school principals before each presentation. Teachers at the schools administered the evaluations immediately after participation in the VLHP presentation. For purposes of this research, elementary school students represent third through eighth grades, and high school students represent ninth through twelfth grades. Surveys were not given to students in kindergarten, first,

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### VLHP Student Evaluation Questions

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How much did you know about the Vikings BEFORE  
the Viking living history presentation?

How much did you know about the Vikings AFTER  
the Viking living history presentation?

Did you feel the Viking living history presentation  
was a useful learning tool?

Did you enjoy being able to participate in  
the Viking living history presentation?

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**Figure 1:** VLHP Student Evaluation Questions

or second grades, as they were deemed too young to adequately address the questions. Teachers were also asked to evaluate the VLHP program using a different evaluation form, which requested rich text responses; however, the purpose of this article is primarily to explore student-level evaluations. The principals collected and returned the completed evaluation forms to Dr. Cox for data input.

The research team did not have access to students before a VLHP presentation to implement a true pre/post student evaluation methodology. Instead, students were asked to self-report their level of knowledge before and after the VLHP presentation as part of the student evaluation form. The text of the quasi pre/post evaluation questions are presented in **Figure 1**. Scores were numerically recoded from the Likert scale from 1 (none) to 5 (a great deal). Students were also asked to evaluate the VLHP as a learning tool and to report their level of enjoyment of the VLHP program. The purpose of these questions were to assess the students' engagement with the VLHP program.

The research team did not have any reason to believe that student evaluations were influenced by school staff, as all data collection was anonymous. However, in some instances, schools told their students that the VLHP presentation was a reward for good behavior in the preceding quarter.

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### VLHP Teacher Evaluation Questions

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How much would you say that your students' subject area knowledge has grown due to the Viking visitation?

How much would you say your own/your in-service teachers' subject area knowledge has grown due to the Viking visitation?

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**Figure 2:** VLHP Teacher Evaluation Questions

#### *Teacher Data Collection*

In addition to the student evaluations, teachers were also asked to complete an evaluation of the VLHP. A total of thirty-one teachers submitted evaluation responses. Almost all social studies teachers for sixth- through twelfth-grade students who participated in the VLHP submitted a completed evaluation. However, the teacher results are skewed towards elementary school teachers because more of them had an opportunity to participate due to the nature of instruction in public schools. Most elementary school teachers (K-5) came in by combined grade, as they taught all subjects in each grade level. Conversely, schools responsible for grade six and above normally had a few specialized instructors that taught their discipline for all grades. Due to the small number of responses and the fact that teachers could not be easily separated into elementary versus high school, teacher evaluation responses are analyzed as a single group.

Many of the evaluation questions elicited suggestions and comments on how to improve the VLHP. Of interest to this research is the teachers' evaluation of the VLHP with regard to personal and student learning. **Figure 2** presents the wording of the evaluation questions.

#### *Research Questions*

Based on previous research on living history presentations at museums and historical sites, this research proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Students will self-report a growth in knowledge about the Vikings after a VLHP presentation compared to their previous level of knowledge.

H2: Teachers will report that the VLHP is an effective teaching tool.

While the data collection methodology did not provide student-level data, students were able to be categorized by the type of school where the presentation occurred—namely, high school (years nine through twelve) and grade school (years three through eight). The analyses presented compares grade school and high school scores to test for effects by age.

### *Analytical Method*

Of the 730 evaluations collected as part of the VLHP, 447 (61%) were completed by students in elementary schools, grade three through eight. High school students completed the remaining 283 evaluations (39%). Since the student evaluations were on paper forms, students had the ability to skip questions or answer questions inconsistent with the established scale. Skipped or uncountable data represented less than 1% of all collected data, suggesting that missing data should not influence the validity of the statistical tests performed.

Each student was asked to rate their level of enjoyment on a five-point scale, ranging from “none” to “a great deal” with the values of one and five, respectively. Students were also asked to rate the VLHP as a learning tool. While it is important that students were able to demonstrate learning about Viking culture after a VLHP presentation, it is also helpful to know that the presentation was engaging. Frequency tables are used to summarize student self-rated enjoyment of the VLHP and assessment as a learning tool.

Teachers were asked to rate the change in their own subject area knowledge and the subject area knowledge of their students after the VLHP. These ratings used the same five-point scale, from “none” to “a great deal.” Inclusion of these ratings in this analysis provides a professional assessment of the VLHP with regard to learning. The results of the teacher evaluation questions are presented using a frequency table.

The main research hypothesis is concerned with a student’s perceived level of knowledge before and after the VLHP. As stated before, students filled out the evaluations in their classroom after participation in the VLHP presentation. The evaluation asked the students to assess their knowledge of Vikings for two time periods; before and after the presentation. To test the hypothesis that students

	Rating	Enjoyment*		Learning Tool**	
		N	Valid %	N	Valid %
Elementary School (444/433 ct.)	1 - none	6	1.4%	18	4.2%
	2 - a little	15	3.4%	30	6.9%
	3 - a moderate amount	31	7.0%	69	15.9%
	4 - a good deal	51	11.5%	121	27.9%
	5 - a great deal	341	76.8%	195	45.0%
High School (277/273 ct.)	1 - none	6	2.2%	10	3.7%
	2 - a little	27	9.7%	31	11.4%
	3 - a moderate amount	62	22.4%	83	30.4%
	4 - a good deal	89	32.1%	109	39.9%
	5 - a great deal	93	33.6%	40	14.7%

\* Evaluation Question: Did you enjoy being able to participate in the Viking living history presentation?

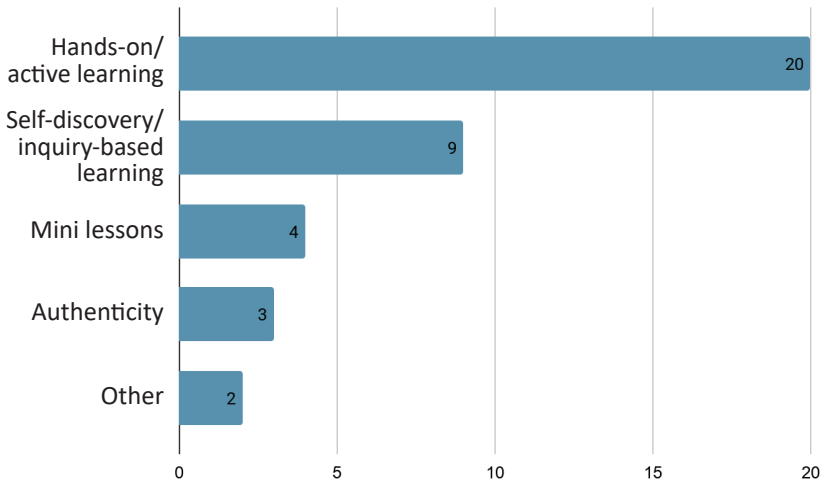
\*\* Evaluation Question: Did you feel the Viking living history presentation was a useful learning tool?

**Figure 3:** Student Participation Enjoyment and Learning Tool Ratings

will indicate knowing more about Vikings after the presentation than previously, paired t-tests were used. Paired t-tests are most appropriate when a set of observations is attributable to a single person or entity. By operationalizing ordinal evaluation responses into a quasi-interval/ratio Likert scale score, we are able to test for significant changes in mean self-reported knowledge for the two time periods.

### Student and Teacher Evaluation Results

**Figure 3** reports the frequencies (N) and valid percentages (%) for student ratings of their level of enjoyment participating in the VLHP, as well as with their assessment of the VLHP as a learning tool. The vast majority of elementary students indicated enjoying participation in the VLHP “a great deal” (76.8%) or “a good deal” (11.5%). Only six elementary school students responded “none” to this question.



**Figure 4:** Beneficial Aspects of the VLHP

Reported enjoyment in participation was more evenly spread among high school students. A majority of high school students (65.7%) responded that they either enjoyed participation “a good deal” or “a great deal” (Figure 3). Twenty-two percent of high school students indicated that they enjoyed participation “a moderate amount,” compared to the 7% of elementary and middle school students that gave the same rating.

Ratings of the VLHP as a learning tool were more spread out on the Likert scale provided. Forty-five percent of elementary school students indicated that they believed “a great deal” that the VLHP was a useful learning tool. “A good deal” is the second highest rating, representing 27.9% of elementary school respondents. “A moderate amount,” “a little,” and “none” represented 15.9%, 6.9%, and 4.2%, respectively.

High school students were more critical of the VLHP as a learning tool. Almost 40% of high school respondents indicated that they believed “a good deal” that the VLHP was a useful learning tool, followed by “a moderate amount” representing 30.4%. Other ratings for “a great deal,” “a little,” and “none” represented 14.7%, 11.4%, and 3.7%, respectively.

Of the thirty-one teachers that responded, 100% reported that they believed the VLHP reinforced Curriculum Standards and Objectives established by the state. Furthermore, teachers unanimously



Rating	Personal Knowledge*		Student Knowledge**	
	N	Valid %	N	Valid %
1 - none	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
2 - a little	1	3.2%	2	6.5%
3 - a moderate amount	5	16.1%	5	16.1%
4 - a good deal	11	35.5%	11	35.5%
5 - a great deal	14	45.2%	13	41.9%

\* Evaluation Question: How much would you say your own/your in-service teachers' subject area knowledge has grown due to the Viking visitation?

\*\* Evaluation Question: How much would you say that your students' subject area knowledge has grown due to the Viking visitation?

**Figure 5:** Teacher Evaluation of Personal and Student Learning from the VLHP

responded that they would recommend the program to others in their community. These results were not presented in a separate chart, as the results were unanimous.

Additionally, teachers were asked to describe what they thought was the most beneficial part of the program. Qualitative responses were categorized using keywords and concepts. The majority of responses fell into four main categories: hands-on/active learning, self-discovery/inquiry-based learning, mini lessons, and authenticity. Responses are summarized in **Figure 4**. Roughly two-thirds (20) of teacher evaluations indicated that hands-on/active learning was the most beneficial aspect of the VLHP. Nine teacher evaluations indicated that the self-discovery/inquiry-based learning was beneficial. Of the two evaluations that provided “other” responses, benefits identified included “cross-curricular connections” and the ability to experience “everyday life at the time period.”

Over 75% of teachers who completed a VLHP evaluation indicated that their own subject area knowledge grew “a good deal” or “a great deal” as a result of their participation. None of the teachers indicated that their knowledge did not grow, and only one teacher indicated that their knowledge only grew “a little.”

The teacher evaluation of their students' growth in knowledge mirrored the results of the student evaluations. **Figure 5** summarizes

All Students		
Before-Mean*	2.48	
After-Mean**	4.05	
N	730	
Significance***	.000	
	Elementary School	High School
Before-Mean*	2.53	2.40
After-Mean**	4.24	3.76
N	447	283
Significance***	.000	.000

\* Evaluation Question: How much did you know about the Vikings BEFORE the Viking living history presentation?

\*\* Evaluation Question: How much did you know about the Vikings AFTER the Viking living history presentation?

\*\*\* p-value less than .05 is considered statistically significant

**Figure 6:** Paired Sample Statistics Results

the results of teachers' perception on their own knowledge growth and their students' knowledge growth. The vast majority of teachers indicated that their students' knowledge grew "a great deal" (41.9%) or "a good deal" (35.5%). Once again, no teacher responded that their students' knowledge did not grow from participation in the VLHP.

### *Paired T-Tests*

Paired t-test results were used to address the second hypothesis that student self-rating of knowledge of Vikings would grow from the time period before the VLHP compared to after the presentation. Students were asked to self-report their knowledge about Vikings from "none" to "a great deal." These ratings were numerically coded from 1 to 5 to create a quasi-interval level variable.

The results of the paired t-tests are presented in **Figure 6**. An analysis of all students irrespective of school type shows a mean value of 2.48. After the VLHP, the mean value for all students rose to 4.05.

The tests of significance were below a p-value of 0.05, suggesting that the change in the mean scores was statistically significant.

In an attempt to eliminate the potential influence of school type, paired t-tests were completed for elementary and high school students, respectively. For elementary school students, the mean rating of self-rated Viking knowledge rose from 2.53 to 4.25. High school students had a lower average before- and after-presentation ratings when compared to elementary school students. However, there was a similar mean increase from 2.40 to 3.76 in the high school level data. The change in mean ratings for both elementary and high school students was found to be statistically significant.

## Discussion

The Viking Living History Project demonstrated that the use of expertly trained reenactors in the classroom, when combined with active participation by the students, is connected with a reported growth in knowledge. Students of all ages believed that their knowledge of the Viking world increased significantly due to their participation in the program. Although high school students reported less overall growth, both groups were enthusiastic about the demonstrations as a teaching tool, with nearly 89% of elementary school students and 85% of high school students claiming that it was at least a moderately useful tool for imparting knowledge. In terms of overall fun and enjoyment, 95% of younger students and, somewhat surprisingly, over 88% of older students enjoyed the Viking Living History Project at least a moderate amount or more. Students overwhelmingly believed that they learned the material, thought the process was a useful learning tool, and enjoyed their time learning about Vikings from “Vikings.” Indeed, one of the teachers shared that many of their students were so enamored with the VLHP that the students asked not only where they could see them again, but if there were any more extensive opportunities for their participation, like summer camps!

The teacher observations bear out these conclusions as well. All of the teachers who responded believed that expert living history met the Curriculum Standards and Objectives (CSOs) established by the state of West Virginia for social studies. To support their belief, some teachers provided specific instances of intersection in

the CSOs for their grade level, such as in economics, geography, and, of course, history. Although only one claimed directly that it was these “cross-curricular connections” that were of most benefit, the sentiment ran throughout many of the other comments. For instance, another instructor shared that they turned the experience into an English-language arts (ELA) exercise once the VLHP departed their classroom, while two others praised the hearty inclusion of women and gender roles, which were often lacking from traditional historical exercises.

All of the teachers also believed that they learned something, too. Only one teacher said that their personal knowledge grew only a little, with all the rest claiming a moderate or more amount of growth. That over 45% experienced a great deal of growth is a testament to the power of expert reenactment in the classroom for adult learners as well. Perhaps more importantly, nearly 42% of teachers felt the same way about their students’ increase in knowledge. All but two of them said that they believed their students’ growth was at least a moderate amount. Here, teachers predominantly cited the hands-on portions of the demonstrations, stating, “It ignites an interest in history,” and that the VLHP “makes history REAL [their emphasis]” for the students. Additionally, the “self-directed, inquiry-based learning” engaged the students more than other activities, meaning that they “not only had a blast, they learned a lot as well.” Ultimately, as per Roth, inquiry-based work like that encouraged by reenactment (which focuses on social organization and worldview) may do a better job of training students in the forms of investigation that are more useful in historical analysis, rather than the rote memorization of simple factual data used in traditional forms of history pedagogy.<sup>39</sup> In short, concentrating less on the knowledge and more on the process may help to reinvigorate historical learning and achieve better results. These professional educators whole-heartedly support the notion of historical edutainment in their classrooms.

### **Limitations**

This research represents a foray into evaluation of professional reenactment as a classroom learning method. However, school principals opted for less time-intensive participation due to reservations on the potential depth and length of intrusion into their

schools' lesson plans and curriculum. As such, we were not able to implement a true pre/post test design in this research, as students who participated in the VLHP could not be assessed beforehand. The results presented herein are also based on student evaluations rather than objective examinations of student knowledge or retention. Future research would benefit from implementing a true pre/post test and examination to a methodological design. Additionally, a longitudinal study of knowledge retention would be required to further assess professional reenactment as a pedagogical learning tool relative to other methods. Based on the results presented, we are unable to conclude that professional reenactment is a *more* effective learning tool than lecture or a multimedia presentation in the classroom. Furthermore, given the nature of social science research, it is unknown whether the scores provided by students and teachers were influenced by interaction with the research team. The utility of professional reenactment in the classroom may also differ in a more diverse student population, considering that the student population available for this research was mostly racially and culturally homogenous.

### Conclusions

As stated previously, there is little literature on the subject of reenactment as a classroom learning tool. This research sought to address that gap by implementing and evaluating a program that not only met state educational standards, but also showed evidence of positive learning outcomes to demonstrate the value of reenactment as a learning tool. However, historical reenactment does have to address associated costs. For example, the VLHP received financial support from various mechanisms within the West Liberty University community, whether in the form of faculty research grants or student activities funds, and the many volunteers who graciously donated their time, expertise, and money to the project. On the other hand, numerous living history groups from a variety of periods already exist. Costs associated with hiring them vary widely, but may be a little as providing a meal or meager honorarium.

Taken together, all of the results from the VLHP demonstrate that expert living history programs yield positive learning outcomes in an educational setting. Not only do teachers and students alike believe it is a quality tool for instruction, every single age level from young

children up through college-educated adults self-reported significant amounts of growth in knowledge after participation. As such, this engaging, fun, immersive, active, and inquiry-based learning style may be a curative for what currently ails social studies education. At the very least, reenactment as a pedagogical approach and best practice deserves more attention and consideration than it has received.

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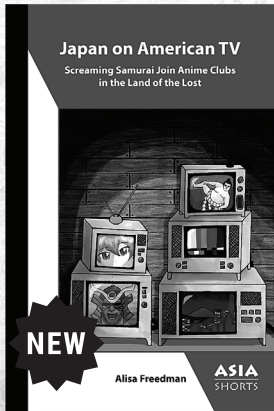
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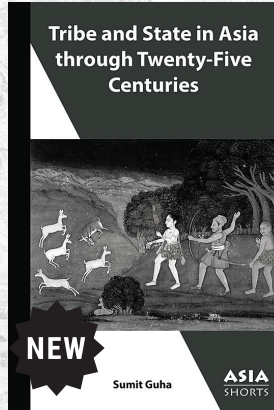
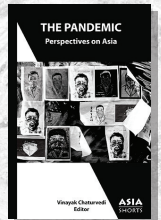
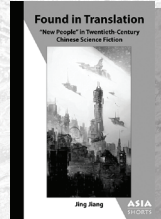
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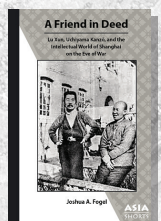
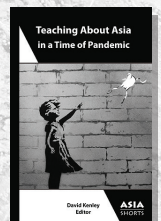
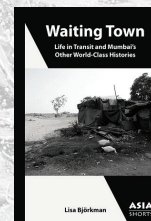
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