

## **Keep'em Guessing: Using Student Predictions to Inform Historical Understanding and Empathy**

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Authors frequently discuss and provide examples of doing history in the social studies classroom. Few focus, however, on allowing students to predict the outcome of historical events before learning what actually happened. In this article, I describe an activity allowing students to make their own predictions informing their understanding of the historical events related to Articles of Confederation. I developed this strategy based on my evolving understanding of how to bring historical thinking into the classroom. I discuss adding the concept of prediction to a previously published lesson plan and how, during my subsequent year in the classroom, I enriched the lesson to elicit student empathy. Finally, the article offers suggestions for teachers developing their own lessons incorporating student predictions.

*Key Words:* Articles of Confederation, historical empathy, historical inquiry, problem-based learning, student prediction, teaching strategies

### **Introduction**

Most elementary and middle-level students love asking questions. Similar to the students discussed by Dave Neumann, Sam Wineberg, and others, I found many of the questions my 8th grade students asked in state history class were from a present-day perspective. This perspective revealed students' negative judgments concerning their understanding of historical individuals. Students saw nothing wrong with comments such as, *Why were they so stupid?*, *Why did they make such a dumb mistake?*, and *Why didn't they know better?* When we look back at historical events, with knowledge of the outcomes, it is easy to identify mistakes, or a person's or group's misguided decisions, that ultimately led to failed initiatives (Neumann, 2010; Wineberg, 2001).

I concur with my social studies colleagues purporting traditional methods of history instruction contribute to students' attitudes towards forbearers' actions and decisions. Researchers have long argued simply teaching dates and facts severely limits students' understanding of historical complexity. These researchers posit such understandings require students to answer important historical questions through problem solving and critical thinking, usually by analyzing and interpreting primary and secondary sources. Too often, students are not given the opportunity to engage in these challenging tasks (e.g., Levstik & Barton, 2005; Lesh, 2011; Loewen, 2010; Wineberg, 2001). Traditional methodologies prohibit students' exploration of cause and effect relationships of historical events and limit their ability to make informed personal decisions in and out of school.

Much has been written by educators and researchers to help social studies teachers include inquiry-based practices in their lesson planning (e.g., Foster & Padgett, 1999; Greenhut, 2011; Lesh, 2011; Stanford History Education Group, n.d.; Swan, Hofer, & Gallicchio, 2008). Inquiry-based lessons present important questions to students coupled with the opportunity to use primary and secondary sources to answer them. For example, Kathy Swan et al. (2008) offer teachers a CSI type strategy for exploring historical sources, called Historical Scene Investigation. The authors introduce a series of exercises in which students use documents to answer questions such as "what caused the Starving Time?" or "who fired the first shot at the

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Battle of Lexington and Concord?;" and "what happened to Aaron (an enslaved man) between December 1767 and January 1771?" (Swan et al., p. 260). Stephanie Greenhunt (2011) offers another example for using the National Archives' DocsTeach website that allows students to access primary source documents to answer questions such as, *Was westward expansion necessary or were the consequences too great?*

While many of the suggestions pertaining to doing history have been useful in my own practice, I sought to develop strategies allowing students to do history by focusing on their own predictions (Levstik & Barton, 2005). Authors who forward strategies and suggestions for doing history rarely offer students opportunities to focus on their own predictions (i.e., Doppen 2000; Greenhunt, 2011; Swan et al., 2008; Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson, & Morris, 1998). In fact, students are usually informed of historical outcomes prior to beginning an inquiry-based investigation. I hypothesized that students might gain a better understanding of historical figures' decision-making challenges through a prediction-based inquiry model focused on state mandated social studies standards and content.

This article describes an inquiry-based lesson allowing students to use predictions to inform historical understanding. I developed the strategy through an evolving process of understanding the implementation of historical thinking in the classroom. I discuss how I subsequently modified a previously published lesson plan to elicit student empathy for historical figures facing difficult decisions. Finally, I provide readers with suggestions about how to develop their own lessons incorporating student predictions.

### **Why do I have to teach the Articles of Confederation?**

As a beginning teacher, I dreaded the topic of U.S. and state government. In particular, my apprehension centered on the state standard concerning the Articles of Confederation (AOC). During my first few years in the classroom, I found the difficulty of teaching 13- and 14-year-olds about the Constitution sufficiently daunting. I was confused about why would the state require these students to learn about a document that was a miserable failure...especially in a Georgia history class?

Over the years, I expanded my knowledge and understanding of inquiry-based practices and historical thinking. I began incorporating these ideas into my lessons, though stymied about how to bring these strategies to what I considered to be useless topics such as the AOC. Instead, I chose to quickly discuss the failures of the document before moving on to a more in-depth study of the U.S. Constitution. The importance of this topic occurred to me in 2009 when the Georgia Council on Economic Education (GCEE) asked me to develop a book of lesson plans titled *Georgia Economic History: Lessons for Implementing the GPS at Grade 8*. The goal of developing this text was to integrate economic concepts into the study of Georgia history. Teachers had specifically requested a lesson be included to address state standard SSH4a: "Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of both the Georgia Constitution of 1777 and the Articles of Confederation and explain how weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation led to a need to revise the Articles" (Georgia Department of Education, 2011, p. 1). This was the turning point in my understanding of the significance of teaching students about the Articles of Confederation.

I began by considering which approaches would help students understand how the strengths and weaknesses of the AOC led to the U.S. Constitution, the longest lasting written constitution in history. In the process, I decided to ask students to develop their own solutions to the challenges the founders faced and predict if their responses would be similar to historic events. The particular published lesson, "Restricting the Commercial Intercourse is Certainly

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Adverse to the Spirit of the Union: The Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation,” has a state history focus, however the predicting strategy can easily be adapted for any course (i.e., U.S. History, Government) that includes a study of the Articles of Confederation and Constitution. The full lesson plan can be requested from the GCEE and I received permission to use lesson excerpts in this article.

**Step 1: What would you have done if...?**

At some point during our Kindergarten-12 (K-12) academic careers, most of us were asked by a history teacher a question beginning with, *What would you have done if...?* I remember vividly a specific question posed in my 11th grade US history class. My favorite teacher asked, *What would you have done if you were Truman?*, in reference to Truman’s decision to drop an atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The question sparked an intense debate about the morality of Truman’s choice. I was so struck by the question that I posed it at home and triggered a spirited family debate about the appropriateness of Truman’s actions.

Research has confirmed this type of questioning to be powerful in both students’ historical thinking and empathy (e.g., Doppen, 2000; Lattimer, 2008; Jensen, 2008; Scheuerell, 2008; Yeager et al., 1998). It also has a major limitation; all students know from the beginning what happened historically. In my example, everyone knew that Truman dropped the bomb. We had no opportunity to form a decision without prior knowledge of the historical event, although we could debate the morality of the past decision. Even if, as students, we had consulted primary documents to inform our debate, previously knowing what happened robbed us of a true problem-solving opportunity. We simply could make value judgments based on evidence from something we already knew. When I accepted the challenge of attempting to make a failed 200-year-old document relevant to middle-level students, I wanted to incorporate the concepts of the Truman’s decision lesson, but add the elements of problem-based learning lacking in this memorable debate from my youth (Delisle, 1997; Scheurell, 2008), or even the additional sources about Truman’s decision by Frans Doppen (2000) and Elizabeth Yeager et al. (1998).

Social studies teachers often are astonished by students’ lack of historical or prior knowledge. I decided to use this characteristic in my favor, assuming my students would bring very little prior knowledge about the Constitutional Convention to this lesson. Ensuring that I did not tell the students the answers beforehand constituted the first step in the process. I changed my published Essential Question from *How did the major economic weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation help lead to the development of a much stronger Constitution?* to *What elements of the Articles of Confederation made it easy or difficult to govern effectively?* in hopes that I did not include the answer (Roberts, 2009, p. 1). Upon completion of this portion of the assignment, I wanted students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the AOC, but not how the problems were remedied during the constitutional convention. Therefore, I began the lesson with a strategically developed WebQuest based on the Library of Congress’ (2013) “The Articles of Confederation” website. Students used the website with guided question to learn information about the document itself, but not its impact on the formation of the US Constitution.

**Step 2: Identify and Solve Problems**

In the second step students identified the weaknesses of the AOC. In the published lesson I provided teachers with six problems their students could solve; however, in my classroom, I allowed students to determine which weaknesses they deemed most problematic for

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maintaining an effective government. Students usually cited problems similar to those I developed in the published lesson such as “one vote per state,” “a weak central government,” “no balance of power,” and “all states must pass approve a law to pass it” (Roberts, 2009, p. 10).

After students determined the weaknesses of the AOC, they were split into committees and assigned one problem to solve. Using a decision tree graphic organizer, students debated, using the knowledge they gained from the WebQuest, and then compromised by developing a group consensus on how to remedy their assigned issue. They documented the decision process on the organizer. At the conclusion of the debates, students reported their problems and proposed solutions while I recorded these on the board. Once students identified the “best” solution they documented them on a chart with the column headings “Problem,” and “Your Solution” (Roberts, 2009, p. 12).

### **Step 3: Reveal What Really Happened**

In the third step in the lesson, students finally learned about the Constitutional Convention and how the founders solved the issues of the AOC by completely throwing away the document and starting from scratch. Many approaches are possible at this point in the lesson. I felt comfortable adding a mini-lecture based on the hands-on elements of conducting the Webquest, holding the discussion, voting, and allowing students to work on their charts. During the lecture, each time I mentioned one of the Framers’ solutions included in our list of problems, students added these to an additional column of their chart titled “Constitutional Solution” (Roberts, 2009, p. 12). Other acceptable strategies in this part of the assignment include: students reading informational texts together to identify how the convention solved the issues in the AOC, watching a media clip that explained the solutions, or taking part in a second WebQuest focused on the Constitution.

### **Step 4: Compare and Contrast**

In the final step, we examined students’ solutions to the weaknesses of the AOC and compared them to those made by the Framers. In this step, students could determine how their ideas agreed with or differed from those of the Framers, some of America’s most famous historical figures. Students became excited as they discovered similarities, such as *my idea was just like the Virginia Plan*. Others were upset about the outcomes. Some thought it would be better to have people vote for the president, not using the unfair Electoral College which gives the big states too much power.

### **Are you Smarter than Abraham Baldwin?**

In a subsequent year, my final in the classroom, I noticed something was missing as I prepared to teach this lesson again. Some students continued to quickly judge decisions made by historic individuals as dumb or stupid so, I added one more element to the assignment in hopes of helping students become more personally connected to the past. Due to the popularity for the game show, *Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?*, I created the game *Are you Smarter than Abraham Baldwin?* to incorporate state-specific history (Hodge & Roberts, 2011). State standards required a focus on Baldwin, a Georgia signer of the Constitution. The game provided the perfect tie-in to include him in this lesson.

Students learned more about a famous Georgian instead of learning about a large body of faceless legislators through the inclusion of a specific, named, individual, Abraham Baldwin. As the game began, students focused on proving *that Baldwin guy* wrong, without even knowing what his ideals were. The process detail in the four steps of the lesson allowed students to identify issues Baldwin and the framers faced while making difficult and complex decisions.

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Students became empathic towards historical leaders facing complex important decisions. After the lesson, some students expressed their empowerment concerning their own ability to make important decisions. Some were shocked by difficulty individuals in a large group face in decision making, and others were impressed historical figures, like Baldwin, could learn from their mistakes and create a document that has remained the cornerstone of our republic for so many years. This element personalized the lesson. Very few students, during the remainder of the year, claimed that an individual was dumb or that a historical decision was stupid. They learned to consider the difficulty of decision making within the context of historical events.

### Conclusion

The most important concept of doing history is ensuring students discover the answers to historical questions through their own inquiry. Teachers should serve as facilitators and lesson planners to create activities allowing students problem-solving opportunities. By developing lessons focusing on student prediction, teachers can keep 'em guessing, allowing students to become problem solvers and not simply passive consumers of historical information. In my experience, students connected more personally to the topic under investigation and learned to be better decision makers and empathic. These two important skills will prepare them for college, career, and civic life.

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