

Creating Global Citizenship through Incorporation of Historical Fiction and Primary Source
Documents in the Social Studies Classroom

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Introduction

Prior to enrolling in Michigan State's graduate course, Teaching and Learning K-12 Social Studies, I had not experienced any coursework in social studies education. Though I had taught Humanities (a combination of English Language Arts and Social Studies curricula) in two different schools and to two different grade levels, I had no formal training in the pedagogy of Social Studies instruction, and was unfamiliar with the history of the subject and the current trends in curriculum development and best teaching practices. I have learned a great deal in the past three months, but the reading that had the greatest impact on me was John Myers's "Rethinking the Social Studies Curriculum in the Context of Globalization." Myers stressed the importance of teaching students to be global citizens. His vision of "global citizenship education" (Myers, 389) is one that combines local and global citizenship, encouraging students to be active members of their local community, but to simultaneously be mindful of the global impact of their actions. Central to accomplishing this monumental task of creating global citizens is the elimination of ethnocentrism; students must be encouraged to not only learn about other cultures, but to appreciate their cultural values as important and worthy of consideration. Additionally, becoming global citizens requires critical thinking, the ability to consider multiple perspectives and, perhaps most importantly, empathy.

One of the best ways to encourage Social Studies students to develop empathy, critical thinking and perspective-taking is through the use of historical fiction and primary source narratives. As an English Literature major who has taught English for fifteen years and who now spends part of each day team-teaching a Humanities class for high school freshmen that covers ancient civilizations as well as foundations and importance of cultural values and identities, I

strive to find ways to use literature in concert with the social studies and history that is part of our curriculum. I know the power of a good piece of historical fiction. As a child, my favorite books were biographies and historical fiction; my copy of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* still sits on a shelf in my home, the cover wrinkled and worn from countless readings. When I taught fifth grade and covered American history, *Blood on the River*, *My Brother Sam is Dead* and *Across Five Aprils* held my students enthralled and brought the time periods to life in their imagination. My belief in the ability of historical fiction to engage and educate students was central to the way in which I shaped my Humanities syllabi year after year.

I originally envisioned this project as an opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of historical fiction and primary source narratives in teaching students about other cultures, other time periods, and critical events in human history. However, as we delved further and further into the practices of teaching for global citizenship, I realized that this project could also be used to provide evidence of the ways in which these two genres could be used to promote and develop the skills necessary for global citizenship. Helping students to become effective, empathetic members of a global society is one of my primary goals as an educator, and is the most important development in Social Studies education in the last decade. The question driving this research project was whether historical fiction and authentic, first-person narratives can serve to help build the skills necessary for global citizenship: perspective-taking, empathy, and critical thinking.

Literature Review

Many articles have been written on the use of historical fiction and primary source documents in Social Studies instruction. Historical fiction in particular was demonstrably linked

in a number of articles to traits that Myers (2012) indicates as being necessary to global citizenship.

The primary benefit of using historical fiction, one that was noted by several authors, was the ability of this particular genre to give “the reader insight into the social realities of other people and groups” (Mills, 1988, p. 8). Sara Schwebel, (2014) noted that research has shown that historical fiction draws readers into the past and thereby helps them develop an appreciation and understanding for the time period in which a particular work is set (p. 20). A specific example of this was described by John H. Bickford III and Molly Sigler Bickford (2015). In studying South Sudan with students, two fictional narratives based on true stories were employed and “guided students towards a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the region, the turmoil’s immediate impact on countless others, and subsequent events” (p. 116). Mary Taylor Rycik and Brenda Rosier (2009) also noted the ability of good historical fiction to help children feel connected to their counterparts in other times and places (p. 163).

Additional benefits were also noted. Sriraman and Adrian posited that “the study of literature can be practical, inspirational, appealing, stimulating, and educational if approached through critical thinking, which in turn can allow the student to experience its connections to life” (p. 97). Critical thinking is an essential skill for global citizenship. The use of historical fiction to encourage critical thinking was seconded by Mills (1988, p. 8) and Edgington (1988, p. 122).

Finally, the role of historical fiction in promoting empathy and perspective-taking was established in a number of articles and studies. Rycik and Rosier (2009) stated that this genre piques curiosity, provides multiple perspectives, and encourages students to contemplate the

complexities of an issue (p. 163-65), and Barbara Stripling (2011) wrote extensively on the use of both historical fiction and primary sources to encourage empathy and perspective-taking. She noted that historical fiction can “help readers and students be more aware of the world around them, and help readers and students understand different ways of behaving and different perspectives” (Stripling, 2011, p. 96). In addition to presenting the benefits of historical fiction, Stripling also examined the benefits of primary sources, finding that they promoted both critical thinking, as well as empathy and perspective taking. She stated that “primary sources promote several types of cognitive reasoning – contextualization, critical thinking, analysis of multiple perspectives, interpretation, and sourcing. These reasoning skills lead to the development of cognitive empathy or perspective taking” (Stripling, 2011, p. 86).

Ultimately, the existing literature indicated that both historical fiction and primary sources were beneficial to students in the Social Studies classroom, encouraging habits of mind associated with global citizenship. The research I conducted fits neatly into the existing literature on the subject and adds to the extant work that examines the role of the teacher and the ways in which various writing tasks and activities can promote the use of these genres to build global citizenship.

Context

This project was conducted at St. Johnsbury Academy, a public-private school in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. The school has a population of over 930 students, with over 260 boarding students from 30 foreign countries and 15 different states. The day students represent over 50 communities in Vermont and New Hampshire. Data was gathered from my 2014-2015 Humanities students, reflecting on their experiences with historical fiction during a

unit on Africa taught in the Spring of 2015. This former class was made up of 27 students, with one Russian student, 26 Americans, 24 day students and three boarding students. The class was comprised of 16 girls and 11 boys. Only one student had a 504 plan which was related to anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder. The current class provided data collected during a unit on Ancient Greece that was taught during the Fall of 2015. This class was comprised of 25 day students and one boarding student from China. There were 17 girls and 9 boys, and no students were on 504 plans or IEPs. In the case of both the 2014-2015 and the 2015-2016 class, the course was designated as part of the Accelerated track. Students were permitted to enroll in the course based upon grades, test scores, and teacher recommendations. Additionally, in the 2014-2015 class, only one student had studied Africa during a prior grade. In the 2015-2016 class, 17 students had studied Ancient Greece at some point during the four previous years.

Methods

In order to establish the efficacy of historical fiction and primary source narratives in teaching students about other cultures, other time periods, and critical events in human history, as well as encouraging the habits of mind that are central to global citizenship, I first determined the instructional units that I thought best represented my use of these genres. The Africa unit my teaching partner and I designed and delivered in the Spring of 2015 involved two works of historical fiction: *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. Then, as we are required to cover Ancient Greece during the fall semester, I elected to add excerpts from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Pericles' *Funeral Oration* in addition to Homer's *Odyssey*. This unit was taught during the Fall of 2015.

The next step was determining the best way to collect evidence. For the unit taught prior to this project, I elected to send a survey to my former students through their school email accounts. The survey was made using Google forms and asked the students to rate the effectiveness of Kingsolver's and Achebe's novels in promoting their understanding of neocolonialism in Africa. The students rated each book on a scale of 1-5 in terms of how much it enhanced their understanding of neocolonialism, and then they provided an explanation of their rating. 24 of the 27 students responded to the survey.

My current students were given two surveys. The first was a survey that asked students to explain what they understood regarding the cultural values of Ancient Greece; this survey also asked students to rate how well they identified with the people of Ancient Greece and provide an explanation for their rating. Finally, this first survey asked students to indicate their prior educational experiences related to Ancient Greece. This survey was distributed prior to the student beginning our unit. The second survey was given to students at the end of the unit. It again asked students to explain the cultural values of Ancient Greece and rate how strongly they identified with the people of Ancient Greece, providing an explanation for their rating. Finally, it asked them to rate and reflect upon the primary sources that were used during the unit. Additionally, I was able to gather evidence of student learning from classroom discussions and activities, as well as writing assignments. All 26 students completed both surveys.

As I continued my review of academic literature that explored the use of historical fiction and primary source documents, I began to see a connection between teaching these genres and developing the skills central to global citizenship. In an attempt to quantify this, I created a

chart that linked the classroom discussions, activities and writing pieces in the unit to the three key components of creating global citizens: empathy, perspective-taking and critical thinking.

To analyze my data, I went through a number of steps. First, I read through the surveys from my previous class to determine how effective they believed the two works of historical fiction had been in promoting their understanding of neocolonialism. I also averaged their ratings for each novel. Then, I examined their open responses looking for phrases that indicated empathy, perspective-taking and/or critical thinking.

With the data from my current class, I began by comparing student responses to the questions regarding cultural values and identification with the people of Ancient Greece. As the questions were identical, I was able to observe any shift or growth in student understanding. I then read through the evaluation of the various works we had read and gauged the effectiveness of those works (as well as the degree of engagement the students felt - or didn't feel - with the texts). Finally, I was able to examine student performance in the discussions, activities, and writing pieces that were part of the unit. By correlating their performance with the skills of global citizenship that I had retroactively assigned to each, I was able to measure the degree to which students successfully demonstrated critical thinking, empathy and perspective-taking.

Findings/Analysis

The students from Spring 2015 indicated that they learned a lot about neocolonialism and Nigerian cultural values in reading *Things Fall Apart*, but some found that the book provided a limited number of perspectives. Additionally, many found the book less engaging than Kingsolver's novel, despite the fact that the book was easier to comprehend. The average rating

for the book, a rating that was based on how effective the student thought the book had been in terms of learning about neocolonialism, was a 3.9. Students stated:

This book was extremely useful as it showed the effects of neocolonialism very well by using fictional characters to illuminate how neocolonialism impacted the native people of Africa. (Eliza)

This was more helpful because it showed more of the beliefs and values of Africa during this time period which helped me to grasp the idea of how neocolonialism was destroying a culture that had existed for a long time. (Ben)

This book meshed different roles [points of view] in Africa and how they evolved. It helped create a realistic picture as to how people were treated, and how they reacted to the changes brought by the British. (Emma F.)

It was pretty helpful. It gave us a good look into the African point of view and daily lives. (Grace)

Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* seemed to have been more popular and to have resonated more strongly with the students. Despite the fact that seven months had passed since they had read the book, students were able to recall characters and events in far more detail than those in *Things Fall Apart*. As well, the students indicated that the book encouraged them to examine multiple perspectives on neocolonialism far more effectively than Achebe's text. They also felt a stronger emotional bond with the characters, both American and Congolese, and were better able

to empathize with them as a result. The average rating for the book was a 4.3, indicating that students felt that it had been quite helpful in learning about neocolonialism.

Despite being dreadfully long I actually enjoyed the book's compelling story and concepts. Instead of reading the whole book, taking excerpts that are the most impactful to the process of understand neocolonialism in Africa will help with the length of the book. Although this might not grow you attached to the characters as much as you would like, it will achieve the goal of understanding neocolonialism in Africa. (Karyssa)

Rather than memorizing information, or even having information described to us, reading it through characters' experiences was closer to experiencing it first hand, and gave us perspective. (Hannah W.)

The Poisonwood Bible definitely helped with understanding the unit better. It helped with gathering a better feel of what westernization was like and how people had responded to it. (Grace)

The book The Poisonwood Bible was helpful in developing my understanding in the time period and perspectives of those involved because it was written from multiple points of views and in a personal manner. (Mikayla)

Student responses to the survey indicated, as demonstrated in the samples above, that the use of the novels by Achebe and Kingsolver promoted looking at a topic from multiple

perspectives, developing empathy for the various groups involved, and understanding the historical events and attitudes that form the basis for the works. A few responses, such as Ben's, also show a degree of critical thinking regarding the events in Africa. Had the survey been formulated after reading Myers's work, I could have adjusted the questions to look for this type of critical thinking (rather than simply critically evaluating the value of the texts in promoting their own understanding of neocolonialism).

The data collected from my current class during our unit on Ancient Greece was helpful in examining the impact of primary source narratives in learning about a culture. With very clear pre and post unit data to compare, it was easy to find evidence that students' understanding of the cultural values of Ancient Greece was improved by reading both Plutarch and Pericles. Students extrapolated a great deal of information about societal structure and cultural values from these readings, and both the quantity and quality of the information they were able to share in responding to the first question on the survey. Students who had written on the first survey that the Ancient Greeks, "wore togas, had buildings with columns and... started democracy" were able to progress to detailed responses that spoke to the Greek's appreciation for "justice, honor, morality, and beauty." Some examples of student responses include:

The Greeks had a sophisticated approach to love. They believed in different types of love and had different names for each. They also thought that the government should work for everyone instead of just a few people. People had to serve their country. Citizenship was a key value too. (Elizabeth)

The Greeks were polytheistic and thought that the gods were able to control the destinies and fates of men. Heros were important and people like Odysseus were celebrated for being clever and brave. (Alex)

I think that family was really important to the Greeks. Who your father was helped shape your whole future. They were proud of their families. (Mary)

Responses to the question of how closely they identified with the people of Ancient Greece indicate some minor growth. Overwhelmingly, students indicated that they felt little connection to the Ancient Greeks in the first survey. With the exception of one young man who mentioned that “we have democracy like they did,” there was no real sense of identifying with the people of this culture. This shifted by the end of the unit.

We have a lot in common with the Ancient Greeks. The way that we view professional athletes and people like Taylor Swift is a lot like the way they looked at their heroes. (Mary)

I think that when you look at the Ancient Greeks you can get a sense of how proud they were of their civilization. They were kind of nationalistic in a way, like the way we think America is the best and everyone should be like us. I think the people on the bottom of their society, not citizens, got left out the same way poor people and minorities do now in America. (Zoe)

It was clear that students had learned a lot about the cultural values of Ancient Greece and had a stronger sense of connection with the people who lived during that period and in that place. The way in which the works we read in class seemed to have affected this transformation was interesting to note. Across the board, the *Odyssey* received high ratings from students. They identified with Telemachos' struggle to manage the behavior of the adults around him, and the desire he felt to live up to his father. They also were entertained by the exploits of Odysseus and also gleaned a great deal of information about the religious beliefs of the Ancient Greeks, as well as the ideal virtues for men and women and the role of hospitality. Antinous was reviled as a villain who got what he deserved, and his arrogance and desire for power allowed for some interesting parallels to various politicians in classroom discussions. Students were generally enthusiastic about the text, and the average rating for the book was 4.6.

I would give the Odyssey a 10 if I was allowed to! [The form had a 1-5 rating scale.]

I thought it was a great story and showed how important a strong leader can be. It also showed that the Greeks valued intelligence and cunning more than brute strength. (Liam)

It's weird how much time I spent thinking about Telemachus. I felt so sorry for him at the beginning. He seemed so powerless and frustrated. I think it's funny how teenagers are probably the same no matter when they are living. (Zoe)

In contrast, the works of Plutarch met with a tepid response. The average rating was 2.5 and students provided little explanation beyond "too hard to read... it was confusing" and "I'm

sorry, but this was pretty boring. I don't think it helped me learn as much." The complexity of the text's syntax and the length of some descriptive passages made this set of readings a poor match for freshmen.

Pericles' Funeral Oration, while it did not receive the glowing praise given to the Odyssey, did receive an average rating of a 3.7, with the majority of students giving it a 3 or 4. Students indicated that it taught them a great deal about the cultural values of the Ancient Greeks, and they appreciated the accessible way in which the text was organized, although it would seem that the complexity of the syntax was troubling for some students.

I learned a lot from this. The beginning was kind of confusing, but then you could tell from the different sections of the speech what things were really important to people in Ancient Greece. (Ethan)

In the final stage of analysis, I examined the performance of student in various formative and summative assessments and related their average success on the assessments to success in demonstrating proficiency in the global citizenship skills that I had linked to the assessments. I chose to focus on three assignments that I judged to best represent perspective-taking, empathy and critical thinking in concert. The first two were creative writing assignments in the form of narratives. These were RAFT writing pieces in which students chose a role and were assigned an audience, format and topic.

The first assignment was completed following our readings of excerpts from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Students chose one of the subjects Plutarch had written about (Pericles, Aristides, Alexander the Great or Theseus) and wrote a letter from the subject to Plutarch. The

students were required to closely analyze Plutarch's text on their chosen individual, assess Plutarch's tone and characterization of their subject, and then craft a response to Plutarch that incorporated their individual's imagined reaction to reading Plutarch's account of the individual's life. These were fairly successful, with the average score being an 84. The students who were most successful were those who took time to research the individual they had chosen in order to provide context for Plutarch's account. (An element that I plan to require in future.) Some were wildly funny, as the individuals felt they had been misrepresented. The need for students to assume a perspective here was crucial to performing well.

The second task asked students to imagine that they had been on hand to hear Pericles' *Funeral Oration*. Assuming the perspective of either an aristoi (aristocratic citizen), a periokoi (less prosperous citizen), a tradesman (noncitizen), a helot (peasant), or a slave, students wrote letters to the editor of an imaginary Ancient Greek newspaper. This assignment required students to not only assume the perspective of a particular individual, but also think critically about how their chosen individual would respond to the content of Pericles' speech. These were even more successful than the first task, as students seemed better able to comprehend Pericles' speech and were therefore even better able to incorporate specific points from the speech in crafting their response. Additionally, the ability to craft a "back story" for their individual meant that these letters were extremely creative and open to far more emotion. Not only did students seem comfortable in this exercise in perspective-taking, they were often empathetic for the plight of the individuals they had chosen. In reading each other's work, students were given the opportunity to appreciate additional points of view.

The final task was a graded discussion at the close of the Odyssey. Students were assigned a character from the epic poem and had to generate a list of questions from their character's perspective. As the class is large (26 students), my teaching partner and I split the group in half. The students submitted their questions ahead of time so that my partner and I could review them and assess the level of understanding that they demonstrated. Students had been previously taught about the three levels of questions developed by Arthur Costa, based on Bloom's taxonomy. For this discussion they were permitted only to ask level two and three questions. By and large the questions were thoughtful and resulted in a lively discussion in which students (in some cases quite vivaciously) captured the persona and point of view of their characters. Journal entries the following day showed that students had not only enjoyed the activity, but had also worked hard to understand how their characters might respond to the questions posed by the group.

The results of this project demonstrated that both primary source documents and historical fiction are able to encourage an understanding of cultural values and historical time periods, and are equally effective at promoting critical thinking in students. Students were able to learn from both genres. For example, there was demonstrable growth in the depth of knowledge students indicated on the surveys regarding the cultural values of Ancient Greece, and the students from 2014-2015 indicated that they had learned a lot about neocolonialism. However, the results also indicate that historical fiction is far more effective at promoting perspective-taking and empathy. The role of characterization and narrative voice in creating a visceral response and connection to the characters and events cannot be underplayed here.

Additionally, the use of multiple perspectives (as in the Achebe and Kingsolver texts) makes perspective-taking a more natural process for students.

Conclusion

I am proud of the work that I accomplished in this project. I have learned a great deal, not only about the benefits of historical fiction in the Social Studies (or Humanities) classroom, but about the possibilities for using this genre to promote traits necessary for global citizenship. Additionally, this project has underscored for me the importance of self-reflection and student feedback in shaping curriculum and instruction. I know that the information that I have gleaned from this process will help shape my teaching practices in years to come. I also think that I will continue to use digital surveys as an easy way to get a sense of the student perspective on my curriculum and the texts that I choose. I think that this project was extraordinarily useful as it encourages me to examine what I do and how it affects my students.

Some of the major lessons I have learned from this project are that historical fiction is more effective than primary source documents in encouraging empathy and perspective-taking, and that the role of the instructor is of primary importance. Beyond choosing the texts, the teacher can affect the level of success that students experience in terms of critical thinking, perspective-taking and empathy. The questions that the teacher chooses to ask, the tasks that the teacher assigns and the feedback that the teacher provides all affect the way in which students experience those texts and the skills that they develop in the process. I would hope that other teachers would use my project as an inspiration to incorporate more works of historical fiction, and more primary source documents into their curricula. “Social Studies teachers can help bring

the insight that fiction gives to human living into the classroom by finding ways to incorporate fiction into the Social Studies curriculum” (Mills, 1988, p.10).

Moving forward, I hope to explore how I can better incorporate primary source narratives as a balance to historical fiction. For example, last year in my sophomore Genre Literature course, I had students read letters from Osada’s *Children of the A Bomb*. The students then used these letters as inspiration for writing original poems that captured the perspective and experiences of one of the children. Students found this poetry writing assignment meaningful and engaging - it was mentioned by multiple students in their end of course survey as their favorite activity/unit. I hope to find a way to have more experiences like this one. These genres and related activities present an opportunity to inculcate the habits of mind that are critical to global citizenship, and creating global citizens should be the goal of all instructors.

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