

Using Graffiti to Teach Students How to Think Like Historians

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IN TODAY'S standards-driven educational context, history teachers are often challenged to "cover" a specified breadth of content by exposing students to a narrative as presented by textbooks, visual media, or even Internet sources to which students may or may not be engaged in the actual intellectual process of historical inquiry, commonly referred to as "doing history."¹ There has been a significant amount of literature in recent years arguing that history teaching centered on students' engagement in inquiry, analysis, and synthesis must provide rich learning opportunities for students in developing critical-thinking, writing, and speaking skills, and that such curriculum maintains the integrity of the discipline by bridging the gap between the Academy and K-12 education.² But the literature only takes one so far. While the scholarship offers the inductive reasoning for the reflective practitioner to "re-think" the foundations of the curriculum used in the classroom, the practical methods from which to build rich learning environments for students is sometimes vague.

The central question from the literature then becomes, *How does one create meaningful history lessons that engage a student in historical inquiry and simultaneously maintain the integrity of the discipline of history?* While the buzz-term "doing history" may be chic in today's classrooms, it is ambiguous, for while there may be a general understanding of the term

regarding historiographical processes, until recently, it lacked a unified framework from which history teachers could develop curriculum with pedagogical and historiographical continuity in the K-12 classroom. In an endeavor to offer a practical historiographical framework accessible to K-12 teachers and their students, *Thinking Like a Historian* (TLH) is a tool for framing the past to teach students the elements of historical thinking while, at the same time, grounding students' knowledge of the past through inquiry and evidentiary support. The framework's design allows for a separation of the ways historians study the past from the ways historians organize their understanding of the past.³ In effect, this allows classroom teachers to build contiguous threads of questioning, analysis, and inferences predicated on the evidence. For those unfamiliar with the TLH approach, the Wisconsin Historical Society offers a website that provides instructional materials for teachers,⁴ and the Appendix provides examples of the conceptual framework.

The purpose of this article is to present one approach to implement TLH in a heterogeneous urban high school setting that has resulted in high levels of student engagement, offering high challenge to students, yet also offering support necessary to allow students' cognitive development within their zones of proximal development (ZPD). A brief discussion on the pedagogy will follow the method presented to illuminate the rationale. The method discussed in this article is a modification of a strategy known as a "Graffiti Wall," which allows students the opportunity to operate in a cooperative group setting and engage in a discourse based on content-specific questions that are crafted after each element of historical thinking, modeled from TLH. For those unfamiliar with the strategy, the Graffiti Wall is a cooperative-group strategy often used to develop students' literacy skills through the use of student-drawn images ("graffiti") on large poster paper that represents literary elements of a common text read by students. Students are usually encouraged to draw images that represent themes or other important contextual ideas embedded within the text. Students subsequently use their graffiti walls to represent their understanding of the text as they discuss their ideas in a cooperative group setting. Educators may use numerous adaptations of the graffiti wall to promote students' historical thinking and develop disciplinary literacy, such as the following application to a Medieval European history analysis.

Method: *Modified Graffiti Wall*

Overview: Students are arranged into five groups and will work together to generate ideas in response to a central question on sheets of butcher paper within an allotted time. Students will move to each station in a "round-robin" fashion and then discuss their responses.

Standards:

National Standards for World History Standard 4, Era 4
 Wisconsin Social Studies Standards

B 12.1; 12.2; 12.3; 12.4; 12.5; 12.6; 12.9; 12.10; 12.11; 12.13; 12.15; 12.17

Materials:

- Six poster-size sheets of butcher paper.
- Six markers, each a different color.
- Timer, stopwatch, or similar device.

Preparation:

* Ensure students have had content exposure to the topic so they have the appropriate background knowledge necessary to generate questions. This example demonstrates the kinds of questions used for a unit on the development of the medieval world, where the Islamic, African, American, South Asian, and East Asian worlds were compared and contrasted to Europe (circa the third through eleventh centuries C.E.). Prior to this Graffiti Wall activity, the students learned about the rise of the Goths, the push-pull factors that led to their “Romanization,” and the residual social, economic, and political conditions that led to the Rome’s “fall.”

- Write each of the following questions, one per sheet, at the top of the butcher paper.

Station 1: How did decisions or actions of the Romans or Goths significantly transform people’s lives in central Europe during the 3rd through 4th centuries C.E.? [Example of a *Turning Points* question]

Station 2: Who benefited from Rome’s “fall?” Who did not? Why? How do you know? [Example of a *Change and Continuity* question]

Station 3: How did the events that you learned about in this unit thus far affect people’s lives, community, and their world? [Example of a *Cause and Effect* question]

Station 4: How does Rome’s “fall” or the rise of the Goths help us make sense of the present? What patterns of human interaction do we see today and then? [Example of a *Using the Past* question]

Station 5: How did the Roman and Barbarian worldview affect their choices and action? [Example of a *Through Their Eyes* question]

Station 6: Questions I still have:

- Divide the class into five groups for students to form when the activity begins.
- Attach each piece of butcher paper on a wall or other surface so that six separate “stations” are created.

- Create a brief instruction sheet for each group to help guide students through the activity: *Graffiti Wall Activity: Student teams will undergo a “round-robin” activity with a different question at each station— 4 minutes per station. Each station will have a TLH-based question. Each team must construct a response based on their dialogue at each station and write it on the butcher paper. Each response must be different—we don’t want five postings of the same thing! Lastly, at Station 6, write any remaining questions you have so that we can address them at the end of the activity.*
- Arrange the desks into five groups. Attach a note card on top of a desk in each group to list student members, and leave one colored marker at each group.
- Write instructions on the chalk/white board for students to find their name and take their seat in their prescribed group.
- Write the following central question from the previous day on the board: *How did the quest for political order lead to the development of early European medieval society?*

Process:

- As students enter the classroom, ensure they sit in their prescribed groups.
- Introduce the Graffiti Wall as an activity that will allow for students to continue exploring the central question.
- Read aloud the instruction sheet, and model moving from station to station.
- Facilitate the activity by having students start at a station: discuss each question and write their group response on the butcher paper with their marker. Encourage students to explore a unique response rather than copying others’ responses. Students may use their notes, texts, or other available sources to refresh their memories on specific details relating to the content. While students are engaged at their stations, monitor their discussions and ensure time-on-task.
- Instruct students to rotate to the next station after each session’s allotted time has passed.
- Once all of the students have rotated through each station, tell them to go back to their group seats and begin to process the activity as a group, and then as a class.

Facilitate Class Discussion:

The following represents strategies to lead the class through a discussion that allows students to evaluate the various responses, reexamine their evidence, and draw conclusions.

- The first task for students once they are back in their seats is to decide which responses at each station resonate with them the most and why.

- The initial class discussion is built from their lists. Teachers should focus on illuminating instances where students support their ideas with the evidence from their background knowledge. This also allows students to see that some questions are indeed better than others at processing historical information. The discussion should allow for students to support their conclusions with the evidence from their sources (notes, texts, handouts, etc.), reinforcing the question “*How do we know?*”
- Students try to identify which station corresponds with the TLH elements of historical thinking. For example, which station represents the *Cause and Effect*, *Continuity and Change*, *Turning Points* question, and so forth? This helps students see firsthand what a “cause and effect” or “turning point” question may look like; by illuminating the questions’ differences, students begin to distinguish the power questions hold within the discipline of history and how they lead to increased understanding of a topic, event, person, etc.
- Examine the “Questions I Have” section as a class and allow students the opportunity to address possible responses. If students have a difficult time doing this, the teacher should address the questions not by giving factual answers, but rather by discussing ways to find out—using the available source materials, suggesting which additional materials may be useful, and so forth. This could also be an excellent opportunity for a more meaningful extended homework assignment where students investigate their own questions and present their findings to the class the next day.

The Pedagogy

There are several reasons why the modified Graffiti Wall strategy is useful for building students’ historical literacy. First, it provides an opportunity for students to gain increased exposure to course content where students’ elaborative rehearsal of working with historical facts and inquiry lead to greater long-term retention.⁵ Hence, students are not merely memorizing historical data for a test, but rather they are grappling with questions and reconciling their understanding in a context-oriented task that builds a discourse community centered in elements of historical inquiry. This affords the opportunity for students to keep the majority of their discussion grounded not in the present, but within the historical context—in this case, the rise of Medieval Europe in the third and fourth centuries C.E. Moreover, the nature of the Graffiti Wall activity provides multiple exposures to the course content from different points of view so that students can engage in complex interaction with the material to ensure deeper meaning and understanding is fostered.⁶

Student engagement and time-on-task present a challenge for even

the most seasoned veteran teacher, and oftentimes, such on-task behaviors are related to the quality of the learning environment established or developed by the classroom teacher. The modified Graffiti Wall, while grounded in a cooperative and student-centered tradition, is structured to facilitate engaged learning through maximizing classroom time to present conditions of short deadlines where students must create some intellectual product in response to a question—in this example, a single statement that is in response to a prompt. Limiting student time at each station allows the students to feel “the crunch,” thus reducing, in most instances, off-task behaviors. In addition, since students are moving around the room and receiving a new prompt, they are, in effect, operating in a controlled state of novelty. In other words, since students have limited time at each subsequent station, there is little time for the question to stagnate, thus producing a higher rate of engagement.⁷ Adding to the novelty is the presence of student-generated responses written in different colors; students not only see the thinking of other students as posted at each station, but they are encouraged to consider such responses as possible statements of understanding, and furthermore must still generate their own response. More importantly, student engagement fostered tends to be content-specific—students are actively discussing history within the framework of what may be considered “signature pedagogy” in developing students’ competencies in historical thinking. Therefore, while the modified Graffiti Wall offers students the opportunity to “talk history,” such talk is framed by the five elements of historical inquiry as prescribed by TLH.

Conclusion

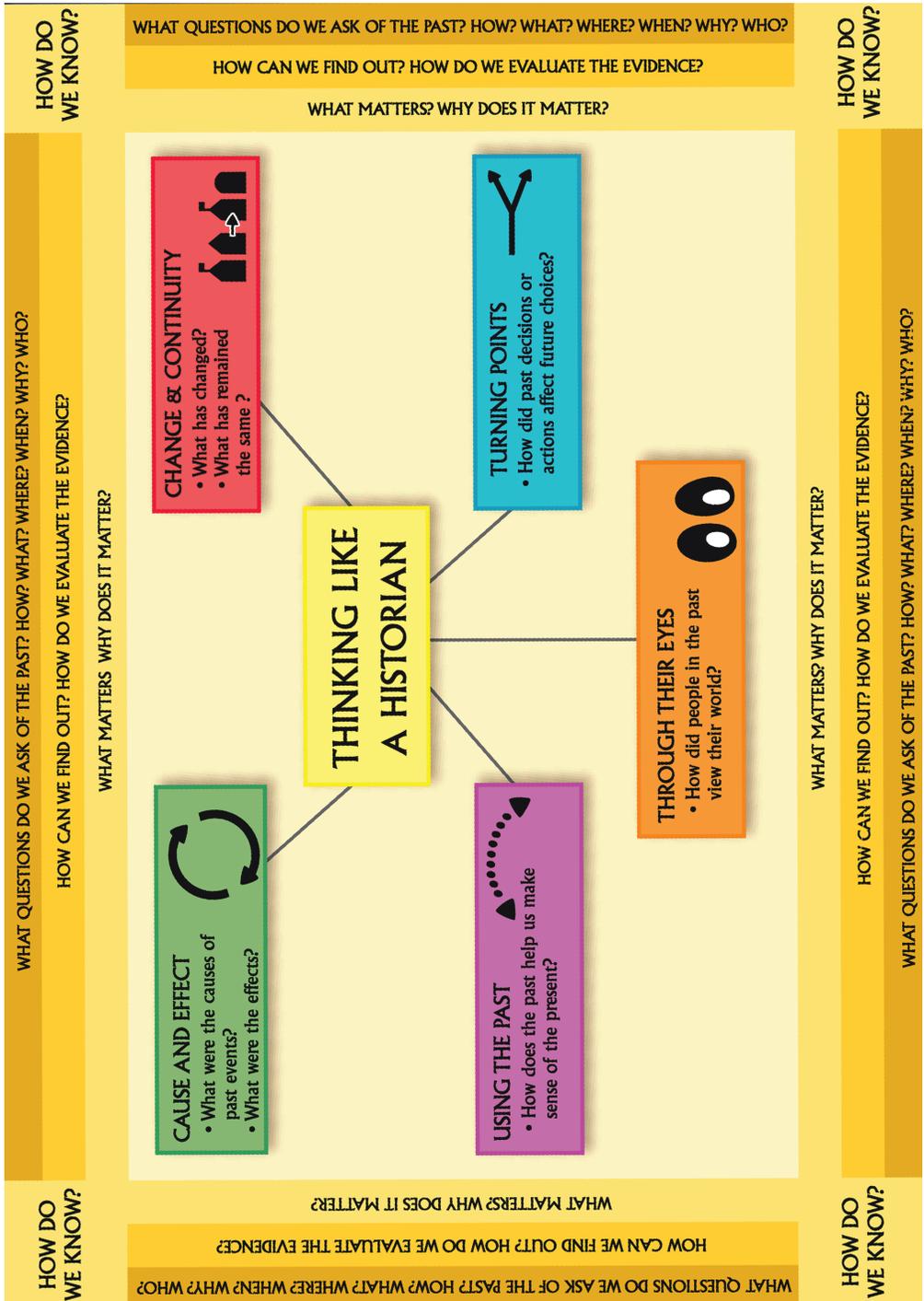
The TLH framework is not meant to be an end in itself, but rather a tool to allow students to differentiate between various modes of thinking that historians use to “do history.” While TLH may offer a nice graphical representation of the various elements of historical thinking, its success or failure rests on the question, “*How do we know?*” Such emphasis on inquiry allows teachers to encourage students to be historians in a manner that, in the past preceding the advent of TLH, may have lacked a certain authenticity.

Learning opportunities created through the use of TLH are not meant to be cookie-cutter responses to explicitly effect the scores on standardized tests such as the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE). Rather, the TLH framework helps establish the integrity of the discipline of history, demonstrating the cognitive tools used by historians and the deep knowledge and understanding which result from rich learning experiences.

Notes

1. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle School*, second ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000).
2. Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 331-353; Robert B. Bain, "'They Thought the World was Flat?' Applying the Principles of How People Learn in Teaching High School History," in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, ed. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), 179-214; Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2001): 1358-1370; Nikki Mandell, "Thinking Like a Historian: A Framework for Teaching and Learning," *Magazine of History* 22, no. 2 (April 2008): 55-63.
3. Mandell.
4. *Thinking Like a Historian*, <<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/ThinkingLikeaHistorian/>>.
5. Mel Levine, *Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Differences at Home and in School*, second ed. (Cambridge, MA: Educational Publishing Service, 2002).
6. Robert J. Marzano, *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003).
7. Patricia Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Transferring Research into Classroom Practice* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).

Appendix: Thinking Like a Historian (TLH) Conceptual Models



WHAT QUESTIONS DO WE ASK OF THE PAST? THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN



CAUSE AND EFFECT

What were the causes of past events?

What were the effects?

- Who or what made change happen?
- Who supported change?
- Who did not support change?
- Which effects were intended?
- Which effects were accidental?
- How did events affect people's lives, community, and the world?



CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

What has changed?

What has remained the same?

- Who has benefited from this change?
- Who has not benefited? And why?



TURNING POINTS

How did past decisions or actions affect future choices?

- How did decisions or actions narrow or eliminate choices for people?
- How did decisions or actions significantly transform people's lives?



USING THE PAST

How does the past help us make sense of the present?

- How is the past similar to the present?
- How is the past different from the present?
- What can we learn from the past?



THROUGH THEIR EYES

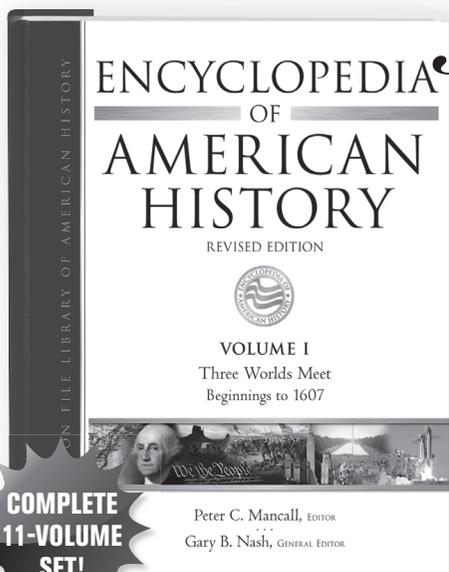
How did people in the past view their world?

- How did their worldview affect their choices and actions?
- What values, skills and forms of knowledge did people need to succeed?

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