

Historical Thinking Module

Doing History in the Classroom

Thinking Like a Historian: Rethinking History Instruction

Dr. Mandell:

History as I learned it in the classroom had a lot to do with names and dates and memorization of facts, and maybe synchronizing them in the right order was a very good kind of thing to do. And what *Thinking Like a Historian* helps us do as historians, as teachers, and hopefully to pass on to our students, is to understand where those names and dates and facts and information fit into historical knowledge. They are part of the evidence, part of the historical record, but they're not history in and of themselves. They need to be connected to a question, they need to be connected with a variety of other sources, and they need to lead us somewhere—which is to our interpretation, to what matters, why it matters, and what's significant.

Dr. Bobbie Malone:

History is an active process of investigation—it's the *study* of the past. You know, we will never know the past; the past is lots of things. What we can do is come up with our own questions and we can look at the sources—the secondary sources, the older interpretations and what's left of the past that we have in documentary evidence or in the terms of the ancient past and archaeological evidence and artifacts that were made at the time. And try to come up with our own ideas about what life was like and what people thought, how they lived, what kinds of things engaged them. And if we let students have that experience, they're thinking for themselves, we're not...they're not thinking about our questions, they're thinking about their own questions. So that's really, I think, what thinking like a historian, and *being* a historian, is. It's being, like you said, it's like being a detective; it's like looking for evidence. It's a wonderful discipline, not just because we're trying to create a whole world of historians, we're trying to create a whole world of critical thinkers.

Terry Kaldhusdal:

One of the most important things that I teach my students is how to think. The thinking like a historian model is perfect for what I do in my classroom. Since I teach 4th grade, I teach Wisconsin history. We start with pre-history, so we talk about the glaciers, we talk about the early cultures. The one that I start with is the Middle Mississippian tribe. It's a fascinating culture, they started down in the St. Louis area, came up the Mississippi River. They had about ten outposts throughout the southeastern part of the U.S., but they had a northern outpost in Wisconsin, in an area between Madison and Milwaukee and an area that we now call Aztalan, which is mistakenly called Aztalan because they thought this tribe was connected to the people in Mexico.

When I started doing research on this tribe, it was amazing what they accomplished. They built a walled fortress over 21 acres, they were farmers, they built pyramidal mounds, they built homes that were different than the other tribes in the state. What I wanted my students to know is that Columbus didn't discover America, Columbus wasn't the first one here, that there were people here—there were sophisticated people here. What's amazing about the Middle Mississippian tribe is they were here for about 300 years, and then they suddenly disappeared and no body knows why.

When I started first doing research on it and reading about it I found that archaeologists disagreed on what happened to this tribe, not only that but they disagreed on how they lived. So what I want my students to know is that this incredible civilization was here, and then it disappeared. So I created a website and it's filled with facts and it's filled with artifacts, facts that scientists and historians, archaeologists all agree on. My students spend hours and they'll read through it and they'll study that website. Once they've done that, then they create a hypothesis, they try and connect the dots. The questions that they're answering are things like: Well, this tribe settled here. Why did they choose this place? This place between Madison and Milwaukee, and they lived here, but what did they eat? And how do we know that?

[Classroom Example]

(Group 1)

Student 1: I think that they would have to have mud on the outer to be kind of like glue, then they'd have straw because, you know, we have a lot of farm land.

(Group 2)

Student 2: Still, we have to find out why all these birds—from turtles, fish, deer, clams, buffalo, birds were all found in one...in one same exact pit.

(Group 3)

Student 3: Then why did they bury this princess—or whatever she was—what did she [they] bury her so nice? And why did they throw?...

Student 4: Well she was probably really important so they—

Student 3: But they found 11 bodies like this and 1...I don't know. They found most of the bodies like—

Student 4: Maybe those bodies were other important people.

(Group 4)

Student 5: Why would they put beads on...well maybe like, I think that could be their leaders because they put beads on them?

(Group 2)

Student 2: They could of just died out.

(Group 4)

Student 6: Maybe it's like one of their belongings that they put on them just to remember them that way.

Student 5: Yeah, that's probably why.

(Group 3)

Student 3: "People who are...bone marrow from human remains—

Student 4: were considered cannibals." They probably just threw them in...

Student 3: But why did they throw them in there?

Student 4: Maybe they were people from other tribes.

Student 3: Or maybe they didn't like them.

[Interview]

Terry Kaldhusdal: But once they've written their hypotheses, they my class will get together with John Hallagan's class and they'll debate their ideas. They'll challenge each other. If you know that, how do you know it? And why is it important?

John Hallagan:

You're detectives, you're historical detectives. You're looking at a mystery, mysteries, that we don't know all the answers to. And what do detectives do? They ask questions. And you're asking questions of history. We're trying to understand what happened with these people that lived 1,000 years ago. We're trying to understand that to help understand how we got where we are now. Using the past to find out about the present.

You've got a question in each one of your groups, and you're going to try and give your reason why something happened. You're trying to give a hypothesis, an educated guess, as to why something is or was. The rest of you in the group are going to listen to this, first the question, the hypothesis, and then the facts to back up the hypothesis. Here's what you're wondering about as detectives, you're wondering: How do you know that? and Why does it matter? Some things don't matter, other things matter a lot. But in order to find out whether something really did happen the way we think it happened you have to have good facts to back it up. And that's what you're asking about with your group.

As a detective you're asking, Well, how do you know? And the detective, the person that's giving the hypothesis, you need to explain. These facts tell me this is what happened. Why does it matter?

Think about that, why is it important? We want to understand these Mississippian Indians. They lived here 1,000 years ago and they lived very different than the other Indians that lived here at the time. We're trying to find out the difference between them.

[Classroom Example]

(Group 1)

Student 1: We thought it could be like a head of a hammer.

Student 2: How do you know that?

Student 3: They got that from northern Wisconsin, they sent it like in the rivers in their canoes.

Student 4: In northern Wisconsin, they just didn't know how it got there.

Student 5: Why does it matter?

Student 6: I think that this is a knife that would be able to cut the edges on this so it makes it sharp.

Student 5: How do you know?

Student 6: [blank stare]

(Group 2)

Student 7: If they had a roof that didn't get the rain off the roof and it would just soak through then how would they be able to stay in there for 300 years?

Student 8: But, umm, they could carve down them.

Student 9: But the thing was how would they use it to do it?

John Hallagan: Sometimes when you're looking at history and you see some of the mysteries and you investigate it, you come out in the end with more questions than you started with. And that's what happened with that group over there. They started with the idea that this person was buried there, and in the end they wanted to know: Who was she? Why was she one of the few that had been buried? Why all the shells? What did shells mean to them? So what they had was in the end they had more questions than they had answers. That's part of studying history.

[Interview]

Terry Kaldhusdal: And once the dust has settled from that, then they write and they reflect on what they've learned. And that's how we wrap up the lesson.

[Students Reading—Note: student recitation overlaps]

Student 1: The Mississippian Indians of Aztalan hunted to get their food. They hunted all kinds of animals like turtles, fish, snakes, seafood, and animals that live in the woods.

Student 2: They lived in different cities. They used the Mississippi River as a super highway. I think this because all of their cities were next to...

Student 3: They built a giant wigwam around their territory. Archaeologists think that they also made watchtowers, but why would they need them?

Student 4: 500 years later, Columbus discovered America, or did he? Columbus found new land that had thousands of people already on it. It makes me think that someone could come to my house and claim it too.

Student 5: After learning about the Indians in Wisconsin I wondered how did the Mississippians learn how to farm? How did the Mississippians figure out how to get to the other sites? How long

did it take the Mississippians to build the big wall? I wonder why the Mississippians suddenly vanished and where did they go?

Student 6: I wonder how did they live back then? How did they get along with other tribes? What if I lived way back then, what would I do?

Student 7: I know that the Aztalan Indians ate corn and animals, but I don't know is what animals they ate. I believe...

Student 8: I know that Aztalan site has rich prairie soil, so maybe those people stayed there to grow crops. I also know that...

Student 9: This is what I think the homes looked like. Doing this research I've come away with more questions than I started with—that is really weird!

[Interview]

Dr. Mandell:

By “Doing History” I really mean that process of asking questions, looking for, evaluating, and interrogating the evidence and then drawing one's own conclusions and understanding of the past. Kind of finding significance—what matters, why does it matter, and answering one's question. That whole process is doing history. It could be that one is doing history really in response to a small activity or exercise that maybe a teacher poses in the classroom, so maybe a very limited level of doing history. If the teacher poses a question with two or three kinds of sources and it's a very limited question, and the students come up with some kind of interpretive answer. Your interpretive answer may include putting things on an annotated timeline. Doing history can also encompass, using that three step process, a very sophisticated, full-scale study that a historian does that results in a major new piece of historical understanding and a major book. They're all, I mean, they're connected to each other in that they start with questions, multiple sources, and they require evaluating, assessing, and synthesizing those sources to come up to some interpretive understanding.