

Lights! Camera! Reenaction!



A National Council for the
Social Studies Publication

Number 43

January/February 2012

www.socialstudies.org

Contents

2–9

**Lights, Camera, ...Reenaction!
Creating Video as We Study the
Civil War**

Angela Stokes

10–15

**Pairing Nonfiction and Fiction:
Social Studies and Language Arts
Together**

Angela Falter Thomas

16

The Back Page

**Candles, Flashlights, and Product
Safety**



MIDDLE LEVEL LEARNING

Steven S. Lapham MLL EDITOR

Richard Palmer ART DIRECTOR

Michael Simpson DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS

©2012 National Council for the Social Studies

Lights, Camera, ... Reenaction! Creating Video as We Study the Civil War

Angela Stokes

It's 4:00AM on a Saturday in May 2011, and 20 sixth graders hover over their keyboards in the school library, making final edits to six short documentary movies. I'm not sure how I'll explain to parents that their children did not sleep a wink during this culminating effort. The moon ebbs as students' fingers fly across video timelines (with the use of Final Cut Express software), inserting the last voiceover and correcting the last typo in the closing credits.

As the clock reaches 7:00AM, I hear students clicking *SAVE* and marking the moment with long, satisfied exhales. The deadline has been met. Everyone in the room shares the pride of a job well done—and also a wisp of anticipation. In a few weeks, the students' peers and parents, not to mention members of the general public, will watch these 5- to 7-minute movies at a national park during the sesquicentennial commemoration of the first battle of the Civil War.

How It All Began

Eight months earlier, a social studies teacher and I had challenged these students to create six original short movies that would examine the First Battle of Bull Run (also called the First Battle of Manassas by Confederate forces), which occurred on July 21, 1861, in Prince William County, Virginia. The students spent two semesters wrestling with questions like, "Is this battle truly important to twelve year olds in 2011? If so, how? Is it relevant to all sixth graders, whether we are first generation immigrants or native born; African Americans, white, or Hispanic; young women or young men? And if it is important to all of us, how do we share that message with a broader audience?"

This Saturday morning in May marked the finish of a national service-learning project designed to connect students with the history in their back yard and to demonstrate history's relevance to current and future generations.¹ The project featured a collaboration between Manassas National Battlefield Park; the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership (which I represented); educators in Prince William County, Virginia; and sixth grade students from Stonewall Middle School in Manassas, Virginia. As part of the assignment, students chose and researched a topic, identified a particular perspective, wrote original scripts, created costumes and props, learned to use state-of-the-art video equipment, filmed their short drama at the battlefield and, finally, used video-editing software to transform their dialog, music, and moving images into a compelling video. Once completed, student videos



became part of the official interpretive material for visitors to the Manassas National Battlefield Park during the July 2011 Sesquicentennial events. Near the Visitor Center on Henry Hill, visitors could view these films by local middle school students at the Family and Youth activity tent, where they were exhibited throughout the four-day event.

In addition to national exposure for their creative efforts, students experienced academic rigor and authentic learning throughout the school year. Most notably, they simulated the work of historians by considering different historical perspectives and analyzing and interpreting primary source documents. The project also challenged students to develop 21st Century

Learning skills,² to contribute to the knowledge preserved at a national historic site, and to assist with real preservation efforts.

Learning and Re-creating History

A history project like this can be conducted in any of our 50 states—just choose an aspect of local history that has a link to your curriculum and make that the focus of students' research. A documentary video can be made on a reasonable budget now that digital video cameras and editing software are within reach of the average consumer.³ A student's history project, however, can be in almost any medium. An eight-minute live

performance, a faux news article from the past, or a poster with original drawings and captions are among the creative vehicles for students to learn about history—and demonstrate what they have learned, as suggested by National History Day.⁴

A history project like this can also be a service-learning project.⁵ Discuss with your local park, museum, or historical society the ways that students' work might be put to use. Student-created posters might be temporarily displayed in the visitors' center of a state park or in a shopping mall. Live performances can be presented to younger students in the school auditorium. Student-directed short videos can be shown during an after-school recreational program. The students I worked with had their short videos presented at a national park.

Finally, I believe that one of the most memorable ways for children or adults to start learning about history is to visit a park or building that is rich with local history. Look for ways to utilize the physical and human resources in your neighborhood. Park rangers, librarians, and archivists are allies in your effort to teach children about their own history. For students in Prince William County, Virginia, learning about local history began with a field trip to the Manassas National Battlefield Park.

Understanding Historical Perspectives

On a brisk October day, local historians (including a park ranger, a poet, a period musician, and author) challenged students to interpret period maps and poems, identify the symbolism in historic songs, experience military and civilian life of the period, and ponder difficult battlefield decisions. These activities served to paint a fuller picture of the First Battle of Bull Run and its aftermath, provoking students to express thoughtful responses to the question, "What part of this story needs to be told?"

One girl suggested that her project could feature the role of the cavalry—from the horses' perspective.⁵ There were giggles, and then other creative ideas bubbled up. The topic raises an interesting question: What were the equine casualties of the Civil War? (An estimated 1,200,000 to 1,500,000 horses and mules died in service).⁶

Ari, a first generation immigrant from Argentina, wanted to showcase Irish immigrants' experience at the First Battle of Bull Run in 1861. "I didn't know there were Irish immigrants in the civil war. Why did they come here, and why did they join the fight?"

Rivaldo was moved by the story of Gustav Schurmann, a Prussian immigrant too young to join the Union army, but who nevertheless determined to enlist. Rivaldo exclaimed, "They [child soldiers] were twelve! Twelve! That's big for a twelve year old." A number of boys in both the North and the South ran away from farm and home to experience the "adventure" of war as color guards or drummer boys.⁷

Norman wanted to tell the story of James Robinson, Sr., a freedman in Virginia who owned a home in what became the

heart of the battlefield. "How can we live here [within a mile of the national park] and not know his story? Why isn't he [James Robinson] in the textbook?"

If "historical perspectives" was an abstract concept to students in the beginning of the project, it didn't remain that way for long. Their visit to the historical battlefield led to a thoughtful discussion on why historians need to examine events and ideas from different points of view.

"Well, we don't want to make six of the same movie," offered Martin.

"True. Any other reasons?" the teacher probed. Silence... until Anthony ventured a thought. "You see, if you look at a story from many people, you get a different picture. Maybe better, maybe worse, but it's different."

We discussed the comment "maybe better, maybe worse" and agreed to revisit the question as we worked on our projects. Understanding the importance of perspective to a historian would be a fundamental part of this service-learning experience.

The young scholars ultimately decided to tell the historical narrative through six different lenses, focusing on Stonewall Jackson; a youthful drummer boy; Leadership as modeled by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln and Confederate President Jefferson Davis; civilians (such as journalists, photographers and mothers left behind); James Robinson, Sr. and his family; and Irish immigrants who fought as Union soldiers.

Interpreting Primary Source Documents

Understanding the value of looking at a story from multiple perspectives is a significant step for sixth graders. But a greater challenge is sitting down with a primary source document, reading it, understanding it, and determining its value.

"Why do I need to read his or her words? What's the point? I already know enough about the story to start writing," commented some.

These were typical responses from this youthful generation. But as historians in training, they decided to pore over a wealth of documents in search of nuggets that would propel their stories forward. As part of the process, they analyzed the credibility of each source, summarized ideas, explained relationships between accounts and, most importantly, evaluated how each selection would become part of the story they wanted to tell.

Six research groups quietly read texts such as the order from Confederate Army General Johnston to General Jackson, delivered three days before the battle:

"Our gallant army under General Beauregard is now under attack by overwhelming numbers. The commanding general hopes that his troops will step out like men, and make a forced march to save the country."

A passage from General Jackson's memoirs described how soldiers responded to the possibility of combat at the start of the war:



“At this stirring appeal the soldiers rent the air with shouts of joy, and all eagerness and animation where before there had been only lagging and uninterested obedience.”

Students asked, “‘Rent the air?’ What does that even mean?” and “Why did they talk so funny?” We discussed both questions and reviewed basic strategies for analyzing new documents, which included breaking down difficult texts into smaller chunks, noticing context clues, using a dictionary, and occasionally asking peers and teachers to help decipher meaning. Students gradually gained confidence in their own ability to interpret the meaning of writing from the period.

Formulating New Questions

Moreover, instead of being tied to a standard primary source document analysis form, the budding researchers began asking their own questions as they worked with the documents.

Emma read a quotation from the memoirs of Mary Anna Jackson, Stonewall’s wife, in which she describes the resolve her husband brought to a battle.⁸ “His cool reply showed the unconquered mind of one who never knew that he was beaten.” Emma noted, “This one is interesting, but I don’t think we will tell this part in our movie. Let’s hold onto it for later.”

Thoughtful evaluation continued as students worked with their unique set of primary sources. The team looking at the African American experience—specifically the trials of James Robinson, Sr.—furrowed their brows when they discovered a discrepancy between an 1871 Claims Commission report and an oral history from his great, great granddaughter.⁹ They marked the conflicting passages with Post-It notes. “This piece says one thing and this one says something different. What do we do when that happens?” In this case, students found a third narrative from the period that corroborated the court document, which they then used while writing the script of their video.

With this experience, an important lesson surfaced: The

interpretation of history can be imperfect. We can state that insight to students in the classroom, but it really resonates when students stand in the shoes of a historian and try to determine the accuracy of two conflicting sources. There’s a new and deeper understanding to their nods.

Working as historians was not always comfortable for these students. There were moments of frustration.

“This one is confusing. Just put it in the NO stack.”

“Shoot, this one makes us think of other questions.”

The distinction between historical document and historical fiction also came into play. Elijah read a quote from a work of historical fiction *The Little Bugler* by William B. Styple¹⁰ In the novel, a father says to his son, “You must never forget why we enlisted to fight in this war. Our cause is just. We have taken up the sword for the purpose of defending and preserving our adopted country. ...” “Does this one [quote] help us tell our story?” asks Elijah, and then answers his own question. “Yeah. It’s not a primary source, but tag it and keep it.”

The five-day research phase ended with documents marked and sorted into three distinct stacks: “Keep,” “Toss,” and “Maybe Use.” As Rachel reviewed the stack of passages that would be the source of her group’s video script, she offered a brief and unsolicited comment, “I like their words better.” There is something powerful about primary sources—words written at the time that an event occurs, authored by people who were there.

Making and Supporting Inferences Using Evidence

Opportunities arose for the teacher and I to help students understand how historians use primary records to interpret historical events with accuracy. In one team’s case, opinions varied on what Confederate General Bee meant during the battle of First Manassas when he coined Thomas Jackson’s nickname, “Stonewall.”

One Confederate memoirist stated, “General Bee cried



out in a voice that the rattle of musketry could not drown, ‘Look! There is Jackson’s brigade standing behind you like a stone wall!’¹¹

Was Bee referencing Jackson’s fortitude or was he implying that the General was holding back and avoiding danger?

It’s not the most important historical question, but students were curious and wanted to know how to portray the scene in their movie. It mattered to them.

They began by asking if General Bee had written any clarification. He had not, as students remembered reading in the book *I Rode with Stonewall*, “With these words of baptism as his last, Bee himself fell and died.” Given that information, students decided to revisit their stacks of documents in search of clues to General Jackson’s character as a soldier.

The group reread Mary Anna Jackson’s description of her husband’s “unconquered mind.” They reviewed Jackson’s earlier interactions with General Bee and his resolve to give the Union attackers “the bayonet.”

They looked carefully at descriptions from soldiers who served under him and noticed this quote in *Stonewall Jackson and the Old Stonewall Brigade*, “Of this eminent man I have still some words to add. Some details are necessary to complete

my sketch: to show him, as he is, not only the idol of the popular heart, but the military leader of masterly genius, trusted and confided in to an unlimited extent by the great Commander-in-Chief of our armies.”¹²

All of these passages from primary sources described Jackson as a man of courage and strength. The students therefore concluded that General Bee must have been applauding Jackson when the famous quote flew from his lips. That’s how the lines were spoken in the students’ video re-creation.

Describing Cause-and-Effect Relationships

Students read accounts of immigrants from the early 1800s who fled desperate situations in their home countries. “The Irish had escaped a famine plagued land and arrived in New York with barely the clothes on their backs. They were largely unskilled laborers and predominantly potato farmers. Arriving in large metropolitan areas, they were forced to live in dirty, crime ridden slums or converted factories.”¹³ Even with these harsh realities however, most Irish, were willing to fight to the death for the support of the Constitution, the government and the laws of the country. “The Germans, like so many of their European brothers, fully knowing the horrors of oppression,

treasured freedom and therefore rejected the institution of slavery. They too were willing to fight to preserve the Union. The Italians and Hungarians vehemently opposed both slavery and secession. Many paralleled their lives in the homeland with the conditions of the Negro slaves. “Freedom was their cherished gift.”¹⁴ As a result of these readings, students discussed clear examples of cause and effect relationships and were able to make the following connections:

Cause: Living conditions were desperate in Europe in the 1850s, so people decided to leave.

Effect: In the 1850s, new immigrants arrived in the United States in search of food and education.

Cause: Some European immigrants were denied basic freedoms in their homeland.

Effect: They were willing to fight and make profound sacrifices for their new freedoms.

Antonio, an immigrant from Guatemala, drew parallels between contemporary immigrants and those from the mid-1800s. “In both cases people came for safety and freedom, and we all want to stay and live in a free and peaceful United States. We also all want to prove that we are worthy to be here.”

Analyzing Social Situations

Following Antonio’s thoughts, many students related to the immigrant experience in 1861 on a personal level. Students whose families had arrived in Manassas, Virginia, from Central and South America and parts of Asia knew about the struggles of contemporary immigrants first hand. Some had conquered the anxiety of starting over, mastered a new language, and experienced isolation and discrimination. It went unspoken, but there seemed to be a sense of relief that they were not the first ones to blaze this trail. A new curiosity followed. How did immigrants handle discrimination in 1861? What can we learn from their response to adversity?

On the question of discrimination, students learned that immigrants generally stood their ground. For example, when given faulty weapons by a Union quartermaster, immigrant soldiers refused to accept them and were resourceful in acquiring replacements that worked. They took action against unfair compensation practices, and demonstrated courage on the battlefield.

Yesterday, July 21, we were in the thickest fight, even though we are green at the business. We traveled eight hours and a half steady almost without halt. Worn out by our long and quick march, we stopped for a short moment and then fired deliberately into the enemy. Then another, then another as we approached the 4th Alabama. But we were like sheep sent to slaughter. The cannons belched forth, bullets whistled by and



our men dropped and scattered.

One of our wounded men who carried the colors was shot down, but the flag was grabbed from his grasp before it could fall. Then that man fell, shot in the foot and in the moment of his collapse, another swept in to keep the colors flying.¹⁵

Immigrants of that time canonized their allegiance to their adopted country and its values in a spirited battle song.¹⁶

Song of the Irish Brigade

(chorus)

Now we’re pledged to free this land,
So long the exile’s resting-place;
To crush for aye a traitorous band,
And wipe out treason’s deep disgrace.
Then let us pledge Columbia’s cause,
God prosper poor old Ireland, too!
We’ll trample all the tyrant laws;
Hurrah for the land and the new!



Solving Real Life Problems

There proved to be no shortage of examples of historical figures (civilians, soldiers, and leaders) who faced and conquered overwhelming odds. Abraham Lincoln was one example. General McDowell sent the president a telegraph on July 21, 1861 at 5:45PM: “Our men exhausted with fatigue and thirst and confused by firing into each other, were attacked by the enemy’s reserves, and driven from the position overlooking Manassas. After this the men could not be rallied, but slowly left the field.”¹⁷ Lincoln responded that the soldiers should remain “strong and resolute.” Despite Union defeats and the horrendous casualties of the war, Lincoln remained resolute in his determination to keep the Union intact.

Another example of resoluteness was James Robinson, who bought freedom for most of his children, one by one, even though the feat appeared impossible.

We also considered Jefferson Davis’s resolve when he was asked to fill a post that he did not want. “I’ve been asked to be the Confederate President. Oh, Dear God, spare me this responsibility. ...The trial is too great and the result too doubtful to justify one in declining any post to which he is assigned. I have no option, but to accept.”¹⁸

After studying these examples, students noticed a pattern forming in the ways people approached difficult situations. Justin concluded in his script, “When life happens, I am just going to persevere and think of Davis’ courage and Lincoln’s resolve.”

21s Century Learning – Collaborate

21st Century Learning skills were embedded in every step of this project. Students learned quickly that, in the real world of film production, people with specific gifts and expertise come together to accomplish a common goal. In each working group, students served as researchers, film directors, writers, editors, costume designers, choreographers, and actors. As in any collaboration, each person depended on the other team members for success. The days devoted to collaborative work were characterized by a buzz of productive, creative energy:

Do you want the skirt to be pink or black?

Let’s go with black since she is sad. Her brother died.

What do the leaves of carrots look like?

Is this wheel big enough?

Does this boot look like it’s been through a battle?

Does this music work with this scene, or is it too happy?

Should we cut this scene earlier?
Is the script too long?

21st Century Learning – Communicate

Students also had to utilize many different communication skills, in many different ways. Wei, director for the Drummer Boy team, could be heard praising and guiding her cast. “You’re doing great. Let’s do it one more time, and this time, no laughing when you charge across the battlefield. Make it real.”

Writers aimed to create a script that would resonate with the audience. “Is this too long? We want to show that young boys thought war was a big adventure. Then they learned it wasn’t and they had to say, ‘Do I stay?’ And we have to show the part where Gustav’s pants are way too big. It’s funny. But, is this too long?”

Each team started with one simple, core idea and developed it by drafting dialog, then discussing each line. To assist the writing effort, the teacher scattered words across the board like Legos – “alliteration, simile, onomatopoeia, and personification”—and asked, “What can we build with these tools? How can you use these figures of speech to help make your dialogs interesting to the audience?” she added. “In addition to historical accuracy, a thoughtful dialog will keep audiences captivated.” A light seemed to click on in students’ heads. Oh, these tools serve a real purpose!

21st Century Learning – Create

Students filmed the final scripts on-site at Manassas National Battlefield Park, then edited their video clips down to 5- to 7-minute mini-documentaries. Teachers, administrators, and community members were impressed by the creative thought displayed by students. Paul, for example, learned to play *Amazing Grace* on his violin because it would be the perfect finale for the documentary about James Robinson. William learned to slow video clips down for dramatic effect and to focus a viewer’s attention on one point in the scene. Rachel choreographed a dance, drafted lyrics with Aliyah, and designed costumes. Bikash became the “sound guy” and was the person to see if the boom mic was busted. Mia gave tutorials on the Sony video camera and kept her team in the appropriate blue or grey period dress. Moez, demonstrating creative genius in front of and behind the camera, was glad to see that angles applied to more than just math.

Philosopher Carl Jung once said, “The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.” If there is truth in that statement, then it is powerful to see sixth grade students “playing with” big ideas and historical evidence from the perspective of the historian—not that of a middle school student trying to absorb dry facts. Maybe history is a discipline they are learning to love.

This project helped create students who are curious and who understand that, though a textbook may only devote a few dozen words to a given event, there is a deeper story lurking behind that one paragraph. Moreover, the project helped these

students develop the skills required to unravel such a story and share what they find through the dynamic medium of video.

For Rivaldo, the decision to make movies at Manassas National Battlefield Park seemed easy. “We had to do this. It was the only way we could honor what they did.” And I thought, “Twelve. That’s a big thought for a twelve year old.”

Notes

1. This project, titled “Of the Student, By the Student, For the Student,” was built on lessons that educators for earlier initiatives at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park and Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello under the auspices of Journey Through Hallowed Ground. Learn about those efforts at www.hallowedground.org and www.nps.gov/nr/travel/journey. JTHG is a partnership project of the National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places, Scenic America, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.
2. Partnership for 21st Century Skills, www.p21.org.
3. The editing program Final Cut Pro X costs about \$300.00. (www.apple.com/finalcutpro).
4. National History Day, www.nhd.org. NHD inspires children through exciting competitions and transforms teaching through project-based curriculum and instruction.
5. Rahima C. Wade, *Community Action Rooted in History* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2007).
6. Milton Meltzer, *Hold Your Horses: A Feedbag Full of Fact and Fable* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 40-41.
7. Daniel C. King, “Drummer Boys: Creating Historical Fiction and Studying Historical Documents,” *Middle Level Learning* 35 (May/June 2009): 10-15.
8. Mary Anna Jackson, ed., *Memoirs of Stonewall Jackson* (Louisville, KY: Prentice Press, 1895).
9. “The Robinson House,” www.nps.gov/archeology/robinson/oral2.htm; “Claim of James Robinson,” www.nps.gov/mana/forteachers/upload/Res5_JRobinson_claimSCC.pdf.
10. William B. Style, *The Little Bugler* (Kearny, NJ: Belle Grove Publishing, 1998).
11. Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1940): 10.
12. John Esten, *Stonewall Jackson and the Old Stonewall Brigade* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1954): 23.
13. John M. Pellicano, *Conquer or Die: The 39th New York Volunteer Infantry, Geribaldi Guard* (Flushing, NY: Pellicano Publications, 1997): 19-21.
14. Pellicano, 21.
15. Paul R. Wylie, *The Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).
16. Pellicano, 20.
17. “War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records (O.R.) of the Union and Confederate Armies.” Series I, vol. II, p. 316.
18. Cass Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis* (New York: Crown, 1981).

I would like to thank Ray Brown, Chief of Interpretation and Cultural Resources Management, Manassas National Battlefield Park; Kenneth Bassett, Director of Student Learning, Prince William County Schools; and David Born, Historic Programs Coordinator of Prince William County Historic Preservation Division for their support of this project.

ANGELA STOKES, an educational consultant, was a project director for *Journey Through Hallowed Ground* during the projects described here. She can be reached at angelastokes0424@gmail.com.

Pairing Nonfiction and Fiction: Social Studies and Language Arts Together

Angela Falter Thomas

Effective teachers meet the developmental needs of their students and connect learning to their students' lives in meaningful ways. Incorporating high-quality literature in the social studies classroom is a powerful way to reach out to students in the middle grades, to touch them deeply on many levels and add another dimension to their understanding.¹ As a teacher for 20 years, I've witnessed my middle grades students so moved that they cry while reading from a trade book in my classroom. Not once have I seen a student so emotionally affected while reading a textbook. When students are affected emotionally, they have better recall and comprehension. Teaching with trade books of fact and fiction can make this happen.

Over the years, I've observed some of my students struggle while trying to read what I've assigned. The readability levels of textbooks are typically written at grade level or above.² Not all students have kept pace with their peers in reading skills, yet content areas demand higher and higher levels of independent work as students move to the middle grades. According to reading expert Richard Allington, if struggling readers spend their days in classrooms where only grade level texts are used, they are wasting time.³ Some textbook page designs bombard students with text, photos, charts, vocabulary, headlines, and sidebars. This can actually confuse and distract struggling readers and English Language Learners (ELLs). In short, for some students, textbooks can fail to provide information in an understandable way.⁴

Teachers Teaming Together

Using a variety of good books, related to a social studies topic or issue, provides the perfect opportunity for adaptations based on the needs of the students. It also provides social studies teachers an opportunity for team teaching, planning lessons together with a language arts teacher, or at least coordinating the timing of assignments.⁵ A novel would be discussed in language arts class while textbook and primary source documents are discussed in social studies. Discussions in both classes could

include everything that students are reading. Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, picture books, chapter books, folklore, mythology and graphic novels allow teachers to meet their students' unique needs while also teaching the content required of the social studies teacher. Trade books are written at a variety of different reading levels, which helps teachers differentiate so that all of their students can learn and be successful.

Providing Background and Vocabulary

Teaching with two books about the same topic—one of fiction, one of fact—is a strategy that encourages rich investigations of the topic at hand in a middle grades social studies classroom. "When readers read two or more texts that are related in some way, they are encouraged to extend their understandings of each text differently than if only one text had been read and discussed."⁶

A textbook is not the only source of nonfiction. Including examples and excerpts from primary historical sources provides students with more meaning, purpose, context and significance regarding the texts and content that they encounter, ultimately giving students a purpose for reading and helping them gain a deeper appreciation for the struggles, courage, and history of humankind.⁷

In my experience, teaching with fiction and nonfiction texts together helped efficiently meet required standards while also developing important information students must have in order to be successful. Pairing the fiction and nonfiction together generated more questions, led to better discussions, and more meaningful learning.

Others have found that teaching with two texts develops and increases students' vocabulary and comprehension which are known to be crucial factors in student understanding.⁸ Students typically learn more specialized vocabulary when it is taught through application, such as teaching through fact and fiction, where they can make many connections between and among texts. Reading experts suggest vocabulary is learned

through direct and indirect ways.⁹ Knowing that students can understand through listening even if they are having trouble reading the material on their own, I read aloud to my students at times. Reading aloud is a great way to introduce new material, to help get students interested in the topics and issues, and to provide students with facts and background knowledge they need to know. It provides the students another way of engaging in the material.

Some middle grades students don't fully comprehend the content because they don't have the background knowledge needed to understand. Reading fiction first seems to help those students a lot. Literature often presents content and vocabulary in user-friendly ways. It helps students gain the background knowledge they need to be successful with more challenging content.

Two Perspectives

The benefits run in both directions. Informational texts support students' comprehension of the fictional text while building background knowledge essential for understanding. Critical thinking skills are utilized as students compare, synthesize, and evaluate the information presented in both texts. Additionally, the topics that can arise in these comparisons can be complex, which leads students to use abstract and higher level thinking.

For students, considering two texts simultaneously is like putting together two pieces of a puzzle. It's like looking through two different lenses, both focusing on the same topic and therefore offering a more holistic view of a given topic. It provides a wider range of potential handles or entry points for student engagement.

Implementing Paired Books

If you want your students to learn deeply and meaningfully, let them experience social studies and issues through the eyes and ears of those who live or once lived in a particular time and place. Combining literature of fact and fiction lets students imagine various cultures, time periods, and geographies. It lets them listen in on conversations so they feel as though they've travelled back in time, or to a faraway place. When you put good books, with great illustrations or photographs, in students' hands, you invite them to slip right into the images and experience important moments.

Teachers do not need to read or have students read an entire book, but read interesting parts and sections and share the findings. Perhaps this is a chapter, or maybe just a really good paragraph or passage. Regardless, I suggest starting with the book of fiction first, and making sure it is historically accurate and has received some favorable reviews or awards. Using fiction will spark interest and build background knowledge and vocabulary to help student succeed. Next, use the nonfiction book (or a selection from it) to offer factual information for your students about the topic of study.

Finding Good Books

My favorite website for finding high quality literature of fact and fiction is www.titlewave.com. Once you register at the website, it's completely free, allowing the teacher to browse thousands of titles. Another useful source for high-quality fact and fiction books is the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. These annual listings are available free to the public as PDFs at the NCSS website (www.socialstudies.org/notable), except for the current year, which is a members-only download.

The following eight teaching activities were used successfully with my sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. While I share the books I used with each of the eight activities, other books could be substituted for these titles. Finally, many of the strategies require the middle grades students to revisit the texts to explore ideas. This can provide additional opportunities to read and re-read, to look more carefully, and ultimately to learn more. Without a doubt, I increased my students' understanding of our topics by pairing books of fact and fiction together and using them in my lessons. 📖

Notes

1. Anita Perna Bohn and P. B. Kolloff, "Dramatic Narratives: Capturing the Human Side of World War II," *Middle Level Learning* 27 (September 2006): 2-5.
2. Janice F. Almasi, *Teaching Strategic Processes in Reading* (New York: Gillford Press, 2003).
3. Richard Allington, "You Can't Learn Much from Books You Can't Read," *Educational Leadership* 60, no. 3 (2002): 16-20.
4. M. J. Fresch, and P. Harkins, *The Power of Picture Books: Using Content Area Literature in Middle School* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2009).
5. Thomas S. Dickenson and Thomas O. Erb, *We Gain More than We Give: Teaming in Middle Schools* (Columbus, OH: NMSA, 1997).
6. K. Short and J. Harste, *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann, 1996), 537.
7. Robin Groce, "Authenticating *Number the Stars* using Nonfiction Resources," *Middle Level Learning* 21, no. 3 (2009): 6-8.
8. M. Graves, *The Vocabulary Book: Learning and Instruction* (Urbana, IL: Teachers College Press, 2006).
9. E. Newton, N. Padak, and T. Rasinski, *Evidence-based Instruction in Reading* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2008).

ANGELA FALTER THOMAS, a National Board Certified Teacher, is an assistant professor of reading and literacy in the Middle Childhood Program, School of Teaching and Learning, College of Education and Human Development at Bowling Green State University, in Bowling Green, Ohio

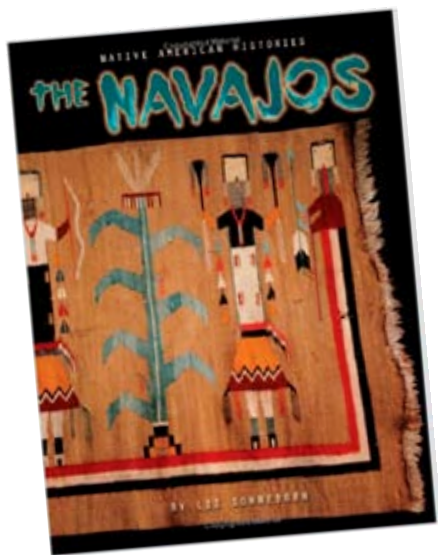
TOPIC: Navajo Culture

STRATEGY: Webbing (A central word or phrase is linked to supporting labels, concepts and ideas)

FICTION TEXT: Miles, Miska *Annie and the Old One*. New York: Little, Brown, 2007.

NONFICTION TEXT: Sonneborn, Liz. *The Navajos*. Lerner, New York: 2007.

ACTIVITY: To build background knowledge before reading *The Navajos*, I first read aloud the fiction book *Annie and the Old One*. My sixth grade students individually created a web about the information they learned through the book about the aboriginal culture as I read. Next, in small groups, the students read selections they chose from the nonfictional text *The Navajos*. I obtained multiple copies of that book from various libraries. During this small group time, students added spokes and details to their webs on the basis of new knowledge they gained from the second book. This webbing activity helped my students organize their learning, like a filing system – adding a new piece of information to some information they already had about the topic. This activity also helped my students to make connections between the information presented in each book.



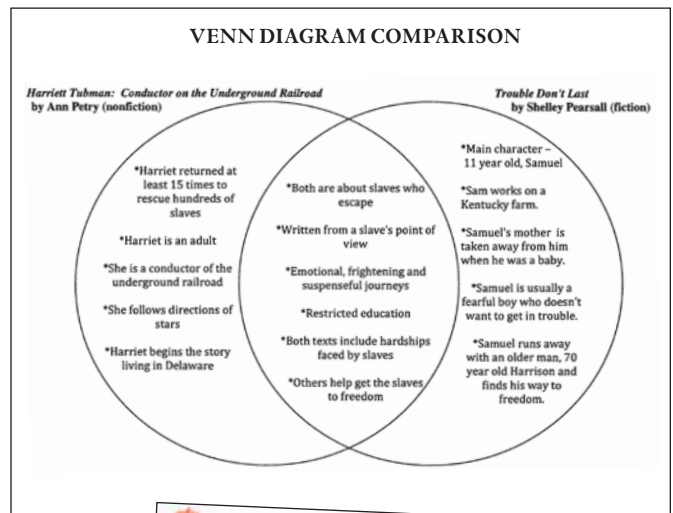
TOPIC: Slavery and the Underground Railroad

STRATEGY: Venn Diagrams (Students place terms within overlapping circles that illustrate similarities and differences between two topics.)

FICTION TEXT: Shelley Pearsall. *Trouble Don't Last*. New York: Yearling, 2003.

NONFICTION TEXT: Petry, Ann. *Harriett Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*. New York: Amistad, 1996.

ACTIVITY: My eighth grade students used Venn diagrams to show relationships in a visual manner after reading both texts. My seventh grade students compared and contrasted information about the topic of the Underground Railroad presented in the two texts while working with a Venn diagram. A large circle represented each book, and the two circles overlapped. This activity allowed students to see and analyze various aspects of slavery presented by each book. Furthermore, the activity helped them understand how different books might emphasize different aspects of the same topic (with the common points appearing in the "overlapping" area of the Venn diagram). This strategy could also be completed with partners, in small groups, or in whole-class settings.



TOPIC: Yellow Fever Epidemic

STRATEGY: T-Charts (A two-column table is used for grouping ideas into categories, typically allowing students to compare and contrast ideas and statements)

FICTION TEXT: Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Fever 1793*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

NONFICTION TEXT: Murphy, Jim. *An American Plague*. New York: Clarion, 2003.

ACTIVITY: While my seventh graders were all reading *Fever 1793*, I selected key pieces from *An American Plague* and read the sections aloud to supplement my students' learning. Through the use of a T-chart, they identified information to compare and contrast, which encouraged them to use critical and higher-order thinking skills. Our T-chart emphasized the differences between the books. Students could also separate fact from fiction in the two texts with a T-Chart.

Fever 1793	American Plague
Fiction	Nonfiction
general terms	specific details
People fleeing Philadelphia	first hand accounts
cemeteries filled w/fever victims	free blacks act as heroes
thieves storm coffee house	18th century medical practices explained.
girl searches for mother	learning the cause & cure of yellow fever

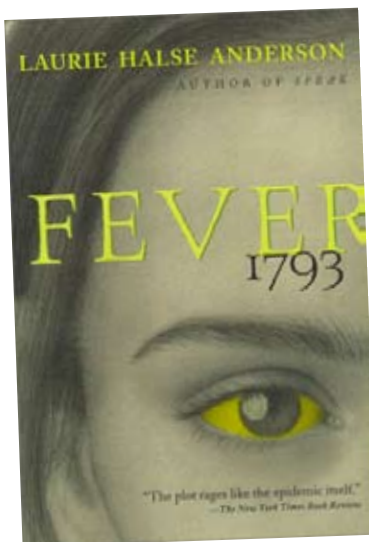
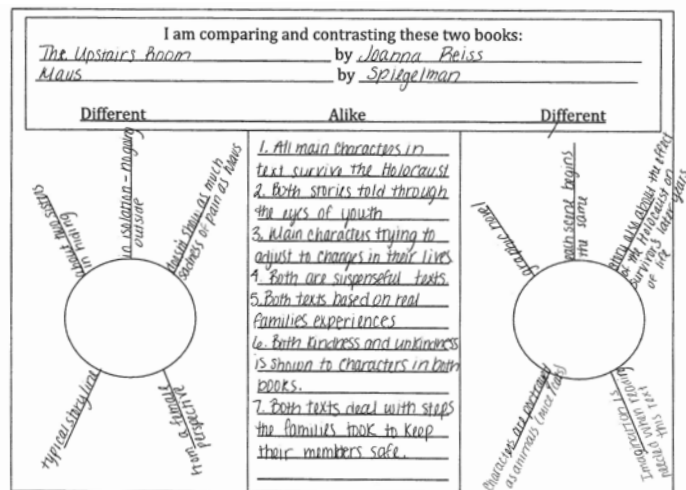
TOPIC: The Holocaust

STRATEGY: Compare/Contrast Maps (A graphic organizer that utilizes webbing concepts to note and organize similarities and differences)

FICTION TEXT: Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

NONFICTION TEXT: Reiss, Johanna. *The Upstairs Room*. New York: Batam, 1972.

ACTIVITY: I used Compare/Contrast Maps with my eighth grade students. These "maps" are another great way to compare and contrast information presented in the two texts. The first is a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, the other is a memoir of a Dutch Jewish girl who was in hiding for two-and-one-half years. Start by writing the names of the two texts you are comparing in the circles under the words "Different." Write differences of the two books on the spokes coming out of the webs. Write how the books are alike on the lines in the middle. This too can be used individually, with small groups, or with whole class settings to help students better understand and comprehend the issues.



TOPIC: The Civil War

STRATEGY: Circle Learning (A class is split in two groups, each taking responsibility for the content of its book and then sharing it with the other)

FICTION TEXT: Collier, James Lincoln and Christopher Collier. *With Every Drop of Blood: A Novel of the Civil War*. New York: Laurel Leaf, 1997.

NONFICTION TEXT: Ford, Carin T. *The American Civil War: An Overview*. New York: Enslow, 2004.

ACTIVITY: I divide the class into two groups and assign the texts based on students' reading abilities and the readability of the books. Each group makes a circle (or a couple of circles) to explore and experience their assigned text, whether it is the fiction or nonfiction book. After each group has selected key passages from their text, an inside/outside circle takes place. This is like a sharing forum, allowing members of the fiction group to pair with members of the nonfiction group, discussing what they learned from their assigned book. After 2 or 3 minutes of discussion, students rotate to another partner to repeat their findings and to add new information to what they already know.

TOPIC: Japanese Internment Camps

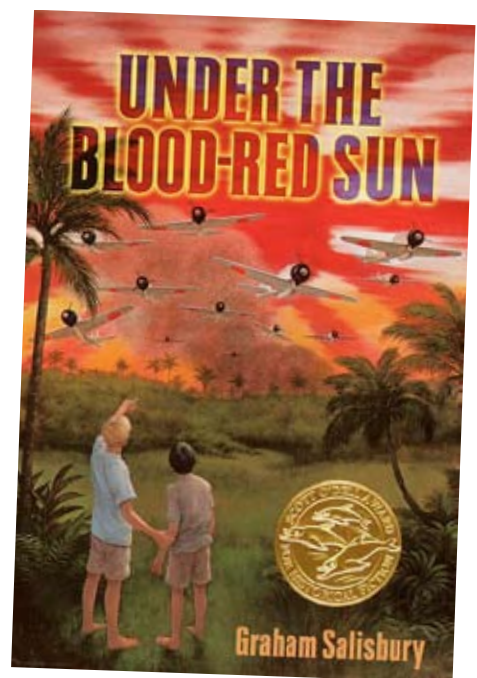
STRATEGY: Class Discussions (With good questions, students use higher level thinking skills, including analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating)

FICTION TEXT: Salisbury, Graham, *Under the Blood-Red Sun*. New York: Laurel Leaf, 1994.

NONFICTION TEXT: Tashiro, Kenneth A. *Wase Time! A Teen's Memoirs of Gila River Internment Camp Days*. New York: AuthorHouse, 2005.

ACTIVITY: Another excellent way to help students increase their knowledge and comprehension is by holding high-quality, whole-class discussions. Here are some queries to actively engage your students:

- Describe some of the differences in writing styles between fiction and nonfiction.
- What was your overall impression of the fiction book? The nonfiction book?
- Compare and contrast the information in the books: How are the books the same? How are they different?
- Describe what you learned from the fiction book that you couldn't learn from the nonfiction book (and vice versa).
- Which book helped you to learn more about the topic? Explain why.



TOPIC: Immigration / Migrant Labor

STRATEGY: Partner Poems (Students tell two side of a story or compare and contrast experiences simultaneously)

FICTION TEXT: Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Esperanza Rising*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.

NONFICTION TEXT: Krull, Kathleen. *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* (New York: Harcourt Children’s Books, 2003).

ACTIVITY: Having students write and present “Partner Poems” or “Poems for Two Voices” is a wonderful way to share the information found in fiction and nonfiction texts. I’ve found my middle grades students enjoy working with partners, creating partner poems, which are designed to be read aloud by two people. A viewpoint from one book is shared and read by the person on the left while another viewpoint is written and shared by the person on the right side. Sometimes the poems contain conflicting viewpoints and opinions while other times there is agreement. When stanzas are written on the same horizontal line, both students read their stanza aloud at the same time – which creates some dissonance or cacophony. A blank space on one side of the line means that that reader is silent while the partner reads his or her line aloud. This teaching strategy is a powerful way to help students think deeply about what they believe, know, and want to express. [Leslie Perfect Ricklin, “Poems for Two Voices: An Interdisciplinary Activity,” *Middle Level Learning* 25, no. 1, (January/February 2006): 14-15.]

Esperanza Rising

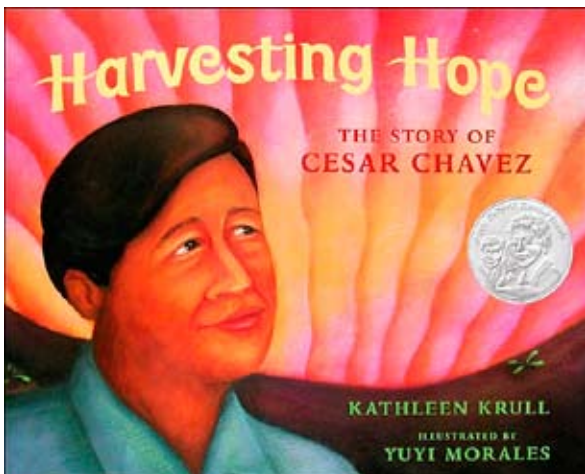
Strike? No!
I’m fearful I’ll lose my job

How will I care for Mama?
With no money, Mama will die
Working and working for low pay
Very hard work
This is no life

Harvesting Hope

Strike! Yes!
I’m willing to risk losing my job.

We must all take a stand
We band together for all
Refusing to work for low pay
No violence
March; raise awareness



TOPIC: The Middle Ages

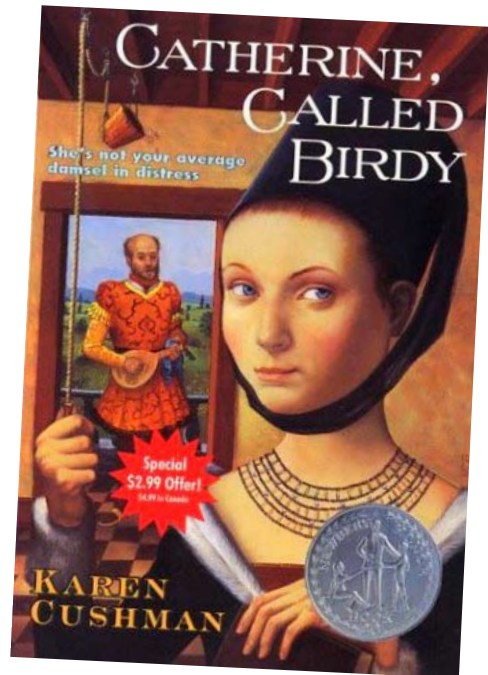
STRATEGY: Compare / Contrast Cubes (Students construct meaning by examining a topic in six different ways.)

FICTION TEXT: Cushman, Karen. *Catherine, Called Birdy*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.

NONFICTION TEXT: Kenney, Karen L. *Harsh or Heroic? The Middle Ages*. Danbury, CT: Children’s Press, 2008.

ACTIVITY: Blank cube templates are available online. Type in the questions you want your students to discuss, print out the templates on heavier paper, cut them apart and glue them together as paper “cubes” with sides equaling, for example 3×3×3 inches. After reading the texts of fact and fiction, middle grades students enjoy “rolling the dice” and discussing the question that comes up on top. Possible questions for middle grades students include:

1. How are the books alike?
2. How are the books different?
3. What are the most important items that make them different?
4. Which book would you recommend to a friend? Why?
5. Give an example of how reading one book helped in your reading of the other book.
6. Did the author of the fiction respect what is known about that period of history? Or did the author make things up that never could have happened in that time and place?



Candles, Flashlights, and Product Safety

Tell you students, “The month of December has almost twice the number of home candle fires as any other month of the year.” Then lead a discussion that can revolve around a few key questions. Listen for whether your students have ideas about these topics before you read any of the answers.

- 1. Why are candles and the month of December a dangerous mix?** Winter celebrations and religious ceremonies during this month often involve candles.
- 2. What can we do to reduce the hazard posed by candles?** Fire chiefs recommend that you (a) put out any flame when leaving the room or going to bed; (b) keep a candle at least 1 foot away from any clothing, paper, or curtains; (c) use sturdy holders, never milk-carton holders such as kids might make as a craft project; (d) place a metal cookie sheet under a Menorah if allowing the candle to burn to its end; and (e) use a flashlight if you need a light for moving about in a dark house (but see the warning below).
- 3. Were our ancestors better at handling candles?** Maybe not. Candles started many fires when they were a main source of home lighting. During the period 1850-1914, when the fashion was to wear layers of underclothing and flowing dresses, many women were burned when candles or lamps caught their clothes on fire.
- 4. Are electric lights safe?** Electric lights are generally safer than open flames, but lamps can get hot, and if a table lamp falls over and rests on cloth or paper, it might start a fire. And consider this press release about one brand of LED flashlight. (Students can visit www.cpsc.gov/about/about.html to learn more about the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Under which branch of government does this agency reside?)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 5, 2012

Release #12-080

(www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/prerel/prhtml12/12080.html)

Firm's Recall Hotline: (800) 440-0680

CPSC Recall Hotline:(800) 638-2772

CPSC Media Contact:(301) 504-7908

Target Recalls LED Flashlight Sets Due to Fire and Burn Hazards

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, in cooperation with the firm named below, today announced a voluntary recall of the following consumer product. Consumers should stop using recalled products immediately unless otherwise instructed. It is illegal to resell or attempt to resell a recalled consumer product.

Name of Product: 6-pc. LED Flashlight Sets

Units: About 55,000

Importer: Target Corporation, of Minneapolis, Minn.

Hazard: When turned on, the flashlights can heat up, smoke or melt, posing fire and burn hazards.

Incidents/Injuries: Target has received reports of four incidents with the flashlights, including two minor burn injuries to consumer's hands.

Description: This recall involves 6-pc. LED Flashlight Sets. They are made of silver plastic with black rubber around the handle and light base. The flashlight sets have UPC code 490021010049 printed on the back of the package. They were sold in sets of six, including two small flashlights measuring about 3 inches long, two medium flashlights about 6 inches long and two large flashlights about 7 1/2 inches long.

Sold exclusively at: Target stores nationwide from October 2010 through December 2011 for about \$10 per set.

Manufactured in: China

Remedy: Consumers should immediately stop using the flashlights and return them to any Target store for a full refund.

Consumer Contact: For additional information, contact Target at (800) 440-0680 between 7AM and 6PM CT Monday through Friday, or visit the firm's website at www.target.com.