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middle level learning



Legendary tour Guides who were Enslaved Americans

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Giving Up Control: Action Research in Middle School



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The Enslaved Tour Guides of Mammoth Cave, Kentucky

Caroline C. Sheffield and Ashley L. Shelton

Kentucky's Mammoth Cave is the world's longest cave system, with more than 400 miles of surveyed passageways—and probably hundreds more still unexplored. Its geological features attract thousands of visitors annually who cross over “the Bottomless Pit,” feel the squeeze of “Fat Man's Misery,” and stand in awe of the “Frozen Niagara.” September 2016 marked the 75th anniversary of the establishment of Mammoth Cave as a National Park, but its history as a tourist destination extends back 200 years.¹ Much of that history intersects with the institution of slavery.

Purchasing “Property”: Land and Human Beings

Mammoth is a “petre cave,” which refers to the presence of niter (calcium nitrate), a raw material used in manufacturing gunpowder. To meet the demands of a nation at war in 1812, miners utilized the labor of dozens of slaves to extract niter.² After the war's end, the once-lucrative mining operation closed, and the cave's owners began offering informal tours to visitors seeking underground adventures.³

Although miners acted as guides on occasional tours, Mammoth Cave did not become a true tourist destination until 1838, when Frank Gorin, a local lawyer, purchased the cave. Gorin needed workers to expand and improve the Mammoth Cave Hotel, to enhance the infrastructure within the cave (such as creating paths of limestone shards), and to lead guided tours. He also sought to extend the known cave passages, so he needed underground explorers. To accomplish all that, he used the labor of three enslaved Americans: Stephen Bishop, Materson (Mat) Bransford, and Nick Bransford.

The actual experience of slavery took different forms between different regions of the country. Kentucky's economy in the early 1800s was primarily one of small farms owned by “yeomen,” often English, Irish, or Scottish immigrants—or their descendants. Most antebellum Kentuckians “were subsistence farmers, producing nearly everything they needed.”⁴ In 1850, 23 percent of Kentucky's white males held enslaved African Americans. Among those slave owners, about 70 percent owned just one slave, with 95 percent owning no more than five slaves.⁵ Large plantations were not common.

If a work gang was required for a labor-intensive task, a landowner might lease additional slaves from neighbors; such was the case with Materson (Mat) Bransford and Nick Bransford, who Gorin leased from a local landowner, Thomas Bransford, who was white. Cave Guide Stephen Bishop, like the cave itself, was owned by Gorin.

Frank Gorin owned Mammoth Cave for only one year, selling it in 1839 to Dr. John Croghan, the nephew of the famed Corps of Discovery explorer, William Clark. In addition to being a practicing physician, Croghan was also the owner of Locust Grove, a plantation near Louisville, Kentucky. He purchased the cave for \$10,000—double the price paid by Gorin a year earlier. Croghan also purchased 18-year-old Stephen Bishop, who in just one year had begun to make significant discoveries that nearly doubled the number of explored caverns. Croghan also continued leasing Materson Bransford and Nick Bransford. There was much work to be done.

Early Explorers and Guides

These three enslaved men—Stephen Bishop, Mat Bransford, and Nick Bransford.—became the foundation upon which Mammoth Cave's success as a tourist destination was built. (Short biographies of these three guides appear as Handouts in the following lesson)⁶ During much of the 19th century, a visit to Mammoth Cave was considered a “must see” for those traveling throughout the United States, much like Niagara Falls. Indeed, the cave played host to several famous visitors, including authors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jules Verne, and singer Jenny Lind.

For more than a century, a largely African-American group of men, many of whom were sons and grandsons of the former guides, explored and led tours through the cave. Sadly, the guides were replaced with park rangers, who were white, when the cave officially opened to tourists as a national park in 1946.

ON THE COVER: *Portrait of Cave Guide Nick Bransford* by Ferdinand Richard, 1857. From the collection of Mammoth Cave National Park.

Interestingly, one of the current tour guides at Mammoth Cave National Park is Jerry Bransford, a descendent of the original Mat Bransford. Part of his presentation to visitors in the 21st century is telling some of his own family history.⁷ The lesson following this article invites students to visit the website of Horse Cave Stories and listen to short audio-clips of NPS Tour Guide Jerry Bransford relating the history of the early explorers, including those who were enslaved.⁸

Enslaved Artisans

Contrary to the common perception, not all slaves in North America worked at hard labor. Some were artisans, providing their masters with much-needed skilled labor as blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, potters, and cooks.⁹ Slaves who possessed desired skills were extremely valuable to their masters, as contracting for (or hiring) such skilled labor could be expensive. The artisans' skills offered them a modicum of leverage over their masters, who financially benefitted from having the artisan working rather than running away due to harsh treat-

On the Use of First Names

Until the civil rights movement of the 1950-60s, in many parts of the country, white adults called black men by their first names or referred to them as "boy," "uncle," or "old man"—regardless of their age. Using these terms has been a method of denigrating black lives. (Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/question/sept06.htm).

In this article and lesson plan, we introduce each guide by his full name, but then often use the first name (or nick name) for three reasons. Online materials from the Mammoth Cave National Park often follow this convention. There are several generations of guides with the last name Bransford, not all of whom are related, and thus using first names helps distinguish between them. Finally, middle school students often make a stronger emotional connection to a person if he or she is referred to in youth literature by first name (Desmond) rather than by a more formal name (Bishop Tutu).

We invite teachers to discuss this editorial choice with their students, and certainly if a student raises the issue.

—The Editors

ment. Stephen Bishop, Mat Bransford, and Nick Bransford were enslaved artisans. While the three men did not necessarily create materials, their talents and knowledge in exploration, guiding, and entertainment were the foundation upon which the business of Mammoth Cave was built.

Dichotomous Roles

One of the guides' responsibilities at Mammoth Cave was exploration. How did the enslaved guides feel as they ventured forth into the dark? It's likely they felt a degree of freedom as they navigated through areas never seen by human eyes. Certainly, they enjoyed the thrill of accomplishment over their new discoveries. Yet the shadow of slavery lingered even in these moments. Each new discovery opened up new areas for tours, increasing the potential profits of the cave's owner. Was their exploration an expression of freedom, or was it just a task for the profit of their masters?

There was a dichotomous nature to the guides' interactions with the public. They were responsible for the safety and entertainment of the visitors while in the cave, but they were also servants. A quote from a letter written by a Mammoth Cave visitor in 1852 reveals the slave guides' varied roles:

[W]e came to the "Lake Lethe" which he forbade us to drink from lest [we] become intoxicated by its waters . . . we came to the boarder of the "River Styx." The ferryboat was in waiting and Stephen personifying Charon soon had us all on board and ferrying us over this famous stream. . . . We were now three miles from the entrance and a six-mile walk was before us before reaching the extremity. Stephen shouldered our basket of provisions and away we went.¹⁰

Bishop not only ferried the visitors along an underground river, he also entertained them with allusions to the "River Styx" of Greek mythology, and directed their behavior as he "forbade" the visitors to drink the water (which may indeed have been unsafe to drink.) Despite his obvious knowledge of the cave, his authority to instruct the visitors, and his power to keep them physically safe, Stephen was still very much a servant, as demonstrated by the description of him shouldering the visitors' provisions. One modern scholar has written...

By treating Mammoth Cave as a stage, complete with costumes, music, props, and illusions, writers framed the underground specter of black authority as an entertaining, but ultimately fleeting unreality, and the [black] guides as stage managers and performers.¹¹

Slavery's Harsh Reminder

It can be argued that the slave guides of Mammoth Cave were afforded an unusual degree of status, celebrity, and freedom of movement as compared with other slaves in the antebellum period. For example, in 1863, while still a slave at Mammoth Cave, Mat Bransford's visit to Louisville was reported in the August 20 edition of the *Louisville Daily Journal*.¹² The article described Mat as traveling alone (which artisan slaves were permitted to do, with a letter in hand from the master), and it provided an account of his activities in Louisville, including sitting for a portrait and visiting friends.

Despite such celebrity and occasional freedom to travel, the three guides were still slaves, and could be denied the basic rights of citizens. Therein lies a sad story. Mat Bransford married Parthena, an enslaved woman who was owned by a farmer living within two miles of Mammoth Cave. The couple was allowed to live on the farmer's land, and Mat was able to save enough money to build a home for his family. Then tragedy struck. Parthena's owner sold three of their four children. Despite his celebrity, Mat Bransford was still a slave with no legal standing to prevent the sale of his children, which caused great pain to all members of the family.¹³

This example of one family's tragedy speaks to a broader truth. The institution of slavery destroyed families. "Some whites acknowledged being troubled by the inhumanity of breaking up marriages and families, but their moral unease was generally silenced by the huge profits that resulted from these sales."¹⁴

The duality of the slave guides' lives is an interesting case study of power and authority. The guides possessed a notable degree of social authority below ground, and yet they were still servants who carried supplies and sometimes lifted the visitors themselves over slippery ground.¹⁵ Above ground, the enslaved guides' situation was arguably better than that experienced by most enslaved Americans, and yet they lacked power and authority over basic aspects of their own lives. Mat could not stop his wife's owner from selling three of their children.

A Lesson about Power, Authority, and Slavery in America

The accompanying literacy-based lesson plan uses images, short biographies, excerpts from primary source documents, and secondary source material to examine the lives of these three men and what they can tell us about the institution of slavery in America. It also serves as an interesting window into the antebellum society of the United States. As written, the lesson could be utilized in a grade 6, 7, or 8 American history class. With some modification, it could also be used in a fifth grade class or, alternatively, a high school class. 🌐

Notes

1. Mammoth Cave National Park was established in 1941, with the official dedication taking place in 1946.
2. Joyce Medley Lyons, *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2006). See chapter 4 in "A Brief History of Mammoth Cave," www.nps.gov/macalearn/historyculture/abriefhistoryofmammothcave.htm.
3. Colleen O'Connor Olson, *Mammoth Cave by Lantern Light: Visiting America's Most Famous Cave in the 1800's*, (Dayton, OH: Cave Books, 2010).
4. Kyleidoscope, "Growth of a New State (1800-1860)," (Kentucky Virtual Library/University of Kentucky), athena.uky.edu/kyleidoscope/growthky/infancy/infancy.htm.
5. National Park Service, "Black History at Mammoth Cave," www.nps.gov/macalearn/historyculture/black-history.htm. See also biographies of Mat and Nick Bransford, www.nps.gov/macaplanyourvisit/upload/BransfordsSiteBulletin.PDF, and of Stephen Bishop, www.nps.gov/macaplanyourvisit/upload/stephen.pdf
6. The biographies (Handouts) in the lesson are adapted from those provided online by the National Park Service, edited for easier reading by middle grade students. See also Harold Meloy, "Stephen Bishop: The Man and the Legend," in *Cavers, Caves, and Caving*, B. Sloane, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1977).
7. Kenan Christiansen, "In Kentucky, a Family at the Center of the Earth," *New York Times*, February 28, 2014. www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/travel/in-kentucky-a-family-at-the-center-of-the-earth.html?_r=1.
8. Horse Cave Stories, "Cave Explorers," www.horsecavestories.com/stop15.html. This educational website is a cultural and historical project with many collaborators: the mayor of Horse Cave, Kentucky; the Horse Cave/Hart County Tourist Commission; and the Horse Cave Development Corporation. It received funding from the National Park Service's Preserve America Program; the National Endowment for the Arts; the Kentucky Arts Council; and the Kentucky Humanities Council. The Kentucky Oral History Commission; and the Kentucky Historical Society contributed materials.
9. Daniel C. Littlefield, "The Variety of Slave Labor," (National Humanities Center), at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slavelabor.htm.
10. From a letter written by John Hancock McRae to his sister on October 9, 1852. (Mammoth Cave Archives, NPS).
11. Peter West, "Trying the Dark: Mammoth Cave and the Racial Imagination, 1839-1869," *Southern Spaces* (February 9, 2010), southernspaces.org/2010/trying-dark-mammoth-cave-and-racial-imagination-1839-1869.

12. *Louisville Daily Journal* (1863), in the collection of the National Park Service.
13. In a brief interview, Mat Bransford describes the sale of his three children in *A Trip to the Mammoth Kave, KY*, by J.F. Rusling. The interview appears in a footnote on pages 5 and 6 of that book, available free online at assets.documentcloud.org/documents/1031464/a-trip-to-the-mammoth-cave-ky-by-j-f-rusling.pdf. An excerpt from the interview is transcribed in a Handout for students.
14. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 107.
15. Beyard Taylor, "The Mammoth Cave: At Home and Abroad, 1864." This document was found in a reprint of the September 1928 *World Traveler* (Mammoth Cave Archives, NPS).

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Terry Langford, Curator, Mammoth Cave National Park, and Carol Ely, Executive Director, Locust Grove National Historic Landmark, for their assistance with research, and the Interpretive Staff at Mammoth Cave National Park for suggestions and advice.

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A lesson plan with handouts follows.



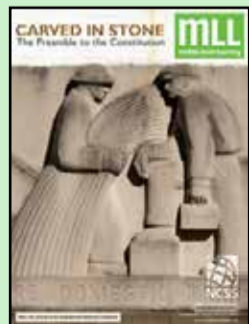
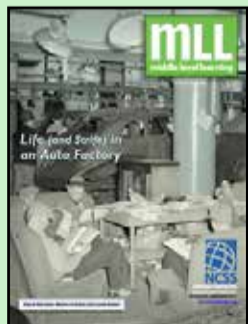
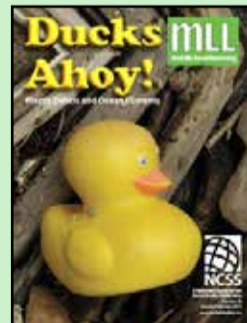
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Lesson Plan: The Enslaved Tour Guides of Mammoth Cave, Kentucky

GRADE LEVEL

6–8, can be adapted for grades 5–12

DURATION: 120 minutes (minimum)

MATERIALS

Handouts A–F. Optional: websites listed on the handouts.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be able to gather and interpret information from multiple primary sources related to the same subject.
- Students will be able to use primary and secondary sources to contextualize slavery as the guides experienced it in their roles as Mammoth Cave guides.

GUIDING QUESTION

How did the enslaved guides' experiences at Mammoth Cave illustrate different aspects of power and authority?

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Suggested Warm-up

Ascertain students' pre-existing conceptualization of the terms "power" and "authority" prior to beginning the lesson activities.

Introductory Statement

Tell students: "We're going to examine the institution of slavery as it was experienced in Mammoth Cave. This site in Kentucky

has been a National Park since 1941. We'll be trying to answer the question: How did the enslaved guides experiences illustrate different aspects of power and authority?"

Visualization

If you have internet access, project modern images from the photo gallery at www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=8C3F542C-1DD8-B71C-0728C0BC176BA864. Ask students to imagine what these caves would look like lit only with flickering torches—and without modern walking paths, handrails, spotlights and other improvements. Have them share their thoughts and speculations.

Transition I

Tell students: "In the 1840s, just like today, visitors had to be guided through the cave; otherwise they risked becoming lost in the largest cave system in the world. Let's learn about the enslaved guides who led visitors through Mammoth Cave from 1837 until the after the Civil War."

As a class or in small groups, students can examine three biographies, **Handouts A, B, and C**, while discussing these questions about the images on them:

- What is the guide wearing?
- What else do you notice about what is in the picture?
- How would you describe the artist's opinion of Nick? Why do you say this?

STANDARDS: Social Studies Themes (Learning Expectations, Middle Grades)

2 TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE

Learners will understand that learning about the past requires the interpretation of sources, and that using varied sources provides the potential for a more balanced interpretive record of the past.

Learners will be able to research and analyze past periods, events, and issues, using a variety of primary sources as well as secondary sources; validate and weigh evidence for claims, and evaluate the usefulness and degree of reliability of sources to develop a supportable interpretation.

5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Learners will understand concepts such as: mores, norms, status, role socialization, ethnocentrism, culture diffusion, competition, cooperation, conflict, race, ethnicity, and gender.

6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE

Learners will examine persistent issues involving the rights of individuals and groups in relation to the general welfare.

C3 Framework Dimension 2: Historical Thinking (6–8)

D2.His.6.6-8. Analyze how people's perspective influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.

D2.His.16.6-8. Organize applicable evidence into a coherent argument about the past.

D3.1.6-8. Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the source to guide the selection.

Common Core: ELA Reading in History/Social Studies

Standard 1. Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g. loaded language, inclusion, or avoidance of particular facts).

Standard 9. Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

A Danish artist, Joachim Ferdinand Richart, drew several pictures of Mammoth Cave including the portrait of Nick Bransford on Handout C. The guides' clothing was typically made of sturdy cloth that could withstand the cold and wet conditions in the cave. Nick is holding an oil lamp and a stick that he could use to throw lit pieces of paper to illuminate sections of the cave.

Students carefully read the handouts in small groups, individually, or the teacher can read them aloud. Then ask:

- What does this description tell us about this man and his life?
- What does it tell us about the institution of slavery in these particular examples.

Transition II

Tell students: "We have accounts of the tours written by visitors to the cave. We are going to examine three excerpts (all on **Handout D**) from primary sources accounts of Mammoth Cave tours. For each primary source, answer the questions in the provided graphic organizer (**Handout E**)."

Primary Source Analysis

Read aloud the first primary source excerpt from Beyard Taylor's chapter on Mammoth Cave. With the students, complete the first row of the primary source graphic organizer. The questions on this handout are complex—and they are meant to evoke discussion. Once students are comfortable with the process, have them read the remaining two sources on Handout D and complete the graphic organizer on Handout E. This could be done individually, in pairs or in small groups. Students can then regroup and discuss their answers. Finally, ask the students:

- Do you think that these excerpts represent a complete picture of the slave guide's life? Why or Why not?

Transition III

Tell students: "We do have the words of one guide, Materson Bransford. One of the tourists was also an author, and he asked Mat about how he felt when his children had been sold into slavery (**Handout F**). The author tried to capture Mat's way of speaking. Can you understand the dialect?"

After students have reviewed the vocabulary list on the handout, ask:

- Based on the following statement, what assumptions can you make about the author's beliefs about slaves? "Uncle Mat, I don't suppose you missed these children much? You colored people never do, they say."

- Based on Mat's statement, how did the sale of his children affect him and his wife?
- How does this document demonstrate the slave guides' lack of power and control over their own lives?

Turn and Talk

To help students synthesize and process the information, have them answer a series of questions in a "turn and talk" activity. Students will discuss each question with their elbow partner, and then the whole class.

- Did the enslaved men have power or authority below ground as guides? In what ways? What is your evidence from the sources we analyzed?
- Did the enslaved men have power or authority above ground—as Americans living in the light of day? In what ways? What is your evidence from the sources we analyzed?
- How were slaves viewed by the dominant culture in Kentucky? What is your evidence from the sources we analyzed?
- As described in the sources, how did the guides entertain the visitors? How did this provide a service to the visitors? Did it also provide a benefit to the owner?
- In what ways was the guides' exploration of the cave an expression of freedom? In what ways was it a service to the man who owned them and owned the cave?
- A person could argue that the slave guides were celebrities. Who benefited from the guides' renown? The guides? The owners? Both?

Jerry Bransford, a National Park Service tour guide in the present day, is a descendant of Mat Bransford. (**Handout G**). With Internet access, students can listen to audio-files of his narrations.

- What are some of the events that National Park Tour Guide Jerry Bransford relates to visitors?
- Can you tell from his words and his voice how Jerry Bransford feels about telling a particular story. Be specific.
- What (do you think) are respectful ways to remember all of the people involved in these events?

ASSESSMENT

Students can answer the lesson's guiding question as a formative assessment. The way in which the students answer the questions can be as varied as an essay, a political cartoon, a video, or a comic strip, among other options. 🎧

Biography of Stephen Bishop

Stephen Bishop was one of the greatest explorers of Mammoth Cave. He was brought to Mammoth Cave in 1838 when he was still a teenager. When the cave was sold to a new owner in 1839, Stephen was also part of the “purchase.”

National Park Service



Stephen Bishop

Stephen learned the toured routes from white guides. However, Stephen Bishop ventured beyond the toured areas and discovered many miles of the Mammoth Cave—places no human eyes had ever seen. He managed to get over a deep vertical shaft known as the Bottomless Pit. That was a great moment. The areas he discovered can still be viewed by visitors today.

Stephen was a showman and visitors wrote of his speech and singing voice, which echoed in caverns and down passages. His attitude and style were a model for future guides. One visitor, Bayard Taylor, wrote,

“I think no one can travel under his guidance without being interested in the man ...”

Stephen gained his freedom in 1856, but sadly died the next year at the age of 37. He left behind his wife Charlotte and son Thomas. His cause of death still remains a mystery today. In those days, people did not understand the causes of disease very well.

Stephen Bishop is buried at the Old Guide’s Cemetery at Mammoth Cave National Park. [🌐](#)

SOURCES: National Park Service, “Black History at Mammoth Cave,” www.nps.gov/macal/learn/historyculture/black-history.htm.

Trading Cards for Mammoth Cave National Park, www.flickr.com/photos/tradingcardsnpsyahoccom/sets/72157629788755876.

Below: Detail from *River Styx in the Mammoth Cave*.



Illustration originally published in Hesse-Wartegg’s “Nord Amerika”, Swedish edition published in 1880 (now in the public domain). This image is available for free from www.shutterstock.com.

Biography of Materson (Mat) Bransford

Materson Bransford was the son of Thomas Bransford and an enslaved woman. Her name is lost to history. Sadly, the relationship between the two men was that of slave and master, not son and father.

Even during the “Stephen Bishop era,” Mat Bransford was responsible for leading most of the tours through Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. Like Stephen, Mat gave a dramatic presentation as he guided tourists through the underground caverns over the years 1838 to 1857.

Mat Bransford married Parthena, who was also enslaved. She was owned by a farmer living within two miles of Mammoth Cave. The couple was allowed to live on the farmer’s land, and Mat was able to save enough money to build a home for his family. Tragically, Parthena’s owner sold three of their four children. Despite Mat’s celebrity and an unusual freedom of movement, he was still a slave and had no legal standing to prevent the sale of his own children. This caused great pain to all of the family members.

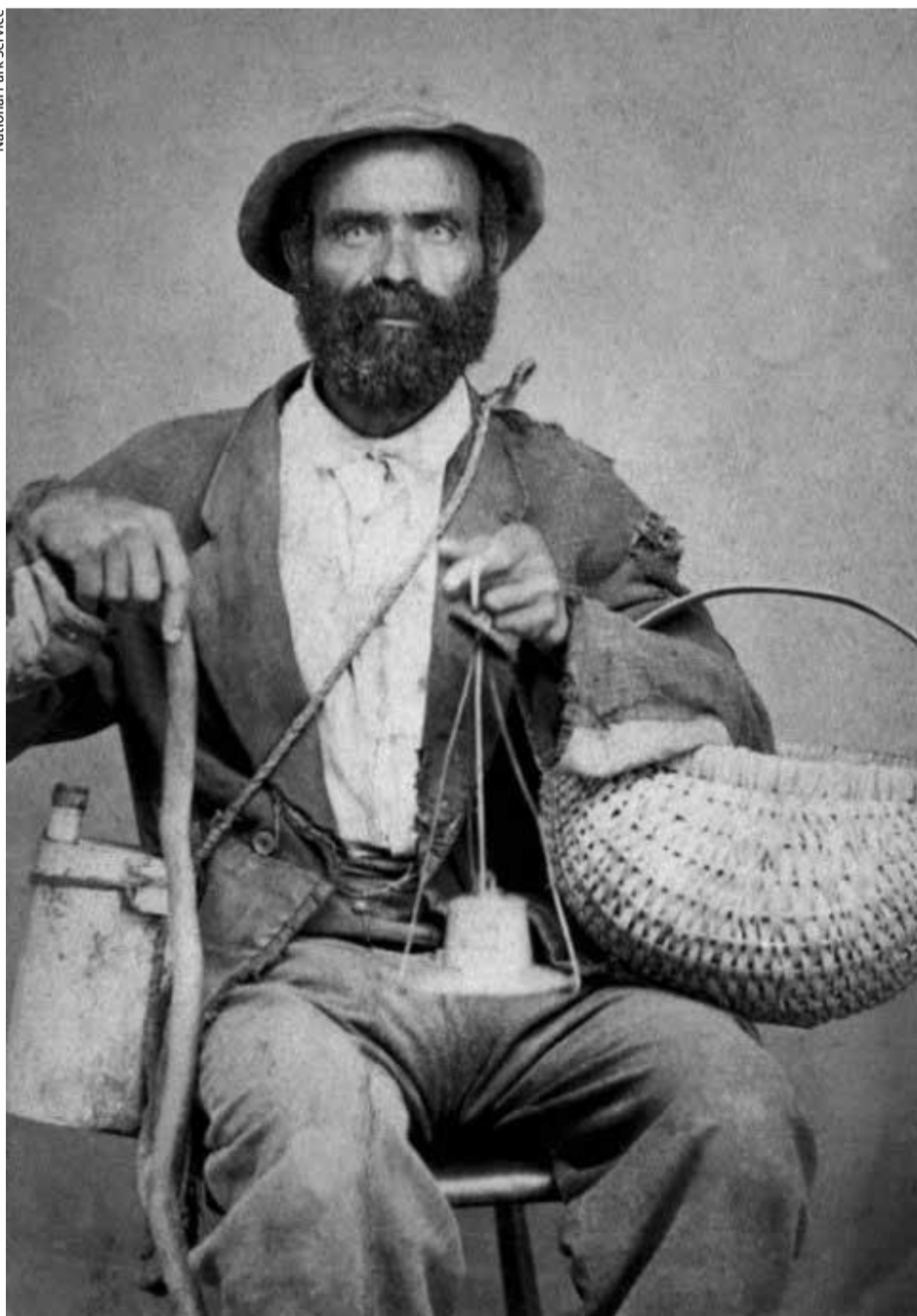
When did Mat gain his freedom? He was not freed in his (white) father’s will. In 1853, upon his father’s death, Mat’s white half-brother, Thomas L. Bransford, became his owner.

Although Kentucky was a slave-holding state, it remained in the Union during the Civil War. It was not subject to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which applied only to states in rebellion. So Materson Bransford probably remained a slave until after the war had ended.

Mat Bransford died in 1886. Some of his children and grandchildren guided tourists through Mammoth Cave until it became a National Park in 1946. Sadly, at that point the African American tour guides were replaced by white park employees. But the legacy of Mat Bransford and his family did not go away. His life story is forever linked to the history of Mammoth Cave. 🌍

SOURCES: National Park Service, “Black History at Mammoth Cave,” www.nps.gov/macal/learn/historyculture/black-history.htm.

Trading Cards for Mammoth Cave National Park, www.flickr.com/photos/tradingcardsnpsyahoocom/sets/72157629788755876.



National Park Service

Materson (Mat) Bransford

Biography of Nick Bransford

Nick Bransford was probably the son of two enslaved Americans owned by Thomas Bransford, a wealthy landowner. Many slaves adopted the family name of their masters, which is how Nick came to have the last name “Bransford.” Unlike Stephen Bishop and Mat Bransford, Nick Bransford was not biracial.

Although he was not a showman, Nick’s knowledge of Mammoth Cave was vast, and his quiet and calm demeanor were appreciated by visitors who wrote about their experiences.

After the renowned Mammoth Cave guide Stephen Bishop died at the early age of 37, Nick Bransford married his widow, Charlotte.

Nick Bransford was a giving man who donated the land for the Mammoth Cave School, where his grandchildren learned to read and write. This quiet soul was also a spiritual man and was one of the first deacons of the Pleasant Union Baptist Church that used to stand in the park.

Oral tradition suggests that Nick Bransford purchased his freedom in 1863 with monies earned by selling the colorless, eyeless fish that lived in the cave to visitors. He continued to work at Mammoth Cave until he died in 1895, having guided tourist through its underground passages for more than a half-century. 🌍

SOURCES: National Park Service, “Black History at Mammoth Cave,” www.nps.gov/macal/learn/historyculture/black-history.htm

Trading Cards for Mammoth Cave National Park, www.flickr.com/photos/tradingcardsnpsyahooocm/sets/72157629788755876.

Portrait by Joachim Ferdinand Richart. Courtesy Mammoth Cave National Park.

Courtesy National Park Service



Portrait of Nick Bransford by Ferdinand Richart, ca. 1857



Courtesy National Park Service

Photo of Mat Bransford and Nick Bransford (L to R) at the mouth of Mammoth Cave by Charles Waldack, 1866.

Primary Sources: Descriptions of Mammoth Cave Tours and Guides

1. Beyard Taylor, “At Home and Abroad 1864,” in the magazine *World Traveler* (September, 1928), pages 40–41.

“While I paused on the brink of these fresh mysteries the others of the party had gone ahead under the charge of Mat; Stephen who remained with me proposed that we descend to the bank of the Styx and see them crossing the river upon the Natural Bridge.”

“Mat waded out and turned the craft, which was moored to a projecting rock. After which he and Stephen carried us one by one upon their shoulders and deposited us in it.”

2. John Hancock McRae, letter to his sister, October 9, 1852.

“I wondered that he could show so much interest, as he has walked the same places nearly every day—He has been a guide for 16 years thus in that time taken hundreds and thousands through. This summer I learned that 3,000 persons had visited the cave. Although there are other guides, he is the favorite with visitors. After an early breakfast our company of 6 humans (a newly married couple having joined us) fitted ourselves with our covers suits and set out (the lady weary the bloomer costume, a very necessary arrangement for climbing over rocks and climbing up ladders 30 feet high.) At the entrance we were each furnished with a small lantern and bidding farewell to the light of day, we started off in fine spirits for an 8 mile walk, not expecting to return until 8 in the evening...

We came to the “Bottomless Pit.” This is crossed by a wooden bridge some 20 feet, which is thrown over the top of it, while we were on it the guide let fall some lighted paper which went eddying around down, down into the depths below – lighting up the jagged sides and precipitous cliffs of this dark and dreary looking pit. ... Then we

came to the “Lake Lethe” which he forbade us to drink from lest we become intoxicated by its waters ... we came to the boarder of the ‘River Styx.’ The ferryboat was in waiting and Stephen personifying Charon soon had us all on board and ferrying us over this famous stream.

We were now three miles from the entrance and a six-mile walk was before us before reaching the extremity. Stephen shouldered our basket of provisions and away we went.”

3. Nancy Williams Gordon, journal, 1857.

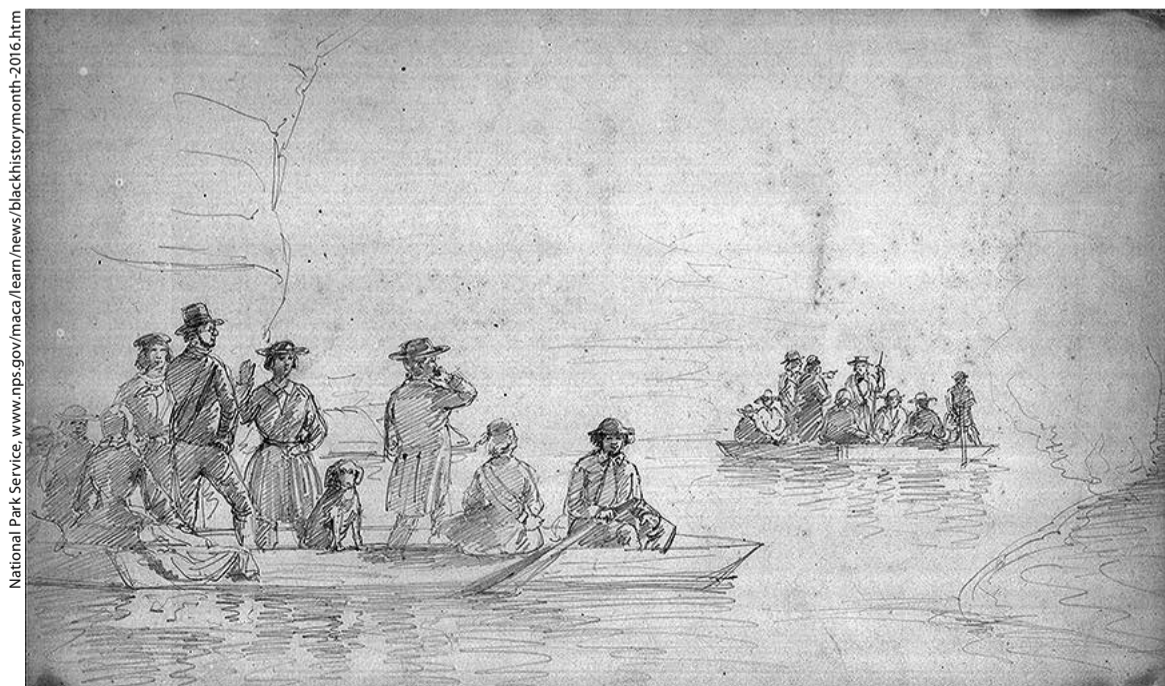
“We are three and one half miles below the earth. ... Mat displays for us his theatrical powers; he took all the lights from us, and secreted them, and we were left in total darkness that could be actually felt. No one spoke, scarcely breathed, for I believe, the thought passed through every one’s mind that Mat might leave us there, and if so, death would be inevitable. Re-echoing through this long corridor, for it is said to be three hundred feet long, are Mat’s welcome footsteps. A ray of light appears for Mat carries the lights behind him, making himself a cloud and throwing the shadow of his body on the starry ceiling, which gives it the appearance of a passing cloud, he manages the light so well. ...

As we are to cross a river, we take the precaution of carrying small shawls, which are soon burdensome to us, and we lay them upon Mat’s shoulders. Poor Mat, with his heavy dinner basket, large flask of oil, India rubber shoes, and shawls, presents a picture of the poor ‘pilgrim.’ Our consciences accuse us of laying all that burden upon him, but he is a happy slave, and keeps up our spirits with his whistle and songs, for we are a little weary today, after our long march yesterday. 🌟

SOURCES: These three historical documents are in the collection of Mammoth Cave National Park.

Analyzing Primary Sources: Mammoth Cave Tours

	Source	What did the guide do or say? In what ways was any particular action an example of holding authority? Of showing subservience?	How did the writer feel? How does the author describe the guide's appearance and mood?	What question would you ask about this scene? And who would you ask, if you could go back in time?
1	Beyard Taylor, magazine article, 1928 Mat Bransford was the guide			
2	John Hancock, letter, 1852 Stephen Bishop was the guide			
3	Nancy Williams, journal entry, 1857 Mat Bransford was the guide			



In 1857, Dutch artist Joachim Ferdinand Richardt visited Mammoth Cave and sketched enslaved guide Nick Bransford with his tour on Echo River.

Mat Bransford on the Sale of His Three Children to Slavery

From a Footnote in an 1864 book by J. F. Rusling, a white visitor to Mammoth Cave.

(The italics appear as they do in the book)

Vocabulary:

Chattel—an item of property. An enslaved human.

Comes from the same root word as “cattle.”

Peculiar institution—human slavery

Removed to Illinois—moved to the state of Illinois

Traitor—Someone who has joined the Confederate cause, the “Rebellion”

Uncle—A “title” often given to older black men by white Americans

[Mat Bransford] is married, and in his time has had four of what Christians would call children, but Kentuckians—chattels.

Three of these, two girls and a boy, have been sold from him; he has only one boy still left, a lad of about ten years old, who—thanks to the Rebellion—will probably be left to him. Two of his children, a boy and a girl, were sold from him, when only about 7 or 8 years old. A man named Shaw bought them both; but he soon became bankrupt, and they both went to the auction block, whence they were sold by the Sheriff to the highest bidder—one to one purchaser, as it happened, and one to another. The other girl was sold at another time, as she grew up, to a man named John Coates, who with a meanness worthy of a dabbler in human flesh afterwards removed to Illinois, and then returned and sold her!

Said I, “Uncle Mat, I don’t suppose you missed these children much? You colored people never do, they say.”

[Mat Bransford replied]

“Sho, Cap’n. Don’t you ‘bieve dat. Culled folks has feelins, jus de same as white folks!

“Course I’s e a man, and can bear sich things, do it went mighty hard at fust, But it ‘most *killed* de old woman, dat’s a fact.

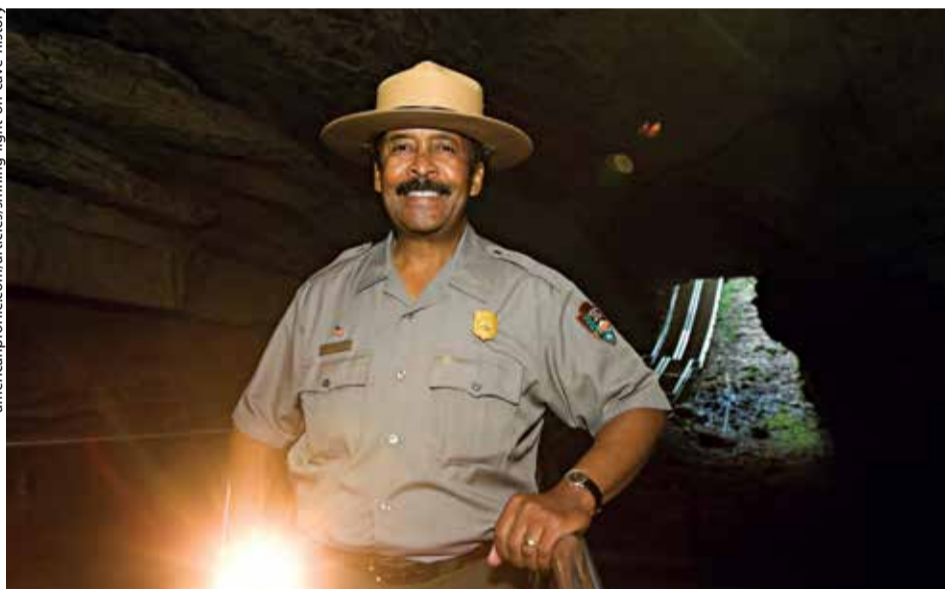
“You see de little toads had us got to runnin about, and talkin lively sort, as bright as crickets, and happy as de birds on de tree, and dare mudder was allers a kind o’ tender woman any how, and to her dey seemed the nicest children, you eber did see. I thought it would o’ killed her. She went roun kind o’ crazy like, for long time ... ”

SOURCE: J.F. Rusling, *A Trip to the Mammoth Cave, KY.* (July 1864; in the collection of the Tennessee State Library). Excerpted from the footnote on pages 5 and 6 of that book, as seen at assets.documentcloud.org/documents/1031464/a-trip-to-the-mammoth-cave-ky-by-j-f-rusling.pdf.

Jerry Bransford, National Park Service Guide at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky

In the early 1990s, historians at Mammoth Cave National Park realized that Jerry Bransford was living nearby. They invited him back to continue the legacy and become a fifth-generation guide.

Today, Jerry Bransford is a National Park Service Guide. He is the great-great grandson of Materson Bransford, who was known as “Uncle Mat” to tourists 150 years ago.



Jerry Bransford, who was 67 years old in 2016, still leads occasional tours. You can listen to short audio-clips of him relating the history of the early explorers, including those who were enslaved.

Go online to www.horsecavestories.com/stop15.html and look in the right-hand column of the webpage for Horse Cave Stories.

Here is a transcript of part of the (2 minute) audio-clip “A Slave Above Ground—A King Below”:

We know for a fact that they learned to read.

... Can you imagine being a slave in the 1830 and 1840s, and you were a slave at the surface, but underground, you were king of your group.

They relied on you. They depended on you. They befriended you.

On a day-to-day basis I have an opportunity to walk in the footsteps of people kin to me that were there 150 years ago. ...

Here is a transcript of part of the audio-clip “But Remember You are a Slave”:

They had 80 or 90 people ... He had to row the boat. He had to look after the welfare of the guests. ... Sometimes these old slave tour guides would talk pretty firmly to their guests. Because a wrong step in Mammoth Cave in those early days could mean falling 30 or 40 feet off the edge. ... Nick would say, “Hey! Get off a’ that rock over there!” ... We’re two miles into the cave, maybe I can yell at you a little bit! (Laughter) ... I’ll let you know who’s in charge. Kept them safe. 🗣️

SOURCES: “Horse Cave Stories,” www.horsecavestories.com/stop15.html.

K. Christiansen, “In Kentucky, a Family at the Center of the Earth,” *The New York Times* (February 28, 2014). This is an article about Jerry Bransford and his tours at Mammoth Cave. Read it at www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/travel/in-kentucky-a-family-at-the-center-of-the-earth.html?_r=1.

Giving Up Control: *Action Research in Middle School*

Ron Silvis

It's the year 2150 C.E. An evil super computer has taken over the record of human history in the United States, confiscating all of our historical documents. There is only one hope for future generations of Americans. A young historian must create a device, travel back in time, and answer the historical questions provided by the evil computer, all the while fending off attacks from the evil computer's minions. The thrilling journey of our historian is full of mystery and intrigue around every corner.

Does the above sound like something created from the mind of one of Hollywood's up-and-coming science fiction producers? If you said yes, you would be dead wrong. The above summary is of an eighth grade U.S. history student's self-written, produced, and animated video game he created to demonstrate that he met the learning targets in our unit on the Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

Have you ever wondered what the Constitutional Convention and opening a bakery have in common? No? That's all right. I didn't either, until I was educated on the subject by an eighth grade student. It turns out these two topics have a lot in common. For example, at the Convention there was a heated debate over representation in congress, over what would be the best number of congresspersons to represent each state. This quandary is very similar to opening a new bakery, as the baker will need to determine the correct inventory to order and number of employees to hire. And when it came time to determine exactly how many amendments to add to the new Constitution (to form the Bill of Rights), the question was comparable—in many ways—to determining the exact ingredients to bake a perfect batch of sugar cookies to sell in the bakery.

History is everywhere, and relevant to us all, each in our own way. The difficult thing for teachers is how do we make teaching history relevant to each student? How do we inspire internal motivation so that students will risk going above and beyond what they perceive to be their limits? Needless to say, the examples of student work described above will not be forgotten by me (the teacher) or by the students (the produc-

ers and creators) for many years to come.

There is no way I could have imagined, designed, and created these examples of student work, or the countless individualized YouTube videos, Padlet or PowerPoint presentations, creative writing pieces, or live speeches, that were the products of my eighth grade students. In a sense, I had to take myself out of the equation. I had to provide a challenge, suggest good sources, and mentor academic skills—but then give control over the day-to-day activities of history class to my students.

Reflecting on “How I Learn”

Knowing from my own experience that autonomy was the key to internal motivation, I had to create a system that would allow each student to learn in a way that pertained to him or her. This isn't an easy thing to do when you have 25 students in a classroom. The first thing I needed to do, if I was going to make it worthwhile, was to help my students understand who they were, what their strengths and weaknesses were, and what their interests were through reflection and self-inquiry. In seventh grade, my students had a nine-week class where they did some career exploration. They documented their interests, strengths, weaknesses, and future goals. At the beginning of my unit, we spent a day revisiting their files from the previous year in order to bring these ideas back to awareness.

The second day of the unit we did some exercises in which students explored their learning styles. I gave them a list and definitions of the “nine intelligences”: from auditory to kinesthetic, and asked them to rank their own preferences.¹ I also had them list activities they had done as evidence of how they had best learned new material in the past. Students also listed learning skills that they wanted to improve (or modes of learning to try) and how they might be able to do so (or where they might find new material). For example, how can I improve my listening skills? Where can one find out about history through the arts of music and dance? If my upcoming challenge to the students was going to be worthwhile, and autonomous learning in a middle school was going to succeed,

it had to be relevant to each and every student.

Preparing Carefully

My general plan was to provide students with the essential learning that needed to be demonstrated. (Figure 1) We would begin with essential question(s), a basic time frame for doing the work, and a way for both teacher and student to check for progress. How students would demonstrate learning was completely up to them, but I highly recommended that they do something that revolved around their interests and the learning styles we had just explored.

Figure 1. **Demonstrate This Learning in Your Project**

In what ways did the U.S. Constitution create “a more perfect union” for the states in 1789?

How does the U.S. Constitution help us to create “a more perfect union” today?

How is power shared between the three branches of the Federal government?

Give a specific, real-life example of that balance of power.

How is power shared between the state governments and the federal government?

Give a specific, real-life example of that (state/federal) balance of power.

I provided several different resources: textbooks, a dozen laptops to use as independent work stations, and access to the district’s Internet network so students could use their own devices if they had them. At the beginning of the unit, I demonstrated some free online resources, such as Padlet and Vocaroo, which students could use to make e-posters and presentations if they wished.

My role over the next several weeks was to be a person who could remove hurdles.² We spent four weeks on this unit as it encompassed two chapters of the curriculum. We would devote the whole class period (50 minutes per day; five days a week) to it. Depending on your curriculum and bell schedule, a shorter time frame may be necessary. For this first attempt, time was needed to help students plan a realistic, achievable product. Within the first two days of students working, I held individual consultations at my desk where I looked at their plans to see what students’ initial ideas were in terms of how they were going to demonstrate that they had learned the material.

I had two major pedagogical concerns: to keep a watchful on students who were having problems with reading comprehension, and to look for ways to pause for whole-class discussions.

Overseeing a Workshop of Creativity

I created a folder in my school e-mail account for each class. By Wednesday of each week, students were to email me a link to an article, website, or video clip they had found and explain how they were using it, or to ask a question about it. Students without an email account could write the link on paper and submit it to me. On Thursday and Friday, I used the links the students sent me to conduct class discussion. Students could often answer each other’s questions. Although I was leading this discussion, the content and purpose were dictated by the links the students sent me. The links also served as formative means to check that students were progressing through the material.

Interestingly, I would receive e-mails with history content at 11:30pm on a Saturday night. This meant that my students were not just turning off the “history clock” when the bell rang. The learning was continuing into their own time when they could choose when to research.

The look of my classroom changed with each period and each day. Students worked at different paces. In my room, you would see some students looking through the textbook, others would be creating PowerPoint presentations or writing short stories. Some would be viewing videos through the history channel or Youtube about the Bill of Rights, others would be sketching comics about the Constitutional Convention. All the while I was monitoring, consulting, advising, receiving requests for supplies, and having discussions about the progress of various projects.

This flexible project structure allowed students to extend their interests and learning beyond the 50 minutes they had with me. Many students would continue their research at home, as was evident through e-mail messages to me with questions on content and form. This allowed students to use class time to create their products or discuss any questions they had, as well as to learn history lesson content. For example, the student who created the time-travel video game opening needed a free program from MIT downloaded onto a computer.³ He spent his time at home writing the story; he spent class time applying the story into the program to create the animated final product. His entire family provided the voices for the various characters in his video. In his case, and for some other

students, the social studies project became a family affair.

Variations in Products and Assessment

Not every final project was as innovative as a cookbook or video game. Many students chose to do what was familiar to them, writing essays, or creating PowerPoint presentations. That's okay though, because the important part of the entire unit wasn't to produce a flashy product, it was that they learned the skills necessary to find information, sorted through many different resources, chose what was important, and take ownership of the product and the main historical concepts.

I had one student who didn't create a "product" at all. For whatever reason, she didn't get the assignment done, but she did ask if I could just ask her questions about history, and I agreed. We ended up having a very in depth conversation about what happened in history and why it happened. She also discussed how she could have done some things differently as she worked on her own project. Though there was no flashy product to display, this conversation was one of the highlights for me. A 13-year-old girl was able to carry on an intelligent conversation with her 35-year-old teacher about something that happened more than 200 years ago. I didn't just ask questions and receive rote answers. We had a conversation, which is a skill she will need for the rest of her life. She clearly learned the material and exceeded the learning targets.

Discussion

Since this first instance, I have led additional projects where I presented a challenge and then virtually "gave up control" of student activities in the classroom. The students and I are getting more and more comfortable with this method of learning. The hardest thing as a teacher is to keep quiet and not provide the answers, but to create a way for the students to figure it out on their own. As the teacher I really had to actively think, relax, breathe, and allow the process to work. It would have been very easy, and perhaps justifiable, to fail the girl that didn't create any product. Had I done that, I would have deprived her of the opportunity to demonstrate what she had learned and what she could do, and I would have missed out on a truly inspiring conversation.

Middle school is an interesting and chaotic time in a child's development. Gone are the days of elementary school, when students seem to be engaged almost constantly with differentiated learning activities, in an environment of smaller class sizes, and an innocence that hasn't yet been chipped away by life experiences and skepticism. In high school, students will be

pushed to explore career goals, and academic transcripts take on a whole new meaning as students prepare for careers and college. In between lie the middle school years, during which some students seem to lose their enthusiasm and maybe even their internal motivations to learn, which can have a damaging effect for decades to come.

Great leaders need to be able to motivate others to be their best. It is widely known that we achieve at much greater levels if we are internally motivated. External motivations such as rewards, payments, or letter grades, may work well in the short term, however they often don't have a lot of staying power. Daniel Pink, in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, talks about how internal motivation is rooted in the concept of autonomy.⁴ After reading his book, I began to think about the things I am passionate about, and excel in. They all had similar characteristics. They were things that I learned informally, at my own pace, and in the manner that worked best for me. Under these guiding characteristics I enjoyed what I did, I didn't view it as work, and I went out of my way to make time and generate the effort needed. Now I'm figuring out ways to incorporate these characteristics into activities for my eighth grade history class.

Do More, Learn More

Looking back over this history project, I feel the responsibility to assess how well it worked as a method of teaching and learning. Did I accomplish the goal I set out to accomplish? I hope to talk and correspond with other teachers about how well this approach works in their classroom. Part of the answer might be heard in a student's statement, spoken during a post-unit group discussion. She said, when asked about the process, "I think this was harder, but I had fun and learned more". 🌟

Notes

1. Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
2. Given your curriculum, a shorter time frame may be necessary. Helping students to plan a realistic, achievable product was part of the pedagogical value of this project.
3. The program is called "scratch," at scratch.mit.edu.
4. Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).

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