

Curating the Human Experience: Introducing an Inquiry of Literary Texts into Historical Research

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Abstract

This case study follows the process as four high school students curate literary sources in preparation for historical arguments. Results indicate that the use of literary texts prepared students to build nuanced historical arguments by helping them identify subtexts and divergent perspectives through their research. The underlying ELA skills complemented the literacy demands of historical argumentation.

Keywords: *Cross-disciplinary writing, digital curation, evidence-based writing, multimodal texts*

INTRODUCTION

Standing at his computer in the school media center, Nate ¹called his four groupmates to his table. Before him was a digital collection of the racist political cartoons drawn by Theodore Geisel. Nate was disturbed that the man who went on to become Dr. Seuss and write endearing stories such as *Horton Hears a Who* could be responsible for these images of hate. Nate wanted his friends to see what “my childhood hero” had done.

Nate’s powerful response to the images before him surely impacted him as he went on to compose an evidence-based video essay about the Japanese internment camps. These were images that he found and curated on his own, and that personal exploration went on to shape his argument. This article will share how a digital curation process that included an exploration of literary texts in preparation for a historical argument allowed students to explore and draw connections to historical content in very personal ways.

Review of Literature

Digital curation refers to the use of digital tools to “select, preserve, collect, sort, categorize, and share digital assets,” (Tsybulsky, 2020, p. 429). Because curation mimics the everyday social media practices of learners, it facilitates student-directed learning and “ethical, factual, rigorous and balanced storytelling,” (Mihailidis, 2015, p. 453). Therefore, through digital curation “additional elements can be leveraged, such as the inclusion of social media to

¹ All names are pseudonyms

disseminate collected content, the ability for other users to suggest content or leave comments and the critical evaluation and selection of aggregated content,” (Ungerer, 2016, p. 6).

It is important to note that digital curation involves the use of multimodal texts, requiring students to consider the “meaning of systems of signs” that may be specific to different modes and genres of texts (Kress, 1997, p. 6). Semiotics, the theory that explores how humans create such signs to bring forth abstract ideas, includes the study of symbols, icons and indexes that can vary across modes (Dewey et al., 2007). Importantly, sign systems are not universal, and meaning is context-dependent; therefore, from a semiotic point of view, literacy is “the ability to use a variety of sign systems appropriate to contexts” (Harste & Carey, 2003, p. 494). The use of digital curation offers students expansive choice but also requires them to engage in complex meaning-making as they make sense of the various texts that might be curated in the process. At the same time, learners must also consider what texts to curate for their purposes.

Disciplinary literacy is an instructional approach to the teaching of reading, writing and literacy practices that emphasizes the “specialized knowledge and abilities” used by skilled readers and writers within specific disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012, p. 7). Those skills and abilities become the practices which allow the learner to develop discipline-specific understandings (Moje, 2007). Therefore, disciplinary literacy focuses on the discourse practices within the field to develop mindsets and practices inherent to the fields. For instance, research has suggested that content area knowledge is not the most important aspect of expert reading of history; rather, it is the ability to interpret texts through the use of subtexts and by studying how rhetorical choices within the text reveal writer’s purpose, audience, beliefs, and worldviews (Wineburg, 1998, 319).

Socio-linguistic views of literacy are highly informed by semiotics because they posit that signs are learned through culture (Smith, 1975). Disciplinary literacy takes such an approach because it views learners as working as an apprentice within a discipline (Moje, 2015). Therefore, the content of the disciplines function as social semiotic systems, and teachers must develop and plan for authentic assessments that allow learners to draw from each discipline’s frames, scripts and schemas (Bain, 2008).

ELA holds a unique position because of its emphasis on discourse among texts, but ELA-specific literacy practices include emphasis on divergent perspectives (Rainey & Moje, 2012). Disciplinary literacies inherent to literary texts offer readers the chance to gain an understanding of perspectives beyond their own. Offering windows into other experiences has lasting implications. Former Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust praised the humanities for its ability to widen the world and teach “empathy for people outside yourself,” (Gilbert, 2016). UNESCO publishes resources for educators, such as a framework for teaching for tolerance of Muslim people. Key among its strategies is developing critical media literacy skills, incorporating theatre, and using the arts to allow learners to “bring a new understanding of Muslim youth that challenges common misconceptions and stereotypes, and allows the struggles of those youth to be discussed” (UNESCO, 2011, p.41). The use of literature in professional development for health care professionals (Bladon & Bladon, 2019), and social workers (Turner, 2013) has demonstrated increased empathy among providers. Bibliotherapy, which employs books and other forms of literature, is an accepted therapeutic approach that can support patients with a variety of mental health disorders, in part because the use of literary texts can increase empathy, tolerance for others and interpersonal skills (Rubin, 1978).

METHODS

Fig.1. A screenshot of the shared Padlet for student curation in history class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the curation process, students identified and shared 36 literary texts to the ELA Padlet. Those texts included political cartoons, photographs, artwork, videos, poetry, and music. Several students shared pictures and articles about memorials dedicated to internment camp survivors. Unlike the historical documents, which largely included the government perspective using primary documents, most of the literary texts (33 of the 36 texts) focused on the Japanese American experience, with much of it written and shared by camp survivors. For example, Nate linked to a TED Talk by actor George Takei, in which he recalled living in the camps as a young boy (Takei, 2014). While historical texts were used to trace shifting perspectives and often included milestones past the time (such as a documentary about the reparations movement during Ronald Reagan's presidency), all the literary texts were situated in the time period itself, even though several of the texts were published more recently. In this section, I will share trends that emerged through careful analysis of data coded as "literary analysis/insight," allowing me to find balance, nuance, and detail in the process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Literary texts evoked strong emotions from the students

During classroom observations of the curation process in both history and English classes, I observed two incidents when group members gathered to respond to a text that was curated by another member. The first incident occurred when Nate found a website of political cartoons drawn by Theodore Geisel, who went on to become the famed children's author Dr. Seuss. Standing at his table, Mike called the others over so he could share his laptop screen with them. As he clicked through the images, the other members expressed dismay at the blatantly racist images. After four images, Nate simply said, "My childhood hero." At that, Mike patted his back and said, "That's rough." In history class the next day, Hailey called Sarah over to show her a picture of protestors at an airport shortly after President Donald Trump's announcement of a travel ban from seven majority Muslim countries. In the picture, a protestor stands before a sign that reads: "Japanese Jew against targeting entire groups of humans #Never Forget #Never Again." As the girls talked softly about the image, Sarah turned the conversation back to a painting she uploaded to the Padlet the previous day. "I guess it's just like another fence," she commented.

Both Nate and Sarah used those powerful images in their essays, and they discussed their strong response during follow-up interviews. Nate said that he could not believe that somebody whose life work was dedicated to messages of love and inclusion could be so manipulated by fear. In his video essay, Nate began with frames of text that talked about the bombing of World War II. His next frame reads, "Artists, such as Dr. Seuss, expressed the hatred and racism that was growing in our country" as three racist images from the collection appear (See fig. 2 and 3).

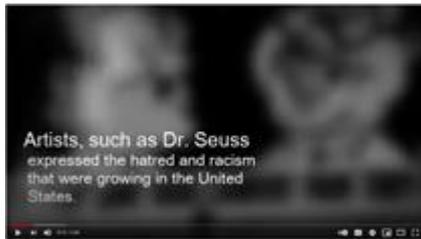


Fig. 2 and 3. Screenshots of early frames in Nate’s video essay. In the first frame, he introduces the political cartoons before showing the racist images in the second frame. The images were drawn by Theodore Geisel, who went on to become Dr. Seuss. Nate was very upset when he discovered this images by his favorite childhood author.

Sarah showed the news photo of the airport protest directly after a clip of Japanese internment camp survivors reacting to news of the passage of reparations in 1989 (See fig. 4). When asked why she chose that photo, Sarah replied that the literary texts helped her to see what had not been shared in the primary documents – the voices of the Japanese American, noting an absence of Muslim perspectives in the news coverage of the travel ban. “I think now, knowing that there could be even more manipulation through what the president is saying, what Congress is saying, because they are all on the same team that sees Muslims as a threat,” she said. By putting the images of reparations and Muslim ban together, she indicated a desire to show viewers the U.S. was making a similar mistake. Upon reflecting on the photograph, Sarah said she worried that Muslims were being silenced in the same way Japanese Americans were during World War II.



Fig. 4. Screenshot of photograph Sarah used in her video essay.

Why those emotions mattered

All four students entered the study with significant evidence of content knowledge; they had a history of success in advanced-level high school history courses, and they often shared their historical knowledge of World War II while discussing the project in interviews. In fact, it was that knowledge and interest that had led them to select the internment camp as the topic of the project. However, even high achieving high school students often fail to read for subtext when engaging in historical inquiry, often because secondary students are offered anthologized, historical texts that are “merely the shell” of those that are considered by academic historians (Wineburg, 1991, p. 500). These texts are usually excerpted and stripped of much of the context that could be used for sophisticated and nuanced understandings. In short, the texts are dull.

The emotional response to the texts described above indicates that the curation process allowed students access to deeper and richer texts. The students engaged in meaning making through a personal process that evoked strong emotions and situated their understandings within their own experiences, values and beliefs. This helped them to contextualize their arguments in ways that brought purpose to their multimodal essays and helped them to think critically about the topic. During observations of their classwork, both Sarah and Nate shared

their reactions with their group members; this social nature of their learning demonstrated that the students were, indeed, creating a community with a shared disciplinary purpose. In summary, the strong emotional responses to the texts helped the students develop a greater sense of purpose and identity that positioned them to make more authentic historical arguments.

Literary texts humanized history

All four of the students indicated that the literary texts helped them understand the human cost of the internment camps. Sarah and Hailey identified a theme of silencing within the literary texts. “A lot of sources talk about silence and being fenced in, and when you read (a historical document) that reports that the Japanese are doing fine..love it...are safe in the camps...it just shows how the Japanese Americans were being silenced by these people, who were trying to keep their opinions low, minimize it.” Hailey added, “The historical texts showed what actually happened, but I liked the literary ones because you could see the reactions and how we got to the point of (changing our attitudes about the camps).”

For the boys, the literary texts required them to draw inferences and engage in a difficult process of meaning-making to truly understand the impact of the internment camp on the victims. The literary texts required them to take a more active role as researcher. “Looking at someone else’s viewpoint is hard. I have to think about what they are saying, not what I want to say,” Mike explained. Nate agreed, adding, “History is about what happened, but in English it was more about what was relevant and important.”

In their final projects, all four of the students brought their video essays to a discussion of how fear harmed the Japanese Americans. Mike concluded his video with a frame that said “Today, there is more sympathy for the Japanese Americans affected” as sombre music played. Nate, on the other hand, used video clips and pictures of survivors and wrote a simple line, “People became aware of the personal experiences of those in the internment camp” to demonstrate the consequences of unchecked fear. Hailey and Sarah both made more direct comparisons between the fear Americans felt during World War II and current fear of Muslims. For example, Hailey ended her video with the text, “Hopefully we can apply the lessons learned from Japanese internment camps to the issues in our country today.”

Why it mattered that history was seen as a human endeavour

In a written analysis and reflection of the curation completed in her Honors English 10 class, Hailey took time to share the literature about the camps that she discovered during curation. These stories, Hailey wrote, tell “the story of those who fought to survive in the camps, and it gives a new perspective to people like FDR, showing how to them, they were villains.” In his reflection, Mike wrote, “Art and writing has shifted to wanting people to understand the suffering when it happened and giving (sic) the real facts.” To both Hailey and Mike, the literary texts allowed them to consider perspectives and voices that had largely been silenced in the historical moment.

Disciplinary literacy in the ELA classroom is often focused on rhetorical aspects of the text; that is, ELA scholars often explore how author’s identity and purpose intersect both with the situational context and the audience in ways that are discursive and open to interpretation (Warren, 2013). Because history textbooks often share texts with limited perspective, the students may rely heavily on the understanding of history that is shared through those textbooks. However, genuine historical argumentation restores agency to the reader, allowing them to select from a wide variety of texts (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015). Such wide variety will naturally mean that students are forced to consider perspectives to understand these

historical texts. This sense that history is open to interpretation and is dependent upon perspectives may feel unnatural to students whose history education has been dominated by textbook accounts of history. Bridging those skills between history and ELA classrooms offers students a familiar model for such work, inviting them to consider history as a discipline that requires them to create meaning through interpretation.

Literary texts slowed down the meaning making process

Including the curation of literary texts in this historical inquiry complicated the process. During observations of class workdays, I witnessed some frustration as students synthesized their understandings of the different types of texts. I even overheard one student (not a participant in the study) tell Mary, “I just wish you’d tell me what to put in here.” Nate explained that the literary texts required careful consideration. “Yeah, you had to pick their opinions out from the texts, and that was hard. The historical documents were pretty straightforward with what people thought and what they were doing.” Still, students saw value in the choice that the curation allowed when composing the video essay. As Sarah told me, “I feel like selecting sources was a big part (of the video essay).”

It was clear that the literary texts required students to slow down their inquiry into the historical time period. Curating the literary texts introduced different genres and modalities into the process. As Nate shared with me, “I feel like it was a lot easier to find historical documents.” Students drew inferences from the various literary texts, and then they considered how those inferences related to the historical documents they found. Reflecting on her students, Mary shared, “You can see (the students) thinking about the background of the documents and not just the words they were saying.” Kathy agreed, adding, “(They) had a better appreciation for the cultural contexts... In history, you might have a section that glosses over the cultural elements ...but not so much on the impact.”

How slowing down helps

In today’s classroom, literacy is a complex idea that moves beyond reading and writing. Digital technologies shape the nature of literacies both in academic and social life. In 1996, the New London Group called for teachers to embrace new pedagogies for new literacies (New London Group, 1996). Two key ideas that emerged were situated practice and critical framing. Situated practice is premised on the idea that students already bring vernacular practice from their lives outside of school that must be bridged with academic learning (Gee, 2004). Critical framing allows the learner to ask questions of socio-cultural contexts and purposes of learning, increasingly important as our life experiences become more globalized through technology (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Often, teachers and students do not stop to consider just how complex a given text may be, especially if those texts are not traditionally seen as academic. Requiring students to slow down their meaning-making process allows them to make observations that may have been missed otherwise. Much of the information we receive in today’s world is synthesized and multimodal; that is, we often gather information in various forms. In this case, students probably brought their vernacular knowledge about video texts, knowledge they may have drawn from watching social media or YouTube videos. Because the literary texts challenged students to synthesize different genres and perspectives, students were given time to consider how this may impact the texts they want to compose in response to the prompt. The visual nature of some of the literary texts, such as the paintings and memorials, invited them to share that understanding in multiple modes.

CONCLUSION

The study of rhetoric is central to ELA disciplinary literacy and can prepare students for literacy tasks across other disciplines (Warren, 2018). Because they understood the perspectives of the victims of the internment policies, participants in this study were better positioned to use their rhetorical skills to analyze what was left unsaid in historical texts. Such literary argument requires the consideration of subtexts, and this prepared students to engage in historical arguments as interpretive and deliberative (Monte-Sano, 2011). The literary texts invited the students to see themselves as active participants in historical thinking. The different opinions and perspectives introduced through the literary texts helped students identify differing accounts of history, an important aspect of historical reasoning (Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012).

Importantly, because the participants actively found and selected these texts, they were positioned to bring their own interpretations and experiences to the task. This can be seen by the unique ways each chose to use the found literary texts. For instance, Nate's strong response to the Geisel cartoon spurred him to explore why Americans became so consumed by fear. On the other hand, Hailey and Sarah found several poems and paintings that demonstrated the lack of voice and silencing of victims. This led them both to spend much of their argument exploring how such silencing of others might continue today. While few of the literary texts were used in the video essays, the understandings they helped illuminate were central to them.

The English Language Arts classroom is often the heart of research skill building. ELA teachers often invite students to practice evidence-based writing that is more rooted in other disciplines. In my own teaching, for instance, I have had students research underage drinking, vaccination laws and food stamp initiatives. In that process, I taught my students to take strong notes, track their resources and formulate appropriate arguments using style guides and academic conventions. But in doing so, I may not have considered how to use the literacies and text types specific to ELA and related humanities to enhance and support students in those tasks.

ELA teachers focus students on building rhetorical analysis – asking students to consider author's identity, purpose, context and audience so that students are better able to both analyze others' arguments and create their own (Warren, 2018). In this study, the students naturally considered such rhetorical concerns as they responded to literary texts, and that allowed them to craft historical arguments that were nuanced and deliberative. The students understood the need to consider various perspectives and made composing choices focused on amplifying those perspectives. By curating and responding to literary texts, these students understood research as more than just a system of steps, but an exploration of ideas.

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