

History + Mystery = Inquiring Young Historians

Jana Kirchner, Allison Helm, Kristin Pierce, and Michele Galloway

AS we entered the fifth grade classroom, it was obvious that the ten-year-old historians were hard at work. Teams of students were using magnifying glasses and clue sheets to examine artifacts and journal excerpts from Lewis and Clark’s expedition. Some traced the route on a raised relief map, while others looked at objects such as whetstones, keelboat models, lye soap, and packing lists. Their task was to answer the mystery question: What impact did the environment and the Native peoples have on Lewis and Clark’s journey? The social studies class was alive with historians, archaeologists, and detectives hard at work, using cooperative learning, critical thinking, and hands-on learning.

The Elementary Student

So how do you create this learning environment in an elementary social studies classroom? Picture in your mind a class of upper elementary students. In general, most of them like to share their thoughts and experiences. Figuring stuff out is a challenge that taps into their natural curiosity. They are full of energy, with diverse reading abilities, and a variety of family backgrounds and experiences. Most like the teacher and hope that class will be fun! Many consider “ancient history” to be within the last few years, as evidenced by my eight-year-old daughter who asked if I rode a horse and buggy to high school back in “olden times”, i.e. the 1980s. Others come to class with the expectation that social studies will only consist of learning facts from a textbook. It would never occur to them that they will be active participants in the classroom.

Why Does History Matter?

While social studies content about communities, neighborhood jobs, and maybe even some state history is taught in the early elementary grades, often the upper elementary grades are the first time students learn about the larger progression of history. Can teachers introduce the eager minds of young learners in grades 4-6 to the concepts of primary and secondary sources, multiple perspectives, cause and effect, and most importantly why history matters to them? This would involve not just placing events on a timeline, memorizing dates, or remembering

names of important people. The story of history includes the experiences of ordinary people (in addition to the great heroes and villains) and complicated events with multiple causes. If we examine the historical record, we find many perspectives in the telling. How can we introduce young learners to this challenge of complexity in the historical narrative?

In their book *Doing History*, Educators Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton explain the real purpose of history: “If history helps us think about who we are and to picture possible futures, we cannot afford a history curriculum mired in trivia and limited to a chronological recounting of events. Instead, we need a vibrant history curriculum that engages children in investigating significant themes and questions, with people, their values, and the choices they make as the central focus. . . . The enduring themes and questions that humans have struggled with over time are, however, more compelling history.”¹

History as Mystery

How do you begin to teach the progression of U.S. history and the themes and questions that humans have struggled with over time to the elementary school learner? How do you teach students to “do” history and “think” history? Creating 21st century learners that can problem solve and demonstrate critical thinking and communication skills is not a small task.² One strategy is teaching history as mystery. Our Kentucky Teaching American History (TAH) grant group found this strategy to be one that tapped into students’ natural curiosity and fascination with mysteries. It helped bring the story of history to life. In their book *Teaching U.S. History as Mystery*, David Gerwin and Jack Zevin explain, “Mystery is a powerful technique for teaching history because it has certain inherent properties that motivate students. First of all, mystery arouses curiosity. Students who might not care very much about reading history become fascinated when confronted by the problem of sorting out clues and putting together evidence for a solution.”³

Strategy Overview

So how does the mystery strategy work? We have found the book *Mystery: Learning Through Clues* to be a helpful guide.⁴



It describes how to encourage students to engage in learning tasks similar to historians, archaeologists, and detectives. The strategy includes using artifacts, primary sources, and secondary sources to help students answer an essential question. First, the teacher provides an interesting mystery question, and then students examine clues to make a hypothesis, present their hypothesis to the class, and finally evaluate their results. (See two lesson examples in the pullout that follows this article.) Here are the phases of the strategy:

1. Encountering the Problem (lesson hook): The teacher creates a mystery question based on the curriculum and prepares a scenario for students. Students learn their respective roles and the performance assessment requirements.
2. Examining and Interpreting Clues: Students collect data by examining clues, taking notes on a clue organizer sheet, and look for patterns or relationships among the clues and their sources.
3. Establishing the Hypothesis: Using the clues as evidence, students generate a hypothesis that proposes a possible answer to the mystery question.
4. Explaining the Hypothesis: Students present their hypoth-

esis and evidence in a performance assessment. If time allows, students may have a choice of products for this stage of the lesson.

5. Evaluating the Hypothesis and the Effort: Students reflect on both the accuracy of their hypothesis as well as the investigative process, i.e. their performance as history detectives.

Instructional Tips

In order for this strategy to be effective in the elementary social studies classroom, there are a few instructional and classroom management issues that need to be planned ahead of time.

1. Choose a mystery question that targets content standards, is broad enough to have multiple perspectives (as represented in the clues), and could have more than one right answer.
2. Select a variety of clues that will represent multiple perspectives. The lesson works best (and it integrates multiple social studies skills) when it involves clues in a variety of formats and media, such as primary (written) sources, secondary sources, maps, charts, graphs, and artifacts (or models of artifacts).

3. Teach an introductory vocabulary lesson to help build necessary background knowledge if there is difficult vocabulary within any of the clues.
4. Model strategies for examining and understanding primary sources. Both the National Archives⁵ and the Library of Congress⁶ websites have materials to use with students for analyzing primary sources.
5. Build student anticipation during the practice of primary source analysis; for example, “The class has done so well with this, you are almost ready for the challenge of a mystery lesson.”
6. Remind students continually to use clues as they formulate answers to the mystery question and to use clues as they create a product displaying their hypotheses. In this way, students learn to refer to source material and to build a logical argument.
7. Provide a rubric that gives clear details as to how the product(s) will be assessed. To motivate students and allow for differentiated learning, permit students a choice of products (such as a poster, pamphlet, spoken report, or brief dramatic performance) for displaying their hypothesis.⁷

Classroom Management

1. Structure the classroom so that clues are arranged around the room (stations around the room can include small clue packets, video clips, artifacts to handle, maps, large posters, a reference book opened to a key page, headphones with an audio file at the ready, etc.).
2. Define very clear roles for cooperative learning groups concerning how they should work together, how they should take notes, how they will examine the clues (alone or in groups), what is the permissible noise level, and how their classroom activity—and their final product—will be evaluated.
3. Model specific cooperative behavior if your young students are new to working in small groups. With the help of one of your better students, talk through the analysis of one clue station while making notations on the clue organizer sheet. (See the PULLOUTS.) Discuss with your young “partner” what you are seeing and what could be written down.
4. Circulate throughout the room to ensure that students are focused on the group effort.
5. If students seem off task at any time during the flow of the lesson, recapture the class’s attention, refocus on the mys-

tery question, and have student groups briefly report their findings and thoughts so far.

The Challenge of Primary Sources

Making sense of primary source texts can be difficult for struggling readers. Putting students into groups encourages them to learn from each other, and also to figure things out among themselves, rather than always refer to an “adult authority” who will “translate” a passage or explain a chart.

Many educators think that modifying (editing and simplifying) difficult primary source text for struggling readers is essential for their participation in group activities and understanding of the material. The Stanford History Education Group, for example has created a “Reading Like a Historian Curriculum” that features 75 document-based K-12 lessons that employ modified primary source texts.⁸

Teaching history as mystery requires the teacher to go beyond the simple lesson plan format of lecturing and distributing a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. It’s a method that also requires more of our young students. Can it really work? The most rewarding part of my (Jana Kirchner) being a Teaching American History grant coordinator is conducting classroom site visits and watching talented teachers bring history to life each day with students in grades 4–6 as they engage with a history mystery.⁹ Elementary social studies is alive and well in these classrooms. 🌍

Notes

1. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating With Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 3.
2. Paige Johnson, “The 21st Century Skills Movement,” *Educational Leadership* 67, no.1 (September 2009), 11.
3. David Gerwin and Jack Zevin, *Teaching U.S. History as Mystery* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
4. Harvey F. Silver, Richard W. Strong, and Matthew Perini, *Mystery: Learning Through Clues* (Ho Ho Kus, NJ: Thoughtful Education Press, 2000).
5. “Document Analysis Worksheets,” (National Archives), www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets.
6. “Analysis of Primary Sources,” (Library of Congress), memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/analyze.html.
7. Julia L. Roberts and Tracy F. Inman, *Assessing Differentiated Student Products* (Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, 2009).
8. Stanford History Education Group, “Reading Like a Historian Curriculum,” sheg.stanford.edu.
9. Read about Teaching American History (TAH) Grant Program at www2.ed.gov/programs/teachinghistory/index.html.

JANA KIRCHNER is the Teaching American History Project Coordinator at the Green River Regional Educational Cooperative in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

ALLISON HELM is a fifth grade teacher at Caneyville Elementary School in Caneyville, Kentucky.

KRISTIN PIERCE is a fifth grade teacher at Caneyville Elementary School in Caneyville, Kentucky.

MICHELE GALLOWAY is a fifth grade teacher at Clarkson Elementary School in Clarkson, Kentucky.