Designing Meaningful Instruction in History for Middle School Students through the Use of Archival Research and Primary Document Analysis as a Teaching Tool

Mark Mraz
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Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania

The article chronicles the use of a Civil War soldier’s diary to teach Civil War history. The project was carried out over a two-semester period in a social studies pedagogy class. The professor and students in cooperative learning groups and whole group discussions interpreted the diary. In this unique process, they also discussed how primary sources might be used to teach middle school and high school students United States History as a dynamic process of real people and not simply facts.

Introduction

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, middle school students know very little about history. Some sample results of sixth-grade students are as follows: (a) 64% could identify the impact of the cotton gin, (b) 43% could explain the goals of the Martin Luther King Jr. march, and (c) 1% could explain how the fall of the Berlin Wall affected foreign policy (NAEP). Clearly, the history being taught is not learned. But should content be emphasized over process?

The Association for Childhood Education International has suggested that less stress should be placed on learning facts and more attention should be paid to learning skills, critical analysis, and reflective thinking. Middle schools should offer differentiated instructional learning models, such as indirect instruction and cooperative learning (Manning, 2000). Therefore, a new pedagogy must be explored and experimented with to excite these young citizens about the past.

Teachers of History in the Middle School

No empirical evidence exists which suggests that a teacher with a large number of content credits is any better with history instruction than a teacher with a large number of credits in pedagogy. Yet, critics harp for the need of a critical mass of historical knowledge. Knowing the ideas of Charles Beard or Carl Becker helps educators understand history, but it does not enable anyone to teach history more effectively. Very few historians actually teach history which deals with the causation, verification, and interpretation of facts and data. In other words, the history taught to the teacher candidates is to prepare them to be academic historians and not history teachers.

Recommendations for unique middle school teacher training programs, separated from both elementary and secondary pedagogy, have not developed over the years. However, many proponents of middle grades specialization believe that regardless of the need, these educators should be schooled in developmentally appropriate pedagogy that relates to young adolescents (Manning, 2000). Middle school students display a vast array of intellectual development as their minds experience transition from the concrete thoughts to abstract reasoning. The students at the middle level enjoy active learning experiences rather than passive experiences and prefer peer interaction during educational activities (California Department of Education, 1987).
From an epistemological standpoint, middle school students learn better when they are required to be practitioners of knowledge and not just receivers of information (Blair & Freeman, 2000). So why not develop a pedagogy that allows the students to do this? One remedy to these problems is to develop a different pedagogical approach to core subjects such as American History. Students respond positively to history when the teacher can develop a pedagogy that immerses the students into the material. A unique approach involves the archival research of primary source documents. Students respond to history when the teacher can develop a pedagogy that allows the students to work with the raw materials of the subject.

**Archival Research and Primary Documents as Pedagogical Devices**

If sources are the lifeblood of historical inquiry, should not the student of history be exposed to the methods of the professional historian? Taking students to local historical societies or university archives and allowing them to work with the materials found there could do this. A number of these agencies have letters, diaries, and books about the roles that local citizens played in various historical events, especially the War for Independence, the Civil War, the Depression, and other incidents in the nation’s past. Most of the archivists are happy to have younger scholars use the academic facilities.

Students get really involved when they touch history via a primary source document. The diary of Morris Hackman is a case in point. On the first day of class, I distributed copies of various entries made by Hackman and instructed the students' to piece together, through inductive reasoning, what was going on in the life of Morris when he was a soldier. With no prior knowledge and within the duration of two class periods, the students had figured out the situation of the soldier who wrote the diary. The process involved deconstructing the entries and interpreting the meaning as a class project. The diary was translated and analyzed by the students in cooperative learning groups and whole class discussions using inductive reasoning.

**Thinking Template and Class Procedures**

The thinking template and class procedures grew out of the ideas first articulated by the educational philosopher John Dewey. He suggested that reflective thought was “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). He set forth five phases, or stages, of thinking. These phases of reasoning became the procedural pedagogical underpinnings of the project and are as follows:

I. **Suggestions** — in which the mind leaps forward to a possible solution.

During this phase, the entries of the diary were copied, and the students were given a page in groups of two. They were to determine what was going on in the life of the diarist and to analyze the content. Since the pages were out of chronological sequence, this condition led into step two. Also, during this phase, all the groups believed that it was necessary to know more about the diarist, Morris Hackman. This was done prior to looking at the diary. Each group, using the Internet, divided the research to discover more about the diarist. One group looked at state records of Civil War soldiers; another group searched national records, and a third group gathered county records to find any information about Morris. Once the class had an idea of the diarist’s identity, step one moved forward and flowed into step two.

II. **An intellectualization of the difficulty or perplexity that has been felt (directly**
experienced) into a problem to be solved.

During this step, the students inducted that they had a problem understanding the entries because they were out of sequence. Therefore, they had to cooperate with the other groups to figure out what happened.

III. The use of one suggestion after another as a leading idea, or hypothesis, to initiate and guide observation and other operations in collection of factual material.

During this phase, students determined that the diary had no entry dates or page numbers, so they had to determine chronological sequences. There were dates in the narrative, so the students decided to check them with a perceptual calendar in order to determine the exact date by matching the day and the month to subsequent years of the war (i.e., 1861-1865). The geography of the soldier’s world was also explored by matching place names to a map of the area.

IV. The mental elaboration of the idea, or supposition, as an idea or supposition (reasoning, in the sense that reasoning is a part, not the whole, of inference).

After the students developed these facts, they made inferences and interpretations of the data. These ideas are expressed in the non-italic font with parentheses in the analysis section.

V. Testing the hypothesis by overt, or imaginative, action. (Dewey, 1933, pp. 199-209).

The various groups in a whole class discussion pieced the entries together and reached a consensus about their ideas, which are expressed in the non-italic font with parentheses in the analysis section.

Diary Translation, Analysis, and Interpretation

Pedagogical Note

It was determined in whole class discussion that more information was needed on the diarist, so the groups explored various Internet databases (i.e., National Park Service, Pennsylvania Archives, PSU Library, and Regimental Histories) on Civil War soldiers and regiments to develop the following profile of Morris Hackman.

Who Was Morris Hackman?

Morris Hackman was a young soldier who kept a diary about his war experiences. The diary was found by the educator-researcher in the special collections room of the Pattee and Paterno Library at the Pennsylvania State University (see Figure 2). The pictures were taken of the pages with a digital camera for the project, and the pages were photocopied as needed.

According to the National Park Service (Figure 1), Morris Hackman was a private in the Union Army. He was a member of Company G of the 29th Pennsylvania Infantry (National Park Service, 2005).

Morris Hackman
Regiment Name 29 Pennsylvania Infantry
Side Union
Company G
Soldier's Rank in Private
Soldier's Rank out Private
Alternate Name Morris W./Hackman
Notes Film Number M554 roll 47

Figure 1. Information on Morris Hackman from the NPS database records (National Park Service, 2005)
The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission has maintained the records of all of the state’s Civil War veterans, and their database revealed that Morris Hackman enlisted on July 1, 1861 in Philadelphia and was discharged after three years when his term of enlistment expired on July 1, 1864 (Pennsylvania State Archives, 2005). What became of him at the end of his service is unclear. The county records reveal no Morris Hackman in Berks County in the mid-to-late 1860s (Berks County Clerk, 2005). According to the card catalogue at the Pattee and Paterno Library at Penn State, Morris was born on November 10, 1845. He was from a town Womelsdorf in Berks County about 20 miles west of present day Reading, Pennsylvania. He joined the 29th Pennsylvania Infantry when he was only sixteen years old and was mustered out three years later (The Pennsylvania State University, 2005).

Figure 2. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Civil War Veteran Card for Morris Hackman which was typed during the Depression as part of the WPA Project (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2005).

Revelations Found in the Diary

Pedagogical Note

Once the students interpreted their page of the diary it was pieced together in whole class discussions. From these discussions, the revelations that follow were based on the instructor and students understandings of Civil War soldiers in general and these epistemological underpinnings were applied to the situations found in the diary. Also the problems with the dairy were elaborated and discussed during these whole class sessions.
Facts Garnished from the Diary as Interpreted by the Students

Morris and his fellow soldiers were preoccupied with food and money. For many soldiers like Hackman, it was usually the case that they had no coins or chickens. This was due to circumstances beyond their control, such as the pay wagon was unable to get to where they were. Many times they were hungry and were forced to forage for nourishment along the march. Civil War soldiers were always on short rations and lacked funds for various reasons. Soldiers frequently drank and lost their money playing cards. Morris did not mention either whiskey or cards in his diary. The other diversion the men indulged in was horizontal refreshment (buying the services of a prostitute) or “Riding a Dutch Girl.” He made no reference to that activity in his narrative account. This may mean one of two things: Either he was at a tender age of sixteen and did not partake of these pleasures or he did but was afraid to mention these activities because his mother or girlfriend might someday read the diary. The Victorian mentality of this period deemed these acts as immoral behavior and not proper for any gentleman to engage himself. During the Civil War, a German military observer noticed that the roads leading to any battle were littered with cards and flasks along the side of the road. Soldiers from both sides would throw these items away so that family members would not find them among their belongings if they were killed in the battle. If the men survived the war, they managed to find these items and others after the battle.

Problems with the Diary as determined by the Students in Entire Class and Group Discussions

The 29-page diary is in the original leather, pocket-sized cover that Morris Hackman used during the Civil War. The manuscript is written in pencil with no personal pronouns or proper punctuation. The language of the narrative tends to be choppy, and the pages do not exactly correlate to the chronology of the war after page seven. Apparently, Morris just jotted down what happened wherever the diary opened, or it was written years later from memory.

Each entry in the diary is not dated; however, the narrative contains sporadic dates, and the students matched them with a perpetual calendar to determine the days and dates that are mentioned. The dates do not correspond to the actual dates of the battles. This was probably due to the fact that he wrote them after the events occurred at night or in the morning. As a precise log of events of the Civil War, the entries would be meaningless. However, students can gain insights into what the life of a soldier was like.

In the first entry, he stated that he left for Reading, Pennsylvania, on Sunday, July 28, 1861. The perpetual calendar shows that the 28th day of July in 1861 was on a Sunday. But the veterans’ card showed that he was mustered in on July 1, 1861 (Pennsylvania State Archives) a good 17 days before he left home. How could this be? According to the 29th Pennsylvania’s History, Major C. F. Ruff began to muster in men on July 1st and continued to sign men up until July 29, 1861, when the regiment was filled. Even if Morris had enlisted anytime on the 29th of July, the records keeper would probably have backdated it for payroll purposes. It was customary to record all the men who volunteered in July on the first day of the month (Pennsylvania Roots). This bookkeeping would allow the Ordinance to keep the pay of the soldier from July 1st till he actually signed up. This skimming of funds was common at the time.

Pedagogical Note

The entries in the diary, as interpreted by the students of SEFE 319 Class: Teaching of
Secondary Social Studies, reflect meaningful explanations of terms and events as they were presented to the class during discussions using inductive reasoning. This type of inductive reasoning can be used with students in both middle school and high school social studies classes. The entries are in italics and the students’ interpretations are written in “Times Roman Normal 12-point font.” In a whole class activity, the investigators reached a consensus about their interpretations of the diary entries.

*Figure 3.* This is the area where Morris’ unit was active in Virginia.

**The Diary Entries as Interpreted by the Classes**

**Year: 1861**

**Entry.** I left home July, Sunday afternoon 28th for Reading. Left Red. (Reading) the next day for Philadelphia. Went out to Hestonville (Camp) and enlisted as a private in Company G. Capt. Richardson led J.R. Murphy and the 29th Pennsylvania, left for the seat of war, August 3rd. Arrived at Harpers Ferry on Sunday evening (August 4th) and encamped at Sandy Hook stayed there for two weeks. Went to Buckystown staid there awhile went to Poolesville went 3 or 4 days and...

**Entry.**... nights were nearly starved. Stolen lots of corn and cooked it, eat about a bushel. Did not make us sick came on to Darnstown staid (stayed) 7 weeks got my first pay from OrD. (Ordinance) $2.66 (Civil War soldiers got paid $13 a month; someone in the ordinance department was cheating poor Morris out of money. This was commonplace because records show that many generals would skim off a few bucks from each private’s account.) Got our new Springfield rifle musket there. Ordered to Conrad’s Ferry got there just after the fight seen boys killed and wounded, ordered to Edward’s Ferry seen General Banks. Ordered to cross then recrossed the river...
Entry. ... branch near Darnstown and awful muddy too. Got three letters from home. Passed a good many deserted houses Jefferson, Poolesville, Darnstown, and Buckeystown seen Governor Hicks and General Banks several times. Marched again on better new and better ground Darnstown Nov. 4. The 10 will be my birthday if I live so long will be 17. (The average age of a Civil War soldier was 19. The legal age to fight was 18. The recruiter would have the boys swear on the Bible that they were “over 18.” Boys would get around this by placing a slip of paper in their boot with the number 18 on it. Since they were standing “over 18.” They could legally swear on the Bible with no repercussions from the Almighty [Catton, 1984]). Then 3 months since I left home since Friday 8th, got marching orders last Monday 4th did not leave till...

Figure 4. These are Brogans Shoes which were issued to all Civil War soldiers.

Entry. ...afternoon marched till night towards Lindensville some slept in a large tobacco house built a large fire in the woods cooked coffee in our tin cups (Some Civil War soldiers cooked coffee in their tin cups by breaking up the coffee beans with the butt of a rifle until the beans were like fine powder. Then they would add water and boil. This was something like instant coffee but very bad tasting.), roasted potatoes in the ashes. Started at 4 in the morning and reached Lindensville at about 7 O’clock. There was election there (This was probably the election of officers; in volunteer regiments, the men voted for the officers.). Stayed one night, started for camp about 8 O’clock reached by another route camp at 8, the enemy passed.

Entry. Through Grayburg left camp at the Potomac called Joe Hell Monday. Dec. 2 crossed the Seneca and Sanis creek and the Monocacy River passed through Burnsville and neared Buckeystown. Slept in the woods a night had a sick headache all the time. Boots (The boots issued to the Civil War soldiers had no left and right foot; this could be very uncomfortable until they were broke in.), rubbed (rubbed) me going into winter quarters. Left here for Dam 11, 4 (The Regimental History chronicles operations about Dams 4 and 5 from December 17 to the 20th [Pennsylvania Roots, 2005]), marched 2 days stayed (This is the one of two times Morris spells stayed correctly; the rest of the time, he spells it “staid.”) there 2 days marched back.

Figure 5. This is a copy of an entry from Hackman diary.
Entry. …again marched all Christmas, feet nearly worn out back again 6 miles on the side of Frederic City near 7 months away got 2 more pays got paid 2 more times.

Year: 1862

Entry. Feb 23 still here left Frederick City Feb. 25th took the cars at Farmville for Harpers Ferry crossed the Potomac on the 26th (The Regimental History chronicles duty at Harper’s Ferry and on Upper Potomac till February 1862 [Pennsylvania Roots, 2005].) stayed in Bolivar 3 days started for Charleston the whole division here Gen. McClellan here too.

Entry. The rebels within 3 miles March 5th on guard a most disagreeable night. March 6th left for Charleston marched towards Winchester marched through Smithfield encamped on the side of town, 5 young men from the rebel army came in and delivered themselves up to the Calvary, tired of the war (Morris is probably referring to the five rebels being tired of the war and not the Calvary.). March 8th on guard Smithfield a rooster crowing in a cellar…(We don’t know what happened here, but probably Morris was hungry and wanted to catch the rooster.) Sunday 9th a splendid day warm as in summer Sunday afternoon the rebels shot one picket and took one prisoner. 1 miles from camp on Monday marched 5 miles all towards Winchester raining all morning hard. Marching Monday evening on guard at the CS (Camp Sutter is a person who sells things to the troops. These goods were usually of bad quality and became known as “shoddy.” This might have been to guard against anyone taking the merchandise for sale or soldiers getting angry at the salesman.) Thursday marched slowly toward Winchester (Marching to and from Winchester was common. The city was the most occupied city in the Civil War; it changed enemy hands 72 times.) encamped in the woods.

Entry. Sleep out in the morning camp further back in the woods, April 4th, 5 Companies are Skirmishing across the river killed 1 of Co. I. On picket duty again, plenty of rebels firing at us all day April 5th, bad weather all week rain and snow April 10th clear off left Edenburg. Drive the rebels through Mount Jackson. Out flanked them then marched hard on turn (Here Morris and the boys got on the side of the rebel formation and preformed an oblige movement or turn to press hard on that perimeter of the enemy flank causing them to retreat) Burned bridge at Edenburg could not pursuit them any further. Camped in the woods

Entry. New Market left Berkins as rear guard G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) on side of town. 2 miles from New Market. Rebels burnt all the cars (railroad cars) and all bridges along the road capture 2 chickens from an old secesh. Mount Jackson was well fortified get thanks of the President and General McClellan (General McClellan was in command in this general area from July 1861 to March 1862.) on for doing the rebels in Monday. April 29th near Harrisonburg got paid $2.66 on Sunday. 28th all went well so far. Sent 15 dollars away. May 1st raining and a walk over the country left camp.

Entry. Coming from town expecting an attack lay in a field all night left at dawn in the morning marched back to New Market 10 miles. Stayed till 11 at night crosses mountain May 7th laying on the mountain to rest General Banks just passed down the road went on to Columbia Bridge. The road went to Columbia Bridge camped for the night turned out to meet the Rebels all quiet again. Return camp May 10th in the night started back again to New Market.

Entry. The 11 cook 2 days rations immediately receive news of capture of Norfolk and other places with the blowing up of the Merrimac start for New Market at 12 at night march till 12 at noon camp in field till...march till 1...lay
at Woodstock march again at night arrive at Strasburg and camp here in our tents for the 1st time on our march raining 14 May another field 15th May more into another field. 16 G.E.B. (No idea what this means? G could refer to George; E could refer to Edwin, and B could refer to Benjamin—three men in the unit who volunteered duty elsewhere. According to the muster roll, there were nine men named George; one man named Edwin, and one man named Benjamin [Pennsylvania Roots, 2005].) leave the Reg. (Regiment) for guard duty.

Entry. Manassas gap Railroad May 20 still in RR (Railroad). The rebels surprise us and after a hard fight captures us 23rd (The Regimental History states that seven officers and 180 men were captured on that day, including Colonel Thomas L. Kane who had formed the famous Bucktail Regiment [Pennsylvania Roots, 2005].). (May 23, 1862, was the date of capture. This fact was verified in another diary from a soldier in the same unit. Ironically, this soldier recorded hardships that were similar to those experienced by Morris. According to this soldier, Benjamin Benner and 58 soldiers of the 29th Pennsylvania were captured by General Ewell’s Confederate Division [Benner, 1900].) took us to Front Royal and put us in the hospital gave us 4 crackers (These crackers were probably hardtack. It was a solid cracker about three inches square and nearly half an inch thick. The crackers became very hard and were usually crumbled and put into coffee to soften it up so one could eat it with a spoon. [Catton, 1984].) and a man all piece of bread, a pieces of fat for 3 days took us to Winchester to the depot gave us 4 crackers 28th gave us loaf of bread and a little piece of meat. 28th left for Winchester, June 1 toward Harrisonburg.

Entry. Fight at Port Republic, the hogs eating the dead along the side of the road. Still in Lynchburg June 19th, 1 man dead of starvation a rumor we will be paroled (Parole was an honor system developed in Europe—a soldier would sign a parole voucher saying he would not take up arms until he received word that the enemy had gotten a man in his stead and then he was honor bound to return to active duty. Disregarded at the end of the war, prisoners were exchanged on the following basis: (a) 1 general = 46 privates; (b) 1 major general = 40 privates; (c) 1 brigadier general = 20 privates; (d) 1 colonel = 15 privates; (e) 1 lieutenant colonel = 10 privates; (f) 1 major = 8 privates; (g) 1 captain = 6 privates; (h) 1 lieutenant = 4 privates, and (i) 1 non-commissioned officer = 2 privates) (Prisoners, Paroles) tomorrow July 3rd still at Lynchburg 1 year since I left home. August 3rd one year since we are in the old still at LPI (?). Left Lynchburg for Richmond arrived at 9, fort on Belle Island. 20 still at Belle Island nearly starving us (This harsh treatment was substantiated by the Benner diary [Benner, 1900].) 5 weeks on Belle Island left on Sept. 13 (According to the Benner diary, the prisoners were paroled on this date, and on November 8, the remaining soldiers were ordered to rejoin their regiment, which they did on December 10, 1862 [Benner, 1900].).

Conclusions

Pedagogical Note

The conclusions were developed as a wrap-up activity in which the students summarized the findings and the utility of the procedural-historical aspects of the project in both small cooperative learning groups and whole class discussions. All aspects of the project were discussed in both forums, and a consensus was reached in a whole class dialogue.

There were other entries in the diary, but essentially they were similar to the earlier entries. The narrative revealed that the soldier’s life was a series of marching to and from the same places as well as incidents such as lack of food. This led them to be quite cognizant of any food available, such as a stray chicken or corn cobs. Morris may have written this diary as a memoir many years after the
fact which would explain the lack of dates on entries. Also the Benner diary appeared to be a memoir-type diary. Nonetheless, this little book revealed the effects of the war on the common soldier.

Most young men only saw the positive aspects of a war until they actually became involved in combat. In the 19th century, people never ventured outside a 50-mile radius of their birthplace. For this reason, going to war would have had a great appeal to a young person. A soldier received new clothes and weapons; he met new people and saw places he had never or would have ever traveled. The only drawback was that he and his friends could die. Once the fighting started, the grim reality set in. From reading the diary entries, it is clear that the entries reveal a certain sentiment change once the killing occurred.

The procedures employed in the lessons enabled the students to be their own historians. Collecting and analyzing historical documentation via a primary source, the students experienced a replicated form of the thought processes of the professional historian. The experiences also provided a realization that history, like beauty, may actually be in the eye of the beholder. History is overly dependent on the person who writes it. The participants believed that the entire process was instructive in two ways: It produced a mindset in the students to be cautionary consumers of history, knowing that it is an interpretation of facts, based on retrospective data analysis, and they developed a template to teach history in a more meaningful way by placing the students in a position to garnish, analyze, and interpret the facts for themselves.

History is too important to be left to the historians. Students should read and think about the experiences of the common people caught up in the sweep of history. The Hackman diary reveals the life of a sixteen-year-old boy caught up in a monumental endeavor of history. Showing this young man’s stark reality reveals a humanity found within us all. By student document analysis and archival research, this period of history will have a significant effect for the participants involved in the study for many years to come. Pedagogically the document analysis in cooperative learning groups and whole class dialogue could be a meaningful assessment for the students on the events of the Civil War era and the impact of those events on the lives of ordinary people. Using archival research and primary document analysis can make history for the middle school student the exciting endeavor it should be.

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Author’s Note: Berks County Clerk correspondence to 
Mark Mraz, by email (11/20/05). A search by the Berks 
County Clerk yielded that a Morris W. Hackman who 
served with the 19th Pennsylvania Infantry in that area. 
Notice that Morris W. Hackman was Morris Hackman’s 
alternative name on the Veteran’s Card.

About the Author

Mark Mraz is an assistant professor of education at 
Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania. He holds a 
PhD in Curriculum and Instruction Social Studies 
Education from The Pennsylvania State University. 
Mark teaches social studies methods and foundations 
courses at Slippery Rock. Prior to coming to the 
University, He taught social studies for 29 years at the 
St. Mary’s Area School District in St. Mary’s, Pensyl-
vania.

Contact information: Slippery Rock University, 
Secondary Education/ Foundations of Education 
Department, 208D McKay Education Building, Slippery 
Rock, PA 16057; phone: (724)738-2288; email: 
mark.mraz@sru.edu.