

# Two-Sided Poetry Lesson for Social Studies

**mll**  
middle level learning

2

**The American Revolution:  
Three Lesson Plans for  
Critical Thinking**

STEPHANIE WASTA

8

**Working to Improve Our  
Community: Students as Citizens  
and Town Planners**

TED MITCHELL

14

**Poems for Two Voices:  
An Interdisciplinary Activity**

LESLIE PERFECT RICKLIN

16

**The Back Page: "Skin the Snake"  
A Colonial Children's Game**

# SLAM

*"Slam" (noun, slang) – a competitive performance of original poetry in which the "winner" is selected by members of the audience.*

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# The American Revolution: Three Lesson Plans for Critical Thinking

STEPHANIE WASTA

It might be tempting to glide through a unit on the American Revolution in the middle grades using a textbook as the sole source of information. After all, what new can be said about the subject? But this approach to teaching would deprive students of three things:

- specific facts and ideas that may not be present in one book;
- the skill of comparing and contrasting historical sources; and
- the awareness that there is, in fact, a wealth of observations, records, opinions and interpretations about this amazing period of history.

You can give your students a richer experience by bringing into the classroom good resource material and leading an activity to help them engage in it. Here are three activities that you could adapt according to your students' abilities and the curriculum for your particular grade and state. Each activity is based on a book (or books) that one could find in many public and school libraries. The first lesson described below offers a choice of autobiographical activities; the second lesson is an activity using multiple sources; the third lesson explores daily life circa 1776. I recommend that you review the lessons and, for starters, choose one that augments the curriculum in an appropriate way. You may choose to use one or several of the lessons as part of the unit of study.

## Lesson 1. Three “Autobiographical” Activities

Brief biographies of the signers of the Declaration of Independence are the focus of this book: *The Signers: The 56 Stories Behind the Declaration of Independence* by Dennis Brindell Fradin, illustrated by Michael McCurdy (New York: Walker, 2002). The signers are grouped by their colony of residence. Each of the thirteen chapters opens with an overview of a colony's struggles and interests in the Revolution; a map that shows the colony with boundaries drawn as they existed in 1776; and a chart that lists the name, birth date, age at signing, marriage(s), number of children, death date, and age at death for each signer discussed in that chapter. Two- or three-page biographies follow, one for each signer in that state. “Etched” illustrations show a cameo portrait as well

as a rendering of each man in action. For example, John Adams is shown with his ten-year-old son, John Quincy Adams, a few feet from a British cannonball as it strikes their ship.

Read *The Signers*. Then put this resource to use by choosing one of the following two-day activities for your class. There are three variations with regard to the activity that students could do on the second day of this lesson, as described below.

### Activity 1: An “Autobiographical” Jigsaw (Two 50-minute class periods)

Prepare for this lesson by calculating the

number and size of the groups that you will need—from three to five students per group. The groups will not all have the same number of members. The reason and determinants of these variables becomes clear in a moment, in step 3.

**1. Day one:** To introduce the lesson, write the names of several signers on the board. Choose some well-known individuals (such as: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin) and lesser-known individuals (such as William Whipple, Thomas Heyward, Jr., and Lyman Hall). Encourage students to hypothesize what these individuals have in common. “What do they know about any of these men?” “How are they important to our history?” You may choose to

## Lesson 1 . Three “Autobiographical” Activities (continued)

add more names throughout the brief discussion.

2. After receiving a number of “guesses,” inform the students that all of these men were signers of the Declaration of Independence. Explain that students will be learning more about some of these individuals through small group activities. Today you will provide them material about the signers from one colony

4. Give each group one chapter copied from *The Signers*. Include the opening two pages of a chapter (which includes the overview, chart, and map) as well as the biographies. Each student will also need a copy of the Declaration of Independence (pages 146–151 of *The Signers*). For example, a group consisting of four students gets the four biographies from Chapter XI: South Carolina; a group of five students gets the five biographies from

Chapter 1: Massachusetts; etc. It is not necessary to include every colony in this activity, but make sure to have various regions of the country represented in your selection. Ideally, each group also would have its own copy of the book for this activity, but that is not essential. (5 minutes)

5. Each student should take, at random, one biography from the small stack given to his or her group. Have the students read and learn their person’s story so they can summarize it orally. Each student should practice before their small group, speaking in the first

person as if he or she were that signer, giving a brief “autobiography.” (35 minutes). Each autobiography should include:

- contributions this signer made to the American Revolution
- any personal sacrifices or hardships experienced during the struggle for independence; If there is time, students could enhance the autobiography by including one or more of these features:

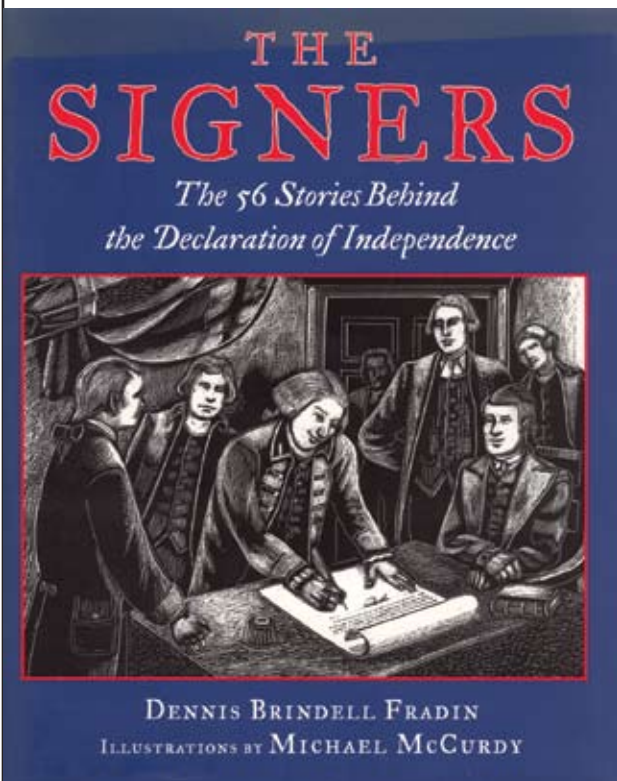
- a description of one or two other signers with whom they might have shared a meal, debated, conspired, or traveled (see signers from their colony or a neighboring colony);
- a short quote from the Declaration of Independence that this person might have felt was especially important; and
- a statement of some specific hopes for the future of the young nation.

These criteria are repeated on a handout for students (**Handout 1, An “Autobiography”**).

6. At the end of the period, assign students to find at home (or make at home), and then bring to class, one prop to represent their person. They should use the prop while they share their “autobiography” the next day in class. This prop will be a mock “historical artifact” that they create. Explain that—because this is an overnight assignment—the prop can be simple (**Handout 2, Creating a “Historical Artifact”**). For Richard Stockton of New Jersey, who was pulled out of bed and arrested by Loyalists in 1776, use a pajama top. For William Hooper of North Carolina, who had to flee to the backcountry, use a pot for cooking over a campfire. And for Lyman Hall of Georgia, use a bag of rice for his rice plantation, which was destroyed during the war. (5 minutes)

7. **Day two:** Have students return to their original groups and number off (1 to 5) with all of the ones, twos, threes, etc. together. Have students share their signer’s story in their new group and note on the chart (**Handout 3, Biographical Comparisons**) the similarities and differences between some of these individuals (who now represent a variety of colonies). (50 minutes)

*continued on page 4*



and, in small groups, students will work together to prepare a report about those individuals. Tomorrow students will complete another project using the information from all of the groups. You will give details about tomorrow’s assignment at the end of this class period. (Plan 12 minutes of class time for this explanation)

3. Divide the class into groups of various sizes; probably six to eight groups, each with three, or four, or five students in it (Plan 3 minutes for this part).

## Activity 2: An “Autobiographical” Presentation

(Two 50-minute class periods)

1. **Day one:** Same as above (steps 1–6).
2. **Day two:** Students share their “autobiographies” with the whole class in a two-minute oral presentation, with their props in hand. The teacher may ask a question of any student after the presentation, or add a “footnote” if the student forgets an important contribution made by that founder. Keep the pace lively, so that all students have a chance to present during the period. Students complete the chart (see **Handout 3**), recording what they learn about ten of the signers during these presentations. (50 minutes of class time)

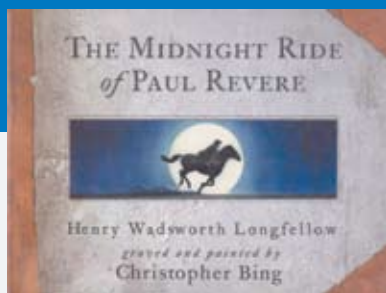
## Activity 3: An “Autobiographical” Journal

(Two 50-minute class periods)

1. **Day one:** Same as above (steps 1–6).
2. **Day two:** Hand out sheets of paper resembling hand-made paper of the eighteenth century (brown paper on which the edges have been roughed up a little); or hand out large paper grocery bags that students can cut into sheets with rough sides. (5 minutes of class time)
3. Have students write a first person narrative on this paper, as if they were the signer writing early in the Revolutionary War, when it was not clear which side would win. The narrative can include a sketch of the prop the students obtained as homework. (20 minutes)
4. Students exchange autobiographies and read each other’s work, using the information from several reports to complete their own chart, on **Handout 3**. (25 minutes)

**Note:** Activity 3 can also be assigned to any student who is very shy about public speaking or, for some other reason, cannot fully participate in Activity 1 or 2.

## Lesson 2. Using Multiple Sources



This lesson is based on *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, an enduring classic, masterfully illustrated by Christopher Bing (New York: Handprint Books, 2001).

### Activity: Check the Facts

(One 50-minute class period)

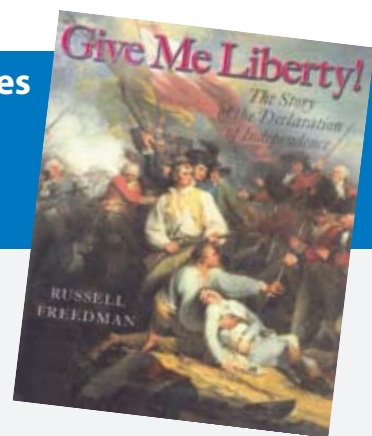
1. If you have an eloquent student with theatrical skills, have him or her read the poem aloud for you after school the day before the lesson. Coach the student so that he or she speaks slowly, clearly, and with emotion.

Have this student read Longfellow’s famous poem aloud for the whole class. Hold up the book and flip the pages so that the whole class can view the carefully crafted illustrations (sprinkled with photographs of artifacts from the times) as the poem is read. (5 minutes of class time)

2. Ask students to describe at least 5 facts that are conveyed about people and events that night in the poem. List these on the board under four categories:

- Names: “The Somerset, British man-or-war.”
- Places: “Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore...”;
- Events: “He crossed the bridge into Medford Town...”
- Emotions and ideals: “The fate of a nation was riding that night...” (10 minutes)

3. Provide students—individually or in small groups—with other sources that describe the same event, such as *A History of US* by Joy Hakim (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) or *Give Me Liberty!* by Russell Freed-



man (New York: Holiday House, 2000).

Students spend the rest of the hour trying to corroborate these facts. Students should write down the sources of various statements, with page numbers, and note whether they corroborate or contradict information in the poem. “Prime the pump” of student curiosity by asking some provocative questions:

- Do any statements in Longfellow’s poem seem to be inaccurate? Imagined?
- Who is mentioned by name in the poem? [Only Revere.]
- Is there anyone else who might be given credit for warning the Patriots of the British encroachment? If so, how might you explain their absence in the poem?
- What information has been left out of the poem? (15 minutes)

4. Finally, invite students, or small groups, to look at the map, read the “Miscellany Concerning the Historical Ride of the Patriot Paul Revere,” and check the bibliography—all in the back matter of Bing’s book. Then ask students to review the illustrations in the book with a critical eye:

- Do you think that Christopher Bing did an accurate job of portraying Paul Revere’s ride of 1775? Why or why not?
- Do you think Longfellow’s poem accurately captures this historical event? Why or why not?
- What effect, would you guess, has Longfellow’s poem had on our society’s memory of Paul Revere? (10 minutes)

## Lesson 3: Daily Life, circa 1776

Researchers have turned their attention to the experiences of the common people throughout history, and this development is a boon for classroom teachers. This lesson draws from two books: *Growing Up in Revolution and the New Nation* by Brandon Marie Miller (New York: Lerner, 2003) and *The American Revolution for Kids* by Janis Herbert (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2002).

### Activity: Comparing Life Today and Yesterday

(Two 50-minute class periods)

#### An Early American Game

(Optional, 10 minutes)

Tell students that they are going to participate in a game called “Skin the Snake.” There are no winners or losers, it is just for fun, like leap frog. (See The Back page, p. 16)

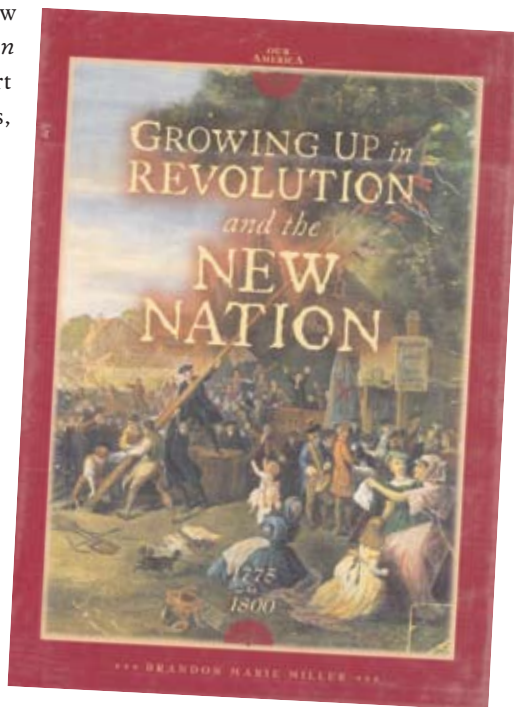
Today they will learn about activities for children during the Revolutionary period.

#### Developing Concepts

1. *Explore*: Give students the chart for this lesson (**Handout 4, Comparisons of Young People**), which includes these column headings: effects of war, school life, etiquette/manners, chores, and recreation/fun. The rows are labeled: “Today” and “1776.” Have students begin by listing what they do today related to each category. What do you do in school? What do you study? What are some manners that you need to follow? What chores or jobs do you have at home? What do you like to do for fun? How do current wars affect us? Have a large class chart up front to record some sample statements from the students. Then, have students brainstorm ideas about what they think they’ll find about children from the American Revolution. What did kids do in the 1700s? You may want to list these

preliminary ideas on a separate chart to check at the end of the activity.

2. *Research*: Divide students into five groups. Each group will become expert on one category of childhood activity



(the column headings in the chart) from the period of the American Revolution. Each group will receive a packet with appropriate pages copied from *Growing Up in Revolution and the New Nation* related to their topic. For example, the group that is given the subject “chores” to research could be given pages from these sections of the book (see the index):

- apprentices (51);
- child rearing (17-31);
- homes (10, 13); and
- work, childrens’ (16, 51)

Each student will read one page of information and share his or her key findings with the group. The group will come up with a list of 5–6 points of information related to their topic. You may want to assign jobs such as recorder, reporter, time manager, summarizer, encourager, etc. All students need to read the information and contribute ideas.

3. *Process*: Each group shares its findings about its topic. Its members will describe school life, etiquette/manners, chores, war experiences or recreation /fun from the American Revolutionary period. Engage students in discussion as each group presents. What was the student’s role in school? How was school different from today? What kinds of manners did students have? How did children and their parents relate to one another? What kinds of actions did parents expect from their kids? What do you notice about the types of activities kids did for fun? Students should complete their own charts as each group presents, filling in new information about the American Revolution period.

4. *Closure*: What key differences do you notice between the lives of kids during the American Revolution and today? What contributes to those differences? How did kids interact with each other? How did they interact with adults? What similarities do you notice between the two time periods? Why do you think these areas are the same? What time period would you prefer to live in? Why? How did our ideas change from our initial brainstorming list?

#### Expansion

Have students write as if they were children of the same age living in the late 1700’s. Students should describe a typical day in the life of an American Revolutionary boy or girl. Make sure they include information from each of the five categories they studied. After students write their story, have them include a brief reflection about what would be best part about living in the 1770s and what would be the most difficult. 📖

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## Handout 1

### Writing an “Autobiography”

Imagine that you are a person who signed the Declaration of Independence. The year is 1777, and it is not at all clear which side will win the Revolutionary War. Write an “autobiographical narrative” that describes

- contributions that this signer made to the American Revolution;
- personal sacrifices or hardships that this person experienced during the struggle for independence;

If you have time, you could also provide

- a description of one or two other signers with whom this person might have shared a meal, debated, conspired, or traveled in a horse-pulled buggy on the way to Philadelphia (see other signers from the same colony or a neighboring colony);
- a short quote from some part of the Declaration of Independence that this person might have felt was especially important;
- a statement of some of your specific hopes for the future of the young nation-to-be.

Obtain information for your “autobiographical narrative” from *The Signers: The 56 Stories Behind the Declaration of Independence* by Dennis Brindell Fradin, illustrated by Michael McCurdy (New York: Walker, 2002).

## Handout 2

### Creating a “Historical Artifact”

Your “historical artifact” is actually a prop, which you can find or make at home. It can be very simple. For Richard Stockton of New Jersey, who was pulled out of bed and arrested by Loyalists in 1776, use a pajama top. For William Hooper of North Carolina, who had to flee to the back country, use a pot for cooking over a campfire. Or for Lyman Hall of Georgia, use a bag of rice for his rice plantation, which was destroyed during the war.

If you are really having trouble finding a good theatrical prop in your home, it is okay to create one out of cardboard. Have fun thinking about this assignment and doing it—on a tight deadline. (That is, don’t stay up all night creating a fancy prop!)

## Handout 4

### Comparisons of Young People Today and During the Revolutionary Period

	1776	Today
Effects of war		
School life		
Etiquette/manners		
Chores		
Recreation/fun		

# Biographical Comparisons of Signers of the Declaration of Independence

Handout 3

	Signer 1	Signer 2	Signer 3	Signer 4	Signer 5
Name of Signer					
Colony					
Family Life					
Age in 1776					
Occupation					
Role in American Revolution					
Life after the War					
An Interesting Fact					
	Signer 6	Signer 7	Signer 8	Signer 9	Signer 10
Name of Signer					
Colony					
Family Life					
Age in 1776					
Occupation					
Role in American Revolution					
Life after the War					
An Interesting Fact					

# Working to Improve Our Community: Students as Citizens and Town Planners

TED MITCHELL

**Recently, my seventh grade social studies classes** at Knotty Oak Middle School in Coventry, Rhode Island, embarked on a three-week project to learn about and improve their local community. Students learned about local history and geography, researched their ideas for community planning, and presented them to town council and planning commission members in the school's media center. After the presentation, Coventry Town Councilperson Sanetti said he felt like "the future of Coventry is in good hands."<sup>1</sup> Middle school students had outlined reasonable approaches to some of the key issues facing the town government. He went on to explain that all of the suggestions made by the students were already in progress or under consideration.

## Background

It all started when I decided to teach a unit of study on the topic of community as a method of implementing the seventh grade curriculum. At this level, the social studies curriculum is grounded in geography, so I began by focusing on Coventry's physical and cultural geography. Middle school students love to learn and discuss content that has to do with their own generation and their own experiences—things that are tangible to them. This project played upon that affinity. By focusing on their local community and devising ways to improve it, the students participated in what was authentic and relevant to them. Then, as the school year progressed, I would scaffold facts, concepts, and skills to new topics in the curriculum—to the study of distant peoples and places or events in the past.

## Introductory Lesson

To begin, I challenged students to think about the basic elements of any community. I asked them to participate in a role-play called Shipwrecked. In this scenario, students imagine that they are on an isolated island and discussed possible solutions to basic problems that might arise. What laws or rules would be necessary in such a simple environment? What sort of government were they going to live under? How would the geography of the island affect their living arrangements and way of life?

Such an exercise is an opportunity to have students read (or re-read) the Mayflower Compact of 1620, which is quite brief

(**Figure A**), and to discuss what it means. Was the Mayflower Compact a list of rules for living? A plan for a government? (It was a basic agreement among the community to create together rules for the "ye generally good" and to obey them.) What commitment must people make before they even start to write a constitution, found a community, or make any plans for the future?

Students brain-stormed these questions for 20 minutes, and we discussed the results for 20 minutes.

Finally, I gave the students a brief writing assignment to finish before the end of the period. I asked them to answer the question, "After you finish your schooling

and move out of your parent or guardian's home, would you want to live in Coventry, or would you want to move away? Why?" I was interested to see if the upcoming unit of study might affect their views of their own community and their future in it.

## How a Community Grows

Urban sprawl is a challenging problem in many states. Consider that between 1982 and 1997, urbanized land increased by some 47 percent nationally, while the population only grew by 17 percent. In addition "the rate of outward land expansion outpaced population increases in 264 of the 281 metropolitan areas" in the United States, according to the Brookings Institution.<sup>2</sup> It's a problem when more-affluent families leave their urban residences for suburban neighborhoods, taking their tax dollars with them. It's a problem when suburban neighborhoods grow too quickly, leading to the worst aspects of urbanization replicating in new locations—problems such as traffic jams, crowded schools, lack of green space, and social stratification by income. The freedom to move from one place to another is a part of our cultural and legal heritage, but the mobility of our nation's population often erodes a sense of place and community. What are some things that municipalities can do to encourage people and business to stay in one place, investing their time, skills, and money locally?

The state of Rhode Island passed a law in the sixties mandating that each town create a comprehensive plan to mitigate environmental problems, traffic congestion, public



safety hazards and so forth, which could accompany growth. Most other states and local communities have legislated planning guidelines, zoning laws, and the like, to ensure livable communities with adequate infrastructure like water supply, waste management, electrical power distribution, traffic control, and public school facilities. Our town of Coventry was the fastest growing town in Rhode Island until some restrictions on development were put into effect by the town government in the 1990s. The population grew 49 percent from 1960 to 1970, the most rapid growth in recent decades. During 1990–2000, after legal restrictions to growth were established, the rate of growth was about 8 percent.

Growth in and of itself is not a problem, but it raises a question for citizens and their local government: How do we create communities where people want to live, no matter what their situation in life—i.e., where they can afford to rent or buy a nice home in a safe and convenient neighborhood, find a good job, have good schools for their kids, and have the amenities they want? Such amenities can include parks, shops, cultural and historical sites within walking distance, or an easy commute to work, or a close-knit neighborhood, or whatever.

Regulation is not always necessary or sufficient to create these types of places. And tackling this issue is not just something the municipality would do. But creative and positive results are best when the whole community tries to figure out what they want their town/neighborhood to be and how they can get there. Why not make young people part of this process?

### Studying Local Population Changes

I began the study of our community by exploring with the students the question: “How has the population been changing in our community?” Teachers and students might obtain information on this topic for their specific locality from one or more of these sources.

1. The Brookings study cited in end notes, number 2.
2. The National Census, which has a very useful and interesting website, [census.gov](http://census.gov).

3. The public library.
4. The local planning commission or zoning board.

I read and discussed the *Community Background and History* section within the “Comprehensive Plan” to the class.<sup>3</sup> A locally produced video about Coventry’s history included a compilation of pictures of their town in the past and as it stands today. All of my students were able to recognize places near their own homes and took an interest in how their town had changed over time.

### Researching a Current Topic

Each student group chose a component of the “Comprehensive Plan” to research and further develop. These categories, which could be applied to any community, included: Natural and Cultural Resources, Land Use and Zoning, Transportation and Traffic Control, Open Space and Recreation, Community Services and Public Facilities,

and Economic Development. (The specifics of each category will vary depending on your community. In some counties, transportation might include river navigation, airport traffic, public bus service, a subway system).

I made folders for each group with copies of relevant maps, tables, and charts, from the “Comprehensive Plan.” The plan includes thematic maps such as Existing Zoning Districts, Existing Land Use, and Traffic Analysis Zones. Other materials included tables that showed: Employment Projections, Median Family Income-Growth, School Enrollment Projections, etc. Many town or city halls across the country have information like this available to the public at the library and on the web.

**An Assignment:** The students read about their area of interest in the “Comprehensive Plan”—the vision, goals, and objectives for the community, and summarized these aspects of the report in their own words. Most important, I had the students add a

Figure A

## The Mayflower Compact of 1620

*In ye name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britaine, Franc, and Ireland king, defender of the faith, etc.*

*Haveing undertaken, for ye glorie of God, and advancemente of ye Christian faith, and honour of our king & countrie, a voyage to plant ye first colonie in ye Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutuallly in ye presence of God, and one of another, covenant & combine our selves together into a civill body politick, for our better ordering & preservation & furtherance of ye ends aforesaid; and by vertue hearof to enacte lawes, ordinances, acts constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet & convenient for ye generall good of ye Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.*

*In witnes wherof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-Codd ye 11th. of November, in ye year of ye raigne of our soveraigne lord, King James, of England, France, & Ireland ye eighteenth, and of Scotland, ye fiftie fourth. Ano: Dom. 1620.*

**Source:** The Mayflower Compact of 1620 and a brief description of it are available at [www.plymouth.org/learn/history/](http://www.plymouth.org/learn/history/) under “The English Colonists.”

Figure B

# Smart Growth Principles

## What is Smart Growth?

Smart growth is well-planned development that protects open space and farmland, revitalizes urban, town and village centers, keeps housing affordable and provides more transportation choices. We also define smart growth according to its outcomes - outcomes that mirror the basic values of most Americans. Smart growth is growth that helps to achieve these six goals:

### NEIGHBORHOOD LIVABILITY

The central goal of any smart growth plan is the quality of the neighborhoods where we live. They should be safe, convenient, attractive, and affordable. Sprawl development too often forces trade-offs between these goals. Some neighborhoods are safe but not convenient. Others are convenient but not affordable. Too many affordable neighborhoods are not safe. Careful planning can help bring all these elements together.

### BETTER ACCESS, LESS TRAFFIC

Two of the major downfalls of sprawl are traffic congestion and unnecessary travel. By putting jobs, homes and other destinations far apart and requiring a car for every trip, sprawl makes everyday tasks a chore. Smart growth's emphasis on locating different kinds of activities, such as stores and homes in the same neighborhood, clustering development, and providing multiple transportation choices helps us manage congestion, pollute less and save energy. Those who want to drive can, but people who would rather not drive everywhere or don't own a car have other choices.

### THRIVING CITIES, SUBURBS AND TOWNS

Smart growth puts the needs of existing communities first. By guiding development to already built-up areas, money for investments in transportation, schools, libraries and other public services can go to the communities where people live today. This is especially important for neighborhoods that have inadequate public services and low levels of private investment. It is also critical for preserving what makes so many of Rhode Island's places special—attractive buildings, historic districts and cultural landmarks.

### EXPANDING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND SHARING BENEFITS

Sprawl leaves too many people behind. Divisions by income and race have allowed some areas to prosper while others languish. As basic needs such as jobs, education and health care become less plentiful in some communities, residents have diminishing opportunities to participate in their regional economy. Smart growth enables all residents to be beneficiaries of prosperity.

### LOWER COSTS, LOWER TAXES

Based on a number of research studies, including Grow Smart's report on "The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island," sprawl costs money. Opening up green space to new development means that the cost of new schools, roads, sewer lines, and water supplies will be borne by residents throughout metro areas including those already living in neighborhoods with adequate infrastructure. Abandoning existing homes and businesses in our urban areas results in additional costs—the costs to municipalities of losing revenue-generating properties. Sprawl also means families have to own more cars and drive them further. This has made transportation the second highest category of household spending, just behind shelter. Smart growth helps on both fronts. Taking advantage of existing infrastructure keeps taxes down. And where convenient transportation choices enable families to rely less on driving, there's more money left over for other things, like buying a home or saving for college.

### KEEPING OPEN SPACE OPEN

By focusing development in already built-up areas, smart growth can preserve Rhode Island's many threatened natural treasures. From forests and farms to wetlands and wildlife, smart growth lets us pass on to our children the landscapes we love. Communities are demanding more parks that are conveniently located and bring recreation within reach of more people. Also, protecting natural resources will provide healthier air and cleaner drinking water.

**Source** "A Strategy For Saving Rhode Island From Sprawl and Urban Decay,"  
Grow Smart Rhode Island's Candidates' Briefing Book. October, 2004. [www.GrowSmartRI.com](http://www.GrowSmartRI.com).



## Smart Growth Resources

few of their own goals and objectives for the community. I told the students that these original ideas would receive a higher grade if based on a careful analysis of all of the materials provided.

### Forming a Big Picture

The first presentation each group had to make in front of the class was a summary of what they had learned, as well as their own ideas for goals. All of the groups were required to use maps and pictures during their presentations. At the conclusion of these presentations, students were beginning to see the connections between all of the categories of community services. For example, the transportation group pointed out that the roads with the most vehicle traffic often had the most businesses and economic activity. I asked students to think about what might make a community grow or shrink (e.g., it's attractive, a good place to live, good schools, jobs, lots of parks, easy to get around in, etc.)— and to consider the more human side of the statistics that describe our community (Figure B).

### Seeking Multiple and Expert Perspectives

To provide incentive to my students and to emphasize the relevance of this project, I invited a few guest speakers to talk about their work and answer some questions related to community planning. Speakers included John Flaherty, the state communications director from GrowSmartRI. (The Smart Growth Network is a coalition of diverse organizations working together to find better ways for communities to grow. See Figure B). A town resident presented the viewpoint of a local coalition organized around zoning issues. A former student of mine, Ali Sherer, described her participation in a project about dealing with rapid population growth in the town of Coventry a few years ago (Figure C). A developer or builder could speak as well, to give students a wider range of viewpoints.

My students paid close attention to these speakers and asked many pertinent questions, which is noteworthy because asking a question aloud in front of an audience is a giant feat for many middle school students. It became clear that our town had already taken many actions to grow more efficiently, such as requiring new housing developments to pay for the cost of extending services to them, writing new zoning ordinances, and matching building permits to what the town's infrastructure could support.

### Forecasting the Community's Future

Our seventh grade team's math teacher, Kristine O'Connor, instructed the students on how to calculate exponential population growth using a growth and decay formula. While most of my students had not studied algebra, they all were able to use this formula to correctly calculate the likely size of the population of Coventry in ten years, and in fifty years. This exercise (or a simpler one shown in (Figure D) would also prove to be helpful in discussing world population growth issues later in the year.

Immediately following Ali's presentation, I had my students predict what their community or town would look like if the town's population continued to grow at the current rate for fifty years. I had each group speculate as to how this possible influx of resi-



In communities across the nation, there is a growing concern that current development patterns—dominated by what some call “sprawl”—are no longer in the long-term interest of our cities, existing suburbs, small towns, rural communities, or wilderness areas. Though supportive of growth, communities are questioning the economic costs of abandoning infrastructure in the city, only to rebuild it further out. Spurring this move toward smarter growth patterns are demographic shifts, a strong environmental ethic, increased fiscal concerns, and more nuanced views of growth. The result is both a new demand and a new opportunity for smart growth. The website [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org), a service of the Smart Growth Network, provides resources, tools, case studies, news, and other information about more efficient, environmentally sound development practices.

To learn more about smart growth practices and community growth, visit *This Land Is Your Land* ([web4.msue.msu.edu/msuewc/kent/yourland/](http://web4.msue.msu.edu/msuewc/kent/yourland/)). Michigan State University created this resource for Kent County, Michigan. It provides lesson plans that educators can use to teach middle school kids about land use, including how to use zoning to create balanced communities, mapping exercises, landmark recognition, “walkability” survey, planning, etc.

The EPA and the Council of Educational Facility Planners International recently published a booklet on how school siting decisions affect communities. It's called “Schools for Successful Communities: An Element of Smart Growth.” Information on how to get the publication, along with a summary of how schools relate to community growth and development and a list of resources from other organizations, is available at [www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/schools.htm](http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/schools.htm). Although the publication is aimed at those making decisions about school facilities and community planning, talking about how a school's location affects the community around it might be an interesting hook for students.

## Coventry at a Glance

**Population:** 33,668 (US Census 2000)  
 Median Age: 38 years  
 Density: 566 persons per square mile  
 Ethnicity: White=96.8%, Hispanic=1.1%  
 Two or more races: 1.0%, American Indian= 0.5%

**Geography:** Three distinct population sub-areas: the rural, the suburban and the old mill villages. The suburban and old mill areas in eastern Coventry contain approximately 20% of the Town's land mass with 71% of the Town's population. The rural areas of central and western Coventry contain approximately 80% of the land and 29% of the population.

**Economy:** Median household income: \$51,987 (US Census 2000) Major employment categories: Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail Trade, Services. Some old mills are still in operation.

**Government:** Five-member Town Council with a Town Manager. Planning: Three staff—Director of Planning & Development/Assistant Planner/Zoning Administrator/Associate Planner with an appointed Planning Commission.

**Growth:** Population growth has slowed due to town permit restrictions to 8.32% (1990–2000 Census) "If the Town adopts a more aggressive posture in regard to economic development than it has traditionally had, coupled with significant infrastructure investments in areas targeted for economic development, population and employment growth by the year 2010 may exceed the forecasts presented above." (1990–2010 percent projected growth = 15%) Coventry is within commuting distances of large industrial corporations, like GTech, Amgen, Pfizer, etc. Surrounding towns have experienced a similar trend since the federal Highway Act 1956 leading to the construction of I-95.

**Source:** "Comprehensive Community Plan: Coventry," adopted August 14, 1992; amended June 19, 2000.

dents would affect each of their areas of concern. I recorded these conclusions on a chart on the board, which students copied into their notes. For example, the Land Use group thought that much of the town's open space would likely be diminished because of the need for more housing space. Community Services and Facilities predicted that Coventry would need more schools and fire stations. The Economic Development groups said that while tax revenues and business volume would increase, the community would need much more tax money to pay for the services to support the growing population.

### Devising Plans for Improvement

At this point, I challenged students to voice their own conclusions and opinions about what their community and town was going to look like in the future. Each student group arrived at with some insightful ideas. For example, the group covering transportation analyzed maps showing the intersections with high incidents of traffic accidents and recommended that an arterial road be built. In their proposal, the group took into account the local geography to determine the best place to add another road while causing the least environmental and social impact. Another group proposed using a piece of town land to create a public recreation field to give young people a place to play sports on weekends and in the summer. The location they chose took into account current zoning regulations and access issues. The group speculated that this use of land might lead to a decrease in juvenile crime and help to combat obesity among young people. Other groups designated locations where new schools could be built and recommended paths where new sidewalks could be created along existing roads. (John Flaherty graciously answered students' e-mail messages and provided suggestions and constructive criticism.)

### Presentation to the Town Council


Earlier, both guest speakers had used PowerPoint as part of their presentations. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts and rescheduling, computer classes were removed from the curriculum years ago. Nevertheless, my students used their home and school computers to learn the PowerPoint computer program on their own time, with minimum assistance from me. Thus, each group's 10-minute presentation in the school's media center included text, maps, and charts displayed with a computer and PowerPoint.

The proposals were so insightful and detailed that one of the Planning Commission members invited to the event said to me afterwards that he now intended to send his own children to Coventry's public schools rather than placing them in private institutions.

### Reflecting on the Project

At the very end of the project, I had students fill out a peer evaluation form. Although I usually see most of what is going on with each student group, it is valuable to give the students the opportunity to provide their views about how the work was distributed within each group, which of their peers contributed the most, and how well they worked together.

As a concluding assignment, I asked students to revisit the question I asked them at the very beginning of the unit: Would they want to live in Coventry as adults? It was interesting to see that many of the students (more than half of those who had expressed the wish to move away as adults) had changed their minds; they were now inclined to stay. It seems that through discovering facts about their own community and participating in planning for its future, many students gained a new sense of community. Some noted that they learned major new things about the features, services, and government of a town they had lived in all their lives.

After hearing the students give their presentations, Councilperson Richard Sanetti said, “The future of Coventry is in good hands.” Wherever they do end up living as adults, I hope that my students will continue to be involved in the planning the future of their community. They’ve made a good start.<sup>4</sup> 

#### Notes

1. Jennifer Swanson, “Middle School Students Present Vision for Town’s Future,” *Coventry Courier* (April 2, 2005).
2. William Fulton, Rolf Pendall, Mai Nguyen, and Alicia Harrison, *Who Sprawls Most? How Growth Patterns Differ Across the U.S.* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001).
3. “Comprehensive Community Plan: Coventry,” adopted August 14, 1992; amended June 19, 2000.
4. Special thanks to Town Council President Frank Hyde and Vice-President Richard Sanetti. Thanks also to Planning Commission members Russ Crossman and Scott Nelson.

#### Resources

Thad Williamson, D. Imbroscio, and G. Alperovitz, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Since the project ended, some of my students took pictures of their town for a historical society project, “Streets of the City,” sponsored by a grant procured by our school librarian. “Our Community Project” can be seen through [www.mitchellteachers.net](http://www.mitchellteachers.net). Check out our website for student presentations, pictures, lessons, etc.

Streets of the City Project. Go to: [www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMStreetsOfCityProject/MrMStreetsOfTheCityProjectContents.htm](http://www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMStreetsOfCityProject/MrMStreetsOfTheCityProjectContents.htm)

Presentation to RI Geography Alliance and GrowSmart-RI Advisory board. Go to: [www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMPresentationsProfDev1.html](http://www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMPresentationsProfDev1.html)

Current edition of the *Our Community* project is at [www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMOurCommunityUnit.html](http://www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMOurCommunityUnit.html)

Ali Sherer’s PowerPoint to Town Council 1999 on population growth is at [www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMPopulationProjectionPowerPoint.html](http://www.mitchellteachers.net/MrMPopulationProjectionPowerPoint.html)

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## Population Growth in Coventry, RI

In this example, students determine the annual rate at which the human population of Coventry is growing, and then calculate the year in which the population will have doubled (the “doubling time”), assuming that the growth rate remains the same. The problem can be worked by hand, or with a basic function calculator.

### What is the annual growth rate of the human population in Coventry?

Given: Population in 1990 = 31,083    Population in 2000 = 33,668

Answer:

**a. What is the increase that occurred over the ten years?**

$33,668 \text{ people} - 31,083 \text{ people} = 2,585 \text{ people}$

Thus, the population grew by 2,585 people over the decade.

**b. What proportion of the starting population is this?**

$2,585 \text{ people} \div 31,083 \text{ people} = 0.08316$

Thus, the ten-year rate of increase is about 8%.

**c. What is the one-year (annual) rate of increase?**

$0.08316 \div 10 = 0.008316$

Thus, the annual growth rate of the human population in Coventry is about 0.8%

*Remind students that this is “eight tenths of a percent,” NOT “eight percent.”*

### What is the estimated doubling time for the human population in Coventry?

Given: Let us assume that the annual growth rate stays constant at 0.8%.

Students can calculate the approximate doubling time of a population using the following formula.

$$\text{Doubling time (in years)} = 70 \div \text{Annual Rate of Increase (as \%)}$$

*Explain that statisticians have shown that the number 70 provides pretty accurate results in such population estimates. It is the approximate equivalent of 100 times the natural logarithm of 2. (Note: Express the rate of increase as a percent.)*

Students can do the calculation.

$$\text{Doubling time (in years)} = 70 \div 0.8.$$

Thus, the doubling time for the population of Coventry is 87.5 years if the annual growth rate remains constant at 0.8%.

In other words, Coventry would attain twice the number of people as it has in 2006 during the year 2093.

For an in-depth look at estimating population increases and country comparisons, see “On The Double,” a free online lesson plan, appropriate for middle school students, at [www.populationconnection.org](http://www.populationconnection.org).

# Poems for Two Voices: An Interdisciplinary Activity

LESLIE PERFECT RICKLIN

The poem on this page is an example of a poem for two voices, two perspectives on the same subject or theme. It was written by two middle school teachers in a workshop that I led at the annual conference of the National Middle School Association. Teachers are quick to see that a variety of language arts skills readily apply to learning in the social studies. Reading, speaking, listening, writing, technology literacy, for example, can get plenty of practice through the learning of social studies content. Likewise, it is hard to imagine fulfilling the goals of social studies education without incorporating language arts. Social studies teaches citizenship by “preparing our people to identify, understand, and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world....”<sup>1</sup> How can middle school students grapple with social studies issues found in current events, geography, or history without reading, writing, listening, and discussing the content? The two curriculum areas are inextricably connected, and a teaching strategy that combines them effectively is poems for two voices.

## A Purpose for Poetry

One reason that a poem for two voices is such a powerful tool for learning is that it depends on two students collaborating closely. Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky labeled this collaboration “the zone of proximal development,” which refers to the difference between what a child can accomplish alone and what that same child can accomplish with the assistance of others.<sup>2</sup> In addition, by teachers integrating social studies instruction, they “are unleashing the power of communications by introducing learning strategies that rely on social interaction. Oral modeling of

I grew up in a house  
On Saturday, my mom made pancakes  
My dad took us fishing  
In the summer I went to camp and  
my big sister wrote me letters  
In gym class I was never any good at  
kick ball  
Life is pretty easy for me.

I grew up in lots of houses  
I had to find my own breakfast  
I never saw my dad  
I went to summer camp and  
no one wrote me letters  
I was always the first picked for gym class  
I know what the real world is like.

reading and writing, collaborative reading and writing, dialogue, and peer journals are just a few of these strategies.”<sup>3</sup> A person does not become literate in a vacuum but in a social context.<sup>4</sup> Social interaction is vital for students to develop into responsible and literate citizens. Here again, poems for two voices fits the bill for students to practice these skills on the road to responsible citizenship.

## Joyful Noises

I learned about poems for two voices some years ago as a participant in a workshop for teachers about the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus, which was run by Bill Bigelow, an editor of *Rethinking Columbus*.<sup>5</sup> He introduced me to the Newbery Award-winning book *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* by Paul Fleischman, upon which Bigelow based his activity.<sup>6</sup> We had to think of a current social or historical issue and write a poem taking a view opposite from that of a partner in the exercise. Subjects for the poems could include the views of Spanish Conquistadors and indigenous peoples, Western settlers and Native Americans, Anglo-Saxon Americans and other immigrants, a homeowner and a homeless person, or a drug-free person and a drug user. We found this strategy

very powerful and effective in exploring a myriad of issues in depth in a fairly short time. The collaboration that led to the creation of the poem was the most meaningful part of the process.

## Language Arts and Social Studies

As an example of a poem for two voices, consider a sixth grade geography unit that focuses on the physical features of Africa (see the example below). After studying landforms, looking at and making maps, etc., students will have gained a body of content knowledge from which to write a poem for two voices. The teacher organizes the activity by telling the class that each person will work with a partner, choose two landforms from the African continent, and write at least six lines each about their respective topic.

I have found that, initially, the teacher (rather than students) should choose the student pairs to be sure that no one is left out, and that one student will not dominate over another. Once students are familiar with how this writing activity is done, the teacher might allow students to select their partners. If there is an odd number of students in the class, one group can easily create a poem for three voices, as most topics have more than just two perspectives

(a thought for a third party in the example below might be to add the “voice” of the tropical forest of Central Africa or of the savanna in the south).

Because the choices for topics are so open ended, students may feel overwhelmed, even reluctant, in the beginning, and not know where to begin. To assist them, the teacher should brainstorm with the whole class to generate ideas for poems. By seeing lists of possible topics (as seen from two or more perspectives) on the board, students can start seeing the possibilities. Once they get an idea and begin to write together, they become engaged in the activity.

Students should have enough time (at least 20 minutes) to collaborate on their poems. Teachers may use writing workshop time, for example, or part of a double period with language arts. Once students have completed their poems, they should practice reading them aloud together before sharing them with the class. They do this by alternating speakers line by line, so that each thought is contrasted with a different thought, as if the poems were a conversation. (For example, while reading the poem below, student A would say, “I am the Nile River.” Student B would say, “I am the Sahara desert.” Student A would follow by saying “ I am the longest river in the world.” And the pattern would repeat.)

Practice time is important in order to help students feel confident as well as prepared. I believe that they should come to the front of the class to read their poems. Students need many opportunities to make oral presentations so that they feel comfortable and learn to speak clearly. This venue offers the support of a partner. The class should applaud after the presentations to acknowledge the creative effort and demonstrate respect for each pair of students.

### Assessment

Poems for two voices can be used as an assessment tool. The poem on this page

reveals how students have integrated what they have learned. In this example, students personify the traits of the Nile River and the Sahara Desert, thus adding a dimension of empathy to their descriptions, making the landforms more understandable and memorable. The teacher, then, can quickly determine what the two students understand about the characteristics of different landforms, even as they read their poem.

I am part of Africa  
I am the Nile River  
I am the longest river in the world  
I overflow my banks to make the land fertile  
My headwaters begin in Lake Victoria in the south  
And I flow north to the Mediterranean  
Humans try to control me  
I am part of Africa.

I am part of Africa  
I am the Sahara Desert  
I am the largest desert in the world  
My lands are dry, dusty, barren  
I extend from the Mediterranean in the north  
To almost the Equator  
Humans cannot control me  
I am part of Africa.

### Controversial Aspects

In other curricula areas, students have written poems that look at two views of economic concepts (capitalism vs. communism), political science (Democrats vs. Republicans during a campaign), and sociology (urban vs. rural life). Given the opportunity, students are quite capable of seeing the dichotomies in what they are studying and coming up with interesting subjects for poems.

What if some of these topics reflect a controversial issue such as the war in Iraq, affirmative action, gay rights, access to abortion, or stem cell research? Teachers may feel that the administrators or parents will object to such inquiry as being too political or that it encroaches on moral aspects of personal matters.

Middle school students, in my opinion, should be encouraged to learn, think about, and discuss the issues surrounding current topics in the news. In a few short years, they will be voters and will make decisions on these and other such issues. In order to make reasoned decisions in our democracy, they should be exposed to different sides of these issues and learn to discuss them in class in a logical, respectful way. As social studies

teachers, it is our responsibility to create an atmosphere in our classroom that fosters student engagement in a healthy exercise of democratic principles. Each teacher must decide what topics are appropriate for his or her students considering their age group and their social setting, although colleagues and principals can often help in these matters. Poems for two voices are an excellent way to help students not only look at different sides of world problems, but also to apply their knowledge to develop their ideas and express them in a thoughtful way.

### Conclusion

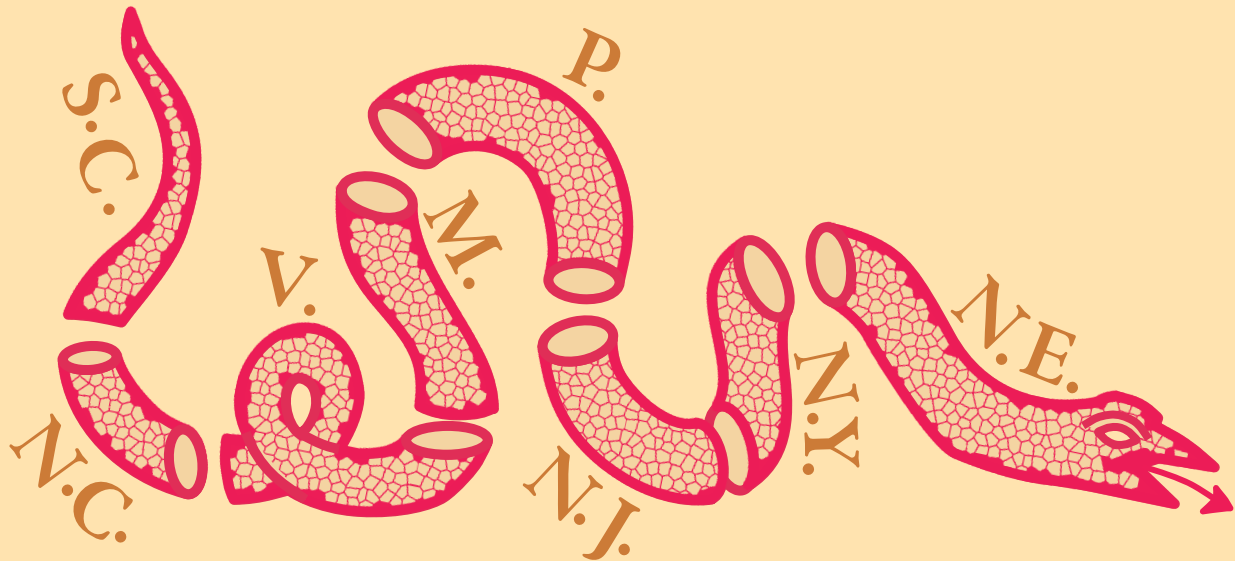
Middle school classrooms should be communities where learning is ongoing, collaborative, meaningful, and

stimulating. Assigning students to work in pairs to create poems for two voices is a powerful way to help students think deeply about what they believe, know, and want to express about all sorts of knowledge. Such poems can bring together the best in social studies and language arts by integrating skills with content. The teacher’s role is to provide (or point the way to) content and background, facilitate student pairs in their work, advise where needed, assess student knowledge, and enjoy watching the creative process unfold. 📖

### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, “In Search of a Scope and Sequence for Social Studies,” *Social Education* 53, no. 6 (1989): 377.
2. Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962).
3. D. G. Hennings, *Communication, Language and Literacy Learning* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000): 8.
4. Pamela J. Farris, *Elementary and Middle School Social Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2004): 33.
5. Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Columbus* (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 1998).
6. Paul. Fleischman, *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1988)

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# SKIN the SNAKE

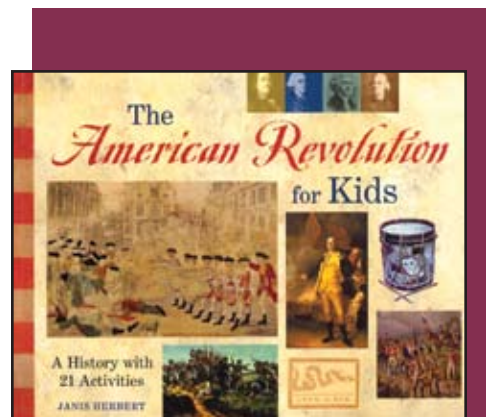
## A Children's Game Popular in Colonial America

Tell students that they are going to participate in a game called "Skin the Snake." There are no winners or losers. It's just for fun, like the game "Leap Frog." It can be played on dry ground, in the gym, or possibly in a classroom if desks are pushed aside to create a wide aisle. Reflecting the customs of the Colonial era, boys should play this game in a group with other boys, and girls with girls.

Have a line of ten student volunteers stand one behind the other, facing the same direction, with legs spread about one foot apart. Each student should reach between his or her legs with the left hand to grasp the right hand of the person behind. After doing this, the last person in the line lies supine (face up) on the floor, placing both hands over the face. Everyone else slowly backs up over this person, taking small shuffling steps, without breaking the chain of hands. When the line has shifted so that the prostrate student is now at the front, that student stands up—and reaches back with his or her left hand. The process repeats. As each person reaches the end of the line, he or she lies down. The line continues moving in a giant loop, rather like a giant tractor tread, slowly across the floor, until the teacher decides to end the game.

After the game, have students describe their experiences. What was it like to play "Skin the Snake?" How did you have to work as a team to be successful? Why might Colonial children group themselves based on gender? (Are gym classes at your school co-ed?) How do you think the game got its name? (Removing the skin from a dead snake, as one might do when preparing snake soup, can be done by making a ring-like cut behind the neck and then peeling down the tube of scaly skin, like rolling a sock off a foot, or like the group's motion in this game.) How have the kinds of games children play and the way in which they play them changed over time? Do you think kids might like to revive this game as a recess activity? Why or why not?

BY STEPHANIE WASTA



**Source:**

Janis Herbert, *The American Revolution for Kids: A History with 21 Activities* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press 1999):23. See pages 7 of this issue of *Middle Level Learning* for classroom application of "Skin the Snake".

**Middle Level Learning**

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**Above:**

A design based on Benjamin Franklin's cartoon of 1754, "Don't Tread on Me."

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