

Using Triangular Texts to Enhance Historical Perspectives in Middle School Social Studies

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Abstract: Middle school social studies explores how people, past and present, live together. Oftentimes, teachers accentuate recall of historical facts rather than relationships between humans. Requiring recall over reflection on how people lived through historical events can result in disengaged students. One solution to address the lack of student interest is for teachers to use multiple modes of delivery through triangular texts (tri-texts). This paper provides educators with strategies to insert tri-texts into their curriculum through story, art, poetry, video, and song. These methods complement the textbook to improve the depth and breadth of knowledge about historical events to create benefits for students, including a more rigorous curriculum, higher visual literacy skills, and increased critical thinking combined with interest and curiosity.

Introduction

Imagine you are teaching a class of fifth graders about Westward Expansion in the United States. You begin the lesson by telling a tale about an adventure into the wilderness. The land is previously undiscovered by American settlers and crawling with danger. There are natives in the area, wild animals, treacherous river crossings, and mountain passes so steep it seems like humans could never get through without slipping into the rushing water below! Food is scarce, horses are dying with sickness and hunger, medicine and supplies are low. How will the travelers ever make it to their destination alive? And what will they find when they get there?

Hands go up, students are intrigued.

“What happens next Mrs. D.?”

“Do they make it?”

“What do they find?”

The tale continues with the story of a hero of sorts. They are an interpreter and a scout; someone not afraid to go ahead of the group to check the area for safety. They are a crucial part of the journey, someone who saves important papers, navigational instruments, books, medicine, and even a baby as a boat capsizes! They are miraculously able to find edible plants, berries, and dig for prairie turnips when it seemed that no food was available. When the time comes to negotiate a trade for horses from the nearby Shoshone tribe, the hero speaks the native language, staying calm and allowing the travelers to pass through hostile territory safely.

Again, student hands go up.

“Who is it? I’m dying to know!”

“They sound like Superman; this person can’t be real.”

“Mrs. D. are you making this up?”

Imagine their surprise when our real-life adventure hero is revealed to be a woman, Sacajawea.

Telling one story in middle school social studies can gain student attention and create interest for the topic being introduced. However, using three intertwined stories can engage students throughout the entire unit. Triangular texts (or tri-texts) are three interconnected texts that focus on the same topic or theme. However, in this article, more than just basic text formats can be considered when implementing tri-text teaching methods. These text formats include picture books, short stories, novels, and poetry, with the additions of maps, art pieces, songs, political cartoons, and videos. The introductory story about Sacajawea is told to peak student interest about Westward Expansion. Teachers may follow with tri-texts that include reading or watching a biography of Sacajawea, examining the original maps made by William Clark, and analyzing journal entries written by Lewis and Clark during early explorations of the Louisiana Purchase. Teaching with varied text formats gives students a more thorough view of historical events while enhancing the factual information presented in a textbook.

The single story, or a textbook in this case, does not always give students a comprehensive view of a person or event. Students may make generalizations, assumptions, and misconceptions that could be avoided by using multiple accounts of the one topic. Michelle H. Martin, the Beverly Cleary Professor for Children and Youth Services at the University of Washington Information School describes the single story as “if you only ever read books by people who look like you and who live like you, that’s intellectual poverty because you don’t ever see into the life of someone else from their perspective.” (Ciecierski, et al., 2021, p. 146). Tri-texts can enhance learning of different historical events through multiple perspectives. They support reading comprehension, strengthen the learning of content and background material, promote critical thinking, enhance classroom conversations, and develop meaningful learning through text-to-text connections (Ciecierski, et al., 2017). This can create a spark of interest in middle school students and could lead to a personal interest in the topics being taught. Ultimately, the goal of a multiple text mentality is for students to read broadly, read deeply, and learn critically and thoughtfully (Bintz and Chaghervand, 2021). Furthermore, tri-texts can combine textbook information with any of the aforementioned modes to contribute to a rigorous curriculum and improve the depth and breadth of knowledge taught to middle school students by inserting additional resources.

Why Use Tri-texts

There has been debate in recent years about how to increase the rigor in the middle school social studies classroom. The Fordham Foundation Publication *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong* (Leming et al., 2003) indicated that an increase

in historical content knowledge would increase rigor in the classroom. However, many educators disagree with that conclusion. Overfilling students with more content knowledge does not necessarily make them a better citizen or student. Creating academic rigor does not have to mean more content presented. Rather, teaching for a deeper and more expansive study of major events to include sociology, anthropology, history, geography, and civics. Tri-texts can assist educators in teaching an integrated curriculum that includes historical content knowledge but with focus on critical thinking, comparisons, diverse perspectives, and how to be a thoughtful world citizen.

These additional emphases lead to a definition of rigor to focus on when using tri-texts. Stern (2005) states that rigor is “study that requires students and teachers to pursue knowledge and skills with enough depth and understanding to be able to apply this knowledge and these skills in their daily activities, present and future” (p. 52). Utilizing Stern’s definition for rigor can improve educators’ understanding that there is more to teaching social studies than rote memorization of facts and dates. Teaching and learning with the multiple modes of tri-texts can still produce a rigorous and inclusive curriculum for middle school students.

Diverse modes of learning can increase the level of rigor desired if students possess a certain level of visual literacy. According to Lopatovska, et al., (2016) visual literacy is the “ability to evaluate, analyze, and interpret an image’s compositional elements and cultural meanings” (p. 1198). When using illustrations and art pieces as additional texts, students need to have enough visual literacy to know what to look for when analyzing these types of images. The Association of College and Research Libraries (2018) identifies seven criteria for visual literacy. Standard 3, #2 states that “The visually literate student situates an image in its cultural, social, and historical contexts.” Educators can demonstrate this understanding by comparing the cultural relevance at the time of an image’s creation with the image’s relevance in current culture through the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, or ‘I do, we do, you do’ as they introduce art as a historical teaching tool. Art and illustration as tri-texts give students more exposure to visual images in a way that allows them to develop their critical thinking and explain their own meanings from personal experiences (Lopatovska, et al., 2016, p. 1201). Illustrations and art can be a captivating method to introduce a topic as they can be interpreted differently and can jumpstart a unit using tri-texts.

Tri-text as Introduction to Topic

When teaching social studies in middle school, there are many ways to introduce tri-texts to enhance existing lessons. One way is by using a “way-in” text. Way-in texts are methods to “Arouse curiosities, inquire, and pursue topics of unexpected interest that hopefully will capture their imagination. It is the one which should be read first because it has the most potential of all the texts to spark motivation and interest” (Ciecierski et al., 2021, p. 149). The story of Sacajawea previously told can be considered a way-in text as it intrigues students through mystery and adventure and arouses curiosity about who Sacajawea is and why she was important to history, which can lead to using tri-texts about Westward Expansion.

Another way-in text that catches the attention of students immediately when using tri-texts to teach the Underground Railroad is *Unspoken*, by Henry Cole (2012). This story has no words, only simple pencil illustrations. It tells the story of a young girl who finds a runaway slave on her family's farm. The pictures tell an incredible story of the girl's emotions as students make connections with her character through the illustrations. Teaching information about slavery and the Underground Railroad prior to reading this story is helpful as students can see links between the story and the Big Dipper, quilt codes, and the Fugitive Slave Law. This story will also gauge students' levels of visual literacy through these connections. Additional resources which include books, videos, and songs, can assist the use of tri-texts for the unit on slavery and the Underground Railroad. Tri-texts can be beneficial for teaching many other units in middle school social studies as well.

Sample Social Studies Topics and Teaching Strategies

Revolutionary War, Paul Revere

When teaching a unit on the Revolutionary War to middle school students, the Road to Revolution is a common opening topic. Explaining the events from the Boston Tea Party to the famous ride of Paul Revere will have students yelling "The British are coming! The British are coming!" down the hallways for days. When discussing the aspects of Paul Revere's midnight ride, reading Sybil's Night Ride (Winnick, 2010) as a parallel to this event where students can use a graphic organizer to compare Sybil Ludington's ride to Paul Revere's. The famous 1860s poem Paul Revere's Ride (Longfellow & Bing, 2001) can then be added as a tri-text to compare the effects that both rides had on the Revolution. Students could then view a short video featuring William Dawes and Dr. Prescott, other important people involved in Paul Revere's ride who typically do not get mentioned. Additional resources to use as tri-text methods when teaching the events surrounding the ride of Paul Revere could include learning about Sybil Ludington. Instruction and activity could evolve into a student biographical research project of other important women of the Revolutionary War era, such as Phillis Wheatley, Nancy Hart, Ann Bates, and Molly Pitcher.

Women of the Revolution

Additional tri-text methods for the Revolutionary War unit can teach about those who are underrepresented in this historic era, such as women. Studies can include the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, an African American woman who lived in this era and women spies of the Revolution. A poetry excerpt can introduce Wheatley by having students read a few lines of her poem *On Imagination* (Poetry Foundation, 1773). The meanings of her text can be discussed and explained in small student groups and how her poetry can be relevant to their lives today. Students can then research biographical information about Wheatley, watch a documentary, and read additional poems to learn how her words gave an inspiring voice when she should not have even known how to read or write.

Other unexpected topics of the Revolutionary War era using pictures as tri-texts can introduce female spies. Students can be shown pictures of women such as Lydia Darragh, Ann Bates, and Agent 355 and then be asked to brainstorm what they believe each had in common. This discussion question could start dialogue about students' opinions of gender roles and activate any prior knowledge of the era. Students' perceptions of traditional gender roles can change once learning that each picture is of a female spy. Teachers could add the tri-text methods of watching a video which explains how spies used codes and ciphers in the Revolution and reading *Anna Strong: A Spy During the American Revolution* (Marsh & Green, 2020) in order for students to compare the effectiveness of spying methods during the war and learn about a fascinating female spy. Students could then decipher codes of their own, applying what they learned through the tri-texts used in the lesson.

War of 1812

Another topic where tri-texts could be especially useful would be the War of 1812. One of the most notable events of the War of 1812 was the creation of the Star-Spangled Banner by Francis Scott Key. Most American students can sing the words of the National Anthem but learning how the original poem was written makes the lyrics meaningful. Tri-texts of the entire four verse poem, listening to the lyrics put to music, and reading a story of the battle at Fort McHenry can all provide additional background knowledge and expand the depth of learning about the War of 1812.

Native Americans

Reading about origin myths through tri-texts would enhance student understanding of Native American history. Native American storytelling was important to their culture and using their own stories to explain how the world was created, why animals have certain features, and explanations of their spiritual beliefs demonstrates that importance to students. By using resources like *The Earth on Turtle's Back*, by Joseph Bruchac and Michael J. Caduto (n.d.) and *Arrow to the Sun*, by Gerald McDermott (2004), for example, students can share in the mythology of Native American cultures as they learn about the features of each tribal region and ways of life. Origin myths as tri-texts can give additional understanding of why these beliefs were essential to that region's culture. Tri-texts allow students to take the additional knowledge gained and lead them to a multitude of activities to show their knowledge and understanding of the social studies units.

Culminating Project: Multi-genre Research Projects

Using tri-text methods in middle school social studies classes can conclude with a project for students to present their independently researched knowledge to their peers. A multi-genre research project uses the methods of tri-texts for students to gather their own information into a culminating project, typically a topic of their interest. Students can gather stories, videos, songs, poems, and art to compare, map out common themes, cite text references, and orally present their full understanding of their chosen topic. Hughes (2009) found that as students explore depth and

breadth of knowledge with their research topics they are learning and mastering material rather than learning superficially. Multi-genre research projects that consider students' interest create a more useful and engaging curriculum. Allowing students to explore an interesting research topic using tri-text methods can give the rigorous curriculum desired in a creative way.

Conclusion

Teaching with triangular texts in middle school social studies can engage students in their study of major historical events by including multiple methods and perspectives. Tri-texts can create many benefits for students, including a more rigorous curriculum, higher visual literacy skills, and increased critical thinking combined with interest and curiosity. Using multiple methods to teach students about one topic, era, or person can help create lifelong learners that textbook information alone cannot. Tri-texts can give students the opportunity to learn with different genres, vocabulary, and text structures along with additional content information, which creates depth and breadth of knowledge. The objective for teachers should be to make learning more engaging for students while incorporating higher level thinking and rigor, and tri-texts can accomplish this goal.

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