



Paedagogia

Journal of Teacher Action Research



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Teaching the Second World War to ninth-grade students in the United States: An interactive curriculum that considers the lives of students

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In the United States today, school districts are repeatedly pushing for an interactive curriculum that addresses the daily lives of students. Teachers are also looking to develop new and interactive ways in helping their students learn the content material. Current teaching practices seek to produce student engagement, hands on learning, higher order thinking, and self-discovery. Often, teachers serve as facilitators to a lesson while using a diverse array of teaching approaches. The Second World War is a compelling period in history for ninth grade students in the United States. The Second World War led to the fall of fascism, the rise of the Cold War and American hegemony throughout the world. This paper looks at the teaching of World War II to ninth grade world history students and offers an interactive curriculum that applies to the lives of students.

Keywords: teaching the second world war, interactive learning

In most high schools in the United States today, students study world history in the ninth grade. World history typically begins with ancient history and ends with the turn of the twentieth century. Depending on school or district, students spend between 200 and 260 minutes per week in their world history course. The Second World War is usually covered during the second part of the year or second semester. When covering the Second World War, many teachers continue to either lecture or have students read out loud from their textbooks or from other supplemental reading material. An interactive instructional approach to teaching the Second World War, where students are engaged throughout the lesson and where students interact with one another, leads to better

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retention of information, improvement in students' critical thinking skills, and increased student involvement and interest in the topic (Barker, 1994).

John Dewey stressed the importance of hands-on learning in the learning process. Interactive or hands-on learning, as advocated by Dewey, is a method of instruction that provides students with opportunities to actively participate in activities and projects that are the central focus of the lesson (Dewey, 1938). Dewey also believed that the subject matter had to relate to the lives of students—he called this “learning by doing” (Dewey, 1938). In this way, students would feel ownership of the learning process. Ownership, a cognitive process that students often undertake, builds upon students' previous knowledge through a personal investment to learning (Stefanou et al., 2004). The end result is a desire to learn more about the subject by developing a personal connection to the events, people, and places that are being examined. The lessons proposed in this paper are designed for a one-week period that covers the causes and results of the Second World War. The goal is to provide teachers with an instructional approach that seeks to relate material to their students' lives while tapping into their students' critical thinking skills.

Relevant Assumptions

The teaching of history in high schools has traditionally approached the subject by having students memorize key people, places, and events (Wineburg, 2001). Such an approach has failed to take into account the diverse ways that students learn. Studies on traditional rote memorization have indicated lack of interest and poor achievement on behalf of students (Mayer, 2002). Moreover, how teachers and students view history strongly impacts the way history is taught and learned. Several assumptions have been proposed by the author in this paper that suggests that in order for learning to be maximized, the following assumptions need to be first considered:

- 1) A teacher's attitude about a subject will often be mirrored by her students.

- 2) A teacher's attitude in the subject can often be infectious and lead to a greater desire to learn more about a subject.
- 3) A teacher's and her students' general viewpoints about a subject influences the classrooms' attitude about that subject.
- 4) Students are able to form opinions after studying and processing material.
- 5) Students are able to connect to a particular subject better by examining its context.
- 6) Classroom methods that are interactive will increase student participation and interest in a subject.
- 7) Role-playing and hand-on learning will increase student motivation as learners.
- 8) Specific resources could give students a sense of identification with and understanding of to the subject matter.
- 9) Varied teaching approaches as well as student activities will increase student engagement in the subject matter.
- 10) Relating the subject to students' lives will motivate students to learn more about the subject.

Children's understanding of history helps reveal the depth of their thinking and mastery of the subject (Levstik & Barton, 2011). A curriculum focused on the lives of students and utilizes a hands-on approach helps encourage students to think critically. Salmon (1933) argued that history must be seen. Salmon advocated for a hands-on approach to history where the most basic primary documents could be used to help students understand how historians interpreted the past (Bohan, 2004).

Context of Lessons

The central theme of this paper is constructing knowledge about the Second World War. Students have the opportunity to build upon prior knowledge of the Second World War and gain an understanding of the differences between democracy and totalitarianism through research and role-playing exercises. Students explore significant people, places, and events that impacted the war. In addition, students role-play and re-enact the decision-making

process that world leaders used during the war. They focus on the causes and effects of the major events of the war and analyze them within a historical context. The in-class learning exercises employed in the lessons utilize extant sources including videos, historical letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, posters, and pamphlets.

The lessons in this paper provide students with the opportunity to experience history. They are designed to enable students to construct knowledge and retain information about the Second World War. The lessons are also designed for students performing at regular ability levels with modification made for gifted and special needs students. Teachers may exercise discretion regarding necessary modifications. Students will be able to identify the major nations involved in the war, the major people and groups who influenced the war, the major events during the war, and the results of the war.

Students will be able to reflect and showcase their mastery of the subject matter through writing assignments, role-playing exercises, and simulation exercises, in class-discussions and in class presentations. How teachers and students view history will strongly impact the way the Second World War is taught and learned. Children's understanding of this period of history will reveal the depth of their thinking and the mastery of the subject. Class simulations, developing compassion, and teacher and student presentations will utilize, develop, and exercise higher learning skills in students while also making the material interesting to students. Thus, a hands-on, interactive teaching approach requires a two-tiered approach composed of attitude toward history and specific methods utilized in the classroom. Both lead to a fruitful and engaging learning experience for students and teacher.

Assessment Procedures

Several summative and formative assessments are utilized to determine whether students understand the material. Teachers assess students by observing student participation in a role-playing simulation, open guided discussions, paper preparation, and

student presentations. These exercises provide students with the opportunity to monitor their learning. In addition, teachers assess student learning through the use of rubrics and checklists as well as by monitoring of students' preparation, guided discussions, and presentations. At the end of the unit, a culminating summative assessment is administered which covers the material from what was learned during the unit. Overall, the lessons are designed to encourage students to experience, investigate, and consider a significant period of history that has and continues to have an extraordinary impact on the world. Active engagement in the study of the past gives students the opportunity to experience history by providing for intellectual and personal connections and is central in overall assessment of students.

Sample Lessons

Lesson I, World History, Grade 9: Experiencing World War II-Motives for Conquest

Time

- a. Two 45-minute class periods

Objectives

- a. In the study of examining Germany's motives for conquest, students will determine those motives by reading off a fact sheet concerning Germany's pre-World War II experiences, as shown by creating a chart that reflects German motives for conquest.

Main Messages

- a. Germany was motivated to choose conquest of other nations by its past political failures and economic difficulties.
- b. Small group learning or cooperative learning increases student involvement in the learning process.

Learning Standards

- a. Understand the political systems, with emphasis on the United States.
- b. Understand the roles and influences of individuals and interest groups in the political systems of the United States and other

nations.

- c. Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of the United States and other nations.
- d. Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation.
- e. Understand the development of significant political events.

Learning Experiences

- a. The teacher explains conquest as one nation invading and conquering another nation and imposing its will on that nation. The teacher will list a couple of the historical events listed on the fact sheet as an example and prompt for students.
- b. The teacher explains that students will receive and read an act sheet concerning pre-World War II events that impacted Germany and motivated them toward conquest.
- c. The teacher will separate the students into groups of four to create a motive chart.
- d. The teacher will explain that the motive chart will contain one column for “cause” and another column for “effect.” The teacher will explain that the “cause” column will contain historical events found on the fact sheet and the “effect” column will contain the actions Germany took because of those events.
- e. The teacher will model a “cause and effect” motive chart by making a chart on the board that has two columns, one for cause and the other for effect. The teacher will fill the “cause” column with an example, “economic depression.” The teacher will fill the effect column with an example, “reparation payments.”
- f. The teacher will explain to student that because Germany was blamed for starting World War I, the victorious countries required Germany to make large payments to reimburse other countries for the cost of the war causing the German economy to suffer.
- g. The teacher hands out copies of the *German Motive Fact Sheet* to each student. The teacher will ask them to silently read the

fact sheets. The teacher will ask the students to begin to discuss causes and effects in their groups after they have read. The teacher will instruct the students to use a piece of notebook paper to plan their motive chart.

- h. When the students have had a chance to read, discuss, and begin planning their charts, the teacher will hand out one piece of poster board and one package of washable markers to each group of four students. The students will use the poster board and markers to create their chart.
- i. The teacher will instruct each group to choose a spokesman for the group who will present the chart to the class.
- j. The student groups will present their motive charts to the class explaining the causes and effects of German motives that led to the Second World War.
- k. The teacher will keep running a list of causes and effects given by each group on the board. The teacher will instruct students to take notes regarding causes and effects that other groups present that they do not have.
- l. The teacher will instruct the groups to hand in their motive charts after each group presents them.
- m. The teacher will summarize the cause and effect results from the running list on the board.
- n. The teacher will instruct the students to keep their notes regarding causes and effects in their notebooks for future study.

Modifications

- a. Learning Challenged students will receive a work sheet with a list of cause and effects that they can fill in and complete.

Resources

- a. Printed Material
- b. Fact Sheet

Assessment

- a. Student groups will create a cause and effect motive chart. Each group must list at least five causes and effects to receive maximum points. Each student group will present their motive chart to the class.

i. The chart will be assessed based on the following scale:

- | | |
|--|----------|
| i. 4 cause and effect motives listed | 5 points |
| ii. 3 cause and effect motives listed | 4 points |
| iii. 2 cause and effect motives listed | 3 points |
| iv. 1 cause and effect motives listed | 2 points |
| v. 0 cause and effect motives listed | 0 points |

Rationale for choices

- a. Cooperative learning is a best practice for teaching history.
Interactive learning increases student interest.

Lesson 2, World History, Grade 9: Experiencing World War II-The World Deals with Nazism

Time

- a. One 45-minute class period

Objectives

- a. In the study of international diplomacy, students will re-enact the decision of leaders who dealt with Adolph Hitler as shown by their role-playing and completing notes of key points of the decisions made.

Main Message

- a. The nations of the world had difficult choices to make regarding Adolph Hitler.
b. Role-playing enables students to interact with the subject matter by providing for students' involvement, which has been shown to heighten student interest.

Learning Experiences

- a. The teacher explains that the students will perform a re-enactment of country's pronouncements during the Second World War. The teacher will explain that the students will recite the released information for their assigned country in the form of an oral announcement. The teacher will explain that some of the releases are designated as "secret" and thus should be whispered with the preface, "This is Secret."
b. The teacher explains that student will receive a country's dialogue in the form of a handout.

- c. The teacher will instruct students to highlight their country releases listed in the dialogue.
- d. The teacher will handout a country's dialogue for the students to recite in turn (Figure 1).
- e. The students will be instructed to read the assigned country statements.
- f. The teacher will guide the reenactment by directing students to perform their parts one by one by announcing the nation country that is to speak.
- g. After all the students have taken part in the reenactment, the teacher will directly instruct the student regarding key points of the releases that are to be read in the reenactment.
- h. The teacher will instruct students to take notes of the key points and statements of the exercise.
- i. The students will hand in their notes as an exit-slip.

Modification

- a. Students noted will be written on the board for students to write down at the end of the exercise.

Enrichment

- a. Students will be challenged to research Neville Chamberlain's appeasement and write a one to two-page paper for why they believe Chamberlain believed Hitler.
- b. Students will be asked to respond to the question, "Did nations have a responsibility to stop Hitler? If so, why?"

Resources

- a. Reenactment Dialogue Sheet
- b. Class Notes

Assessment

- a. Students' notes will be assessed on completeness and organization. Completion will be determined by the amount of data the students have recorded from the summary of the reenactment. Student will also be assessed on their participation in the activity.

Rationale for Choices

- a. Best Practices and the theoretical literature support student

interaction and involvement as the methods that evoke student interest and increases subject retention.

Lesson 3, World History, Grade 9: Experiencing World War II-The Atomic Decision

Time

- a. Two 45-minute class periods

Objectives

- a. In the study of the decision by the United States for drop atomic bombs on Japan, students will debate whether the bombs should have been dropped on Japan.

Main Message

- a. The decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan was a complex and difficult decision to make with lasting world-wide ramifications.

Learning Experiences

- a. The teacher will instruct students regarding the factual events that led to dropping atomic bombs on Japan.
- b. The teacher will separate the students into groups of four. Each group will be partnered so that there are two students on the “for” side and two students on the “against” side.
- c. The teacher will instruct student that they will have the opportunity to research the dropping of the atomic bomb on their electronic devices or computer lab.
- d. The teacher will remind students on the proper debating techniques.
- e. The teacher will instruct the students on the rubric that will be used to assess the students during their debates.
- f. The students will research the bombings and prepare their debates for the next class meeting.
- g. The student debate teams will debate their sides of the issue with five minutes to make their case and two minutes to rebut their opponents.
- h. The teacher will pass out the rubric scoring sheets to the students.

- i. The students will debate the issue.
- j. The students will vote on the winner of the debate.
- k. The teacher will keep a tally of the winning and losing propositions.

Assessment

- a. The students will be assessed by their fellow students and by the teacher using the scoring rubric with an average of the assessments producing the grade for the exercise.
- b. The teacher will give average the student and teacher assessments and enter the average scores in the grade book.

Discussion and Summary

The curriculum and lessons in this paper, which covers the teaching of Second World War to ninth grade students in the United States, were designed to encourage students to experience, explore, and consider the Second World War through a hands-on and interactive approach. Studies have found that if students are actively engaged in a subject or topic students are more likely to improve their reasoning and analytic abilities (Freeman et. al 2014). Active engagement was central to the teaching of the Second World War to ninth-grade students. Active engagement provides students with the opportunity to experience history while making personal connections to the events, people, and places that helped shape the past. While the students themselves did not experience many historical events, a connection to the past would ostensibly help students better understand the past. In this way, a curriculum like the one proposed in this paper incorporates an interactive instructional approach, which would help students retain historical information, improve students' critical thinking skills, and increase student engagement in the classroom.

Moreover, the lessons proposed in this paper could be adapted to students' needs (i.e. students' strengths and weaknesses and general student understanding about the topic). For example, in lesson 2, students may take some of the known facts and create their own role-playing scripts about what they thought it might

have been like. Similarly, lesson 3 could be less student-centered and more teacher-centered if students need more direction. In this case, the teacher may offer examples from the Second World War where students are asked to make connections to their own lives (i.e. 1. Have you ever fought for something that you believed in? 2. Is there such a thing as “evil” in the world? If so, explain. 3. Have you ever made a promise? If so, why is it important for someone to keep their promise? 4. Have you ever had to make a difficult decision? If so, how did you handle it the decision? 5. Do you think the Second World War was a just war? If so, explain why?).

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Appendix

Figure 1

Second World War Diplomacy Reenactment Dialogue

Poland: We will sign a ten-year declaration of non-aggression with Germany.

Turkey: (Turkish President Kemal Ataturk) American General Douglas MacArthur, a war will start in Europe around 1940. Germany will dominate the continent except for Great Britain and Russia, and the Soviets will benefit most form this.

Germany: (Adolph Hitler) The disarmament clause of the Treaty of Versailles was unfair. Like it or not, we are re-arming and conscripting soldiers.

France: We agree with the Soviet to a five-year Treaty of Mutual Assistance.

Czechoslovakia: We agree with the Soviet Union on a five-year Treaty of Mutual Assistance.

Germany: (Adolph Hitler) We will not intervene in Austria or incorporate Austria to the German Reich.

England: We agree with Germany on the naval treaty, limiting the German surface fleet to 35 percent of British tonnage, and submarine fleet to 45 percent.

Germany: (Adolph Hitler) We would like to re-occupy the Rhineland. It is German territory.

France: We agree to a pact with the Soviet Union.

Denmark: We will remain neutral.

Sweden: We will remain neutral.

Norway: We will remain neutral.

Sweden: We will re-arm.

Note. A sample of dialogue from lesson 2.



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