

Teaching American History Grant: Learning Experience 2008-2009

Michael Brown—Red Hook Central School District

Topic Title: History as an interpretive discipline DATE: 11-19-08

Grade Level: 8

Overview of the Learning Experience:

- Students will observe a skit in the classroom, but will be unaware that it is a skit. After the skit is over, students will analyze their experience, first on their own and then with a partner.
- The goal of this lesson is to have students build some understanding about how history is constructed, how history is, to some extent, open to interpretation, and to understand some the complexities involved in the practice of writing history.
- Much as this lesson is concerned with questions surrounding historiography, it could be taught at any point in the year, but the earlier the better.
- Learning Standards addressed:

USNYHS1.04. United States and New York History Standard. Understand how different experiences, beliefs, values, traditions, and motives cause individuals and groups to interpret historic events and issues from different perspectives.

Essential Question(s):

- How is history constructed?
- What are some of the complexities in writing about historical events and people?

Time Allotment (classroom time): This lesson should take two periods.

Materials/Resources: (Please include all documents containing directions for students)

- Students will need the guided response sheet where students will record what they witnessed, how it differed from their partner's response, and their answer to the essential question.
- Teachers will need the script for skit that will take place in the room and the cooperation of one student in each class as well as an administrator.

Procedure:**Day 1**

- Perform the skit (attached).
- Hand out student worksheets. Students will spend 15 minutes writing down the sequence of events as they remember them.
- Students now share their observations with a partner. They will then write down two differences they found in their memory and interpretation of events.
- Teacher will lead a discussion about these differences. Some points of controversy are attached to assist teacher discussion.

Day 2

- Students further consider the event by answering questions revolving around some issues that would not be considered “the facts”. These questions include motivational and moral issues raised in the skit. Students should see that events are open to interpretation
- Teacher makes the connection from this experience today to the work of the historian.

Assessment:

- See rubric.

Script for Classroom Skit

Setting and Prop List

- Prearrange with a student to be complicitous in this activity. This student is your “plant” in the classroom. Explain to this student what you are trying to accomplish and the student’s role in this activity. You will also need the help of your Assistant Principal or some other authority figure in the school.
- Typical Middle School classroom.
- Cell phone in teacher’s pocket.
- Cell phone in student’s pocket.

Character Objectives

- Teacher (Mr. Brown): Teach class; maintain order in the room; have school rules followed.
- Student (Anthony): Conceal the fact that you are using a cell phone and what has been texted to you. Get your phone back.
- Assistant Principal (Ms. Zahedi): Have school rules followed. Complete your investigation of a texting episode in the school.

Skit Dialogue

Scene opens with teacher welcoming the class.

Mr. Brown: Good morning. *(Begins lesson.)*

Anthony: *(Looks at his cell phone, but is doing his best to conceal this action.)*

Mr. Brown: Anthony do you have your cell phone out?

Anthony: Uh...no.

Mr. Brown: Yes it is. Bring it up here.

Anthony: *(Anthony walks up to teacher with his head down and hands teacher the phone. Returns to his desk and soon closes the book on his desk. All other students have theirs open as it is integral to the lesson being taught.)*

Mr. Brown: Have a seat. Your mom is going to have to come pick this up from Ms. Zahedi.
(*Puts phone in his pocket.*)

Wow, I am so disappointed. (*Places phone on desk and places a sheet of paper or other object over the phone, and resumes lesson. Within a minute or so, teacher turns his back to the class in order to write something on the black board or do something on the Smart Board.*)

(*Anthony sneaks up to the teacher's desk, lifts the paper covering his cell phone, and takes the phone.*)

(*Class may giggle or react in some way. Teacher needs to be firm with the class and not allow any comment.*)

Mr. Brown: Anthony why is your book closed? Could you please step outside?

(*Anthony leaves classroom and stands in the hallway.*)

(*Mr. Brown resumes lesson. A minute or so passes.*)

Ms. Zahedi: (*Enters the classroom.*) Mr. Brown, I'm sorry to interrupt your class.

Mr. Brown: Oh, that's fine.

Ms. Zahedi: I'm looking for Anthony. (*Pause.*) There's a serious issue in school today. Several students are texting each other and the substance of those conversations are very troubling. I already have several kids in my office surrounding this issue.

Mr. Brown: Oh really. I have Anthony's cell phone.

Ms. Zahedi: Could I have it please?

(*Mr. Brown goes to his desk to retrieve phone. Finds it is not there. Appears confused and glances at the class with suspicion. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a different cell phone. Looks at the phone to see if a message has been sent.*)

Mr. Brown: Yes, I see Anthony's got a message here.

Ms. Zahedi: Could I have it please?

Mr. Brown: You're going to read his messages? (*Pause.*) Um, Anthony's in the hallway. Didn't you see him?

(The idea here is that Anthony was not in the hallway when Ms. Zahedi came down the hallway and into the room. Students could hypothesize that Anthony had gone to the rest room, perhaps use his phone.)

Ms. Zahedi: No.

Mr. Brown: I sent him out a couple of minutes ago.

Ms. Zahedi: No. I didn't see him.

(Mr. Brown goes to hallway and is only partially visible to Ms. Zahedi and the class. Anthony is not visible to the class. Anthony hands his phone to Mr. Brown.)

Mr. Brown: He's right here!

Ms. Zahedi: I'm sorry for interrupting your class Mr. Brown, but I need to take Anthony and his phone to my office.

(Mr. Brown hands Ms. Zahedi Anthony's phone.)

Ms. Zahedi: *(Exits classroom out into the hallway.)* Anthony, please come with me.

(Mr. Brown resumes lesson for a few seconds. Ms. Zahedi and Anthony enter the room and, with Mr. Brown, all three take a bow.)

End of skit.

Say: Class, you have just observed a skit. Anthony, Ms. Zahedi and I were all acting. This skit was put on for a purpose. You all observed events in this room. You all have opinions about what you saw. We now are going to find out what you believe you saw. I'm going to have you answer some observation questions where you will be analyzing events that occurred over the last few minutes. My goal here is for you to have some understanding of how history is constructed, how history is, to some extent, open to interpretation, and what are some the complexities involved in the practice of writing history.

Issues raised in skit that could become part of the conversation analyzing the skit.

Any or all of these issues could be raised to show that there is not only one interpretation of what happened in the room--historic events and agents. Further, even if “the facts” are agreed upon, opinions on several of the following issues will vary, just as historiography of an important event may morph, weave or change focus over time.

Authority: The issue of authority is raised first, when Anthony disobeys Mr. Brown and the school rules and, secondly, when Mr. Brown doesn't immediately comply with Ms. Zahedi's request for the cell phone.

Morality: Several minor moral issues are raised: 1. When the class does not inform on Anthony. Did they have an obligation to speak up? Did students have an obligation to inform Mr. Brown about the theft of the phone? 2. How shall we judge Mr. Brown when he claims to have Anthony's cell phone when, in fact, he doesn't?

Loyalty: Student loyalties are conflicted. On the one hand they are drawn to be loyal to their peers, but on the other hand, they have some loyalty to their teacher on a personal level and to classroom rules.

Right to privacy: The issue of privacy arises with viewing the cell messages. Can school priorities supersede a student's right to privacy over his or her cell phone?

Factual ambiguity: Are all the facts always clear or obvious?

Some doubts or confusion surround the box: How did it get on Mr. Brown's desk? Isn't it odd that Mr. Brown is using this box even though its presence is a mystery to him?

Some doubts or confusion surround the whereabouts of Anthony: Where was Anthony when Ms. Zahedi came up the hallway and entered the room?

Some doubts or confusion surround Anthony's phone: How did Mr. Brown end up with Anthony's phone? Why didn't Mr. Brown tell Ms. Zahedi that Anthony's phone was missing?

Credibility: Historians make judgments all the time as to what evidence is more viable. Are some students record of what happened more credible than others? Why?

Part II. Find two ways your view of events differed from your partners.

1.

2.

Part III. In addition to “the facts”, there are some areas of motivation and underlying explanation involving the actors and the class that are not obvious. Address some of these issues by answering the following questions.

1. Why didn't you or anyone else in the classroom tell Mr. Brown about Anthony's removal of the phone from the box?

2. Why did Mr. Brown question Ms. Zahedi's need to have the phone?

3. Why did Anthony sneak the phone away from Mr. Brown's desk? Why is he risking getting into more trouble? How might Anthony justify his behavior?

4. Whose phone did Mr. Brown give to Ms. Zahedi? Explain.

5. Why didn't Mr. Brown tell Ms. Zahedi that Anthony's phone was missing?
How shall we judge Mr. Brown on this point?

6. Where was Anthony when Ms. Zahedi came through hall into Mr. Brown's room?

Part IV Homework: Imagine there is a text book entitled, *The History of Linden Avenue Middle School*. In the Chapter about Mr. Brown's room, there should be an entry on what happened in Mr. Brown's room today. Your assignment is to write that section. Make sure you include at least two of the motivational issues.

Name: _____

Rubric for “What Happened?” Lesson.

Part I: Recording what you saw.

Wrote a thorough description of the event. All the action was accounted for.

6-5 Points

Wrote a pretty good description of the event. May have missed some of the action.

4-3 Points

Satisfactory description of event. Definitely missed some of the action.

3-4 Points

Weak effort shown in describing The event.

1-0 Points

Part II: Sharing with a partner.

Had two clear differences recorded.

2 Points

Had one clear difference recorded.

1 Points

Did not record a difference recorded.

0 Points

Part III and IV: History of Linden Avenue Middle School textbook entry.

Thoughtful answer. Student understood the intent of the lesson. Student addressed at least two of the controversial issues identified with solid effort. Text book entry was thorough.

2 Points

Showed evidence of understanding the lesson. Student adequately addressed one of the controversial issues identified with good effort. Text book entry was thorough.

1 ½ -1 Point

Answer did not show evidence of understanding the lesson. Text book entry was weak.

No entry submitted.

½ - 0 Points

Total (Maximum 10) _____