

Poetry and Postholes: Making History Instruction Deeper and More Personal

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*Artists and poets are the raw
nerve ends of humanity.
By themselves they can do
little to save humanity.
Without them there would be
little worth saving.¹*

These words from Jackson Pollock's headstone reflect some of my latest musings about authentic pedagogy.² In particular, what authenticity demands most and history teaching often seems to supply least is feeling and depth. Most teachers will endorse "standards" of authentic instruction, including deep knowledge, higher order thinking, substantive conversation, and connections to the world beyond the classroom. When it comes to putting such endorsements into practice, however, they too often accept a standardized view of content that is dull and doctrinaire and settle for approaches to teaching and assessment that are superficial and sterile. My challenge to those who feel defeated by cries for curricular conformity and trivial testing is to plumb the depths of individual and collective experience. In other words, to make social studies deeper and therefore truly authentic, we need to make it more poetic and therefore more personal.

The Poetic. Affect is not sufficient for depth, but it is certainly necessary. If art and poetry are the means by which humanity's nerves are exposed, we might

also say it is one vehicle through which we can feel history. I take an inclusive view of poetry. Any artifact that provides a window into the metaphors, myths, mysteries, and magic of the human experience might be considered poetic. I extend the poetic aperture to stories that invite us to reach deeper into the personality of history. For example, the 1865 story of German chemist Friedrich Kekule includes a poetic element. One day during a waking dream, Kekule observed a snake devouring its own tail. Upon awakening, he combined the dream with other memories and unlocked the mystery of the Benzene Ring, a long-standing chemical conundrum. By reaching into the mythic elements of this discovery, Kekule's story has the potential to become our own. We all know the "aha" experience and the power of discovery. It is not the story of chemistry that is important, but as we shall see, it is the mystery of everyone's personal transformation reflected in the renderings of artist or scientist that makes something poetic.

The Pedagogical. In thinking about opportunities for deep knowledge in every day social studies, I am guided

by a "posthole" metaphor.³ A posthole is a concentrated unit focused on a single question, person, process, or event and embedded into a normal chronological curriculum. A poem is itself like a posthole. In history, the byproduct of post-holing is the construction of anchor points in students' minds upon which the "fence" of an historical or conceptual narrative can then be attached. If we want to build a worthy intellectual enclosure, we must first dig deep postholes. And to dig postholes, we must recognize that it is the poetic impulse within the student that all curricula and techniques are intended to arouse.

The Personal. I was raised in Wyoming, where I also taught social studies for 11 years after college. I still visit often, traveling from my home in Wisconsin—so trails once forged across Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Nebraska are familiar, even if they now bear such generic signposts as "I-80" or "I-94." Other markers of historical significance—Louisiana Purchase, Oregon Trail, Homestead Act, Manifest Destiny—have always adorned my course syllabi. The curriculum of my soul, however, is inscribed by landmarks

of a more literary nature. I see Wisconsin through the natural realism of Hamlin Garland's *Main Traveled Roads* and recall the prairie through Willa Cather's *O Pioneers* or Walt Whitman's poem *Pioneers! O Pioneers!* from which Cather adopted her own title. Here are just two stanzas:

... For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must
bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the
rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers! ...
Minstrels latent on the prairies!
(Shrouded bards of other lands, you
may rest, you have done your work,)
Soon I hear you coming warbling,
soon you rise and tramp amid us,
Pioneers! O pioneers! ...

Whitman added 24 more verses, each concluding with the same refrain—"Pioneers! O pioneers!"—almost as if each thundering but redundant phrase is another obdurate obstacle in front of a slowly moving parade. When I drive across my native soil, I often witness a similar sight. A perpetual procession of trains creates the impression of an artist's lines drawn upon the vast desert landscape that comprises much of Wyoming. From a distance, these contemporary carriers of coal seem almost motionless as they creep slowly in and out of magnificent gorges of stripped earth in order to reveal vast storehouses of energy that lie beneath. Up close, they roar by like intruders on a lunar landscape, curiously comfortable with the unceasing Wyoming wind. Whether the wagon train of yesteryear or the coal train of today, each sight elicits an intimate response as I ponder my own journey, traversing both time and space in search of personal value and a promised land. Stories and statements like Cather's and Whitman's mediate my knowledge of history with poetic sensibility.

Postholes in the Curriculum

I have identified three ways to dig poetic

postholes in the social studies curriculum, which I introduce next with examples that invite students to relate with history more intimately.

Posthole # 1: The Transcendent Event

The Scopes Monkey Trial is what I call a transcendent event. From a brief but intense interlude into the nuances of the famous trial, we can develop deep conceptual knowledge of forces like modernism and fundamentalism as they battle for the soul of society and every individual in it. The feud over teaching evolution persists to this day; so part of any posthole we might dig must include immersion in contemporary affairs, with students examining personal beliefs about intelligent design, local control of curriculum, and circumstances where the issue has most recently flared.

Embedded in most transcendent events are literary, theatrical, and cinematic works that capture the spirit of a period—or the ethos of a people—as much as, or more than, the event itself. They also illuminate perennial questions. For the Monkey Trial, *Inherit the Wind* is such a work. The play has been converted multiple times to film and, like the trial, it embodies timeless issues and reflects grave tensions that not only existed in the 1920s, but still persist today. As one historian, commenting on the "media-mythic proportions" of *Inherit the Wind*, concluded: "It may not have been accurate history, but it was brilliant theater—and it all but replaced the actual trial in the nation's memory."⁴ Understanding the importance of Scopes necessitates digging into the context of the play, which in turn yields poetic elements.

During an exploration of my own, I discovered that authors of *Inherit the Wind* as well as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* wrote their dramatic scripts in the 1950s as a way to address the fears and dangers of McCarthyism. This knowledge invites myriad posthole opportunities. For example, I might introduce excerpts from *The Crucible* early in a course, helping students make judgments about credibility by comparing

the play to primary sources surrounding the Salem witch trials.⁵ Later, *Inherit the Wind* becomes another posthole, when students are challenged to consider the influence of popular media on politics and historical understanding. An ideal question could be framed like this: "How might context (Red Scare and McCarthy), medium (stage or film), audience (mass culture), and producer's perspective (fears about individual liberty) influence the way people of one period (1950s or today) view the issues of another (1920s or 1950s)?"

When it's all said and done, what my students and I resonate to most personally, because we feel it most deeply, are the elements aroused within ourselves—feelings of xenophobia and prejudice, scapegoating and ignorance. We know that we are both victim and perpetrator of these attitudes and actions. What we remember are the immortal words uttered not by Clarence Darrow, but by Spencer Tracy (later Jack Lemmon and Jason Robards) in the 1960 film:⁶

Gentlemen, progress has never been a bargain. You've got to pay for it. Sometimes I think there's a man behind a counter who says, "All right, you can have a telephone; but you'll have to give up privacy, the charm of distance. Madam, you may vote; but at a price; you lose the right to retreat behind a powder puff or a petticoat. Mister, you may conquer the air; but the birds will lose their wonder, and the clouds will smell of gasoline!" Darwin moved us forward to a hilltop, where we could look back and see the way from which we came. But for this view, this insight, this knowledge, we must abandon our faith in the pleasant poetry of Genesis.

The artistic image created during this scene introduces the concept of opportunity costs associated with progress, a deep conceptual principle students can apply during future analyses. Exploring similar

questions that swirled around Sacco and Vanzetti, Al Capone, or Amelia Earhart might be equally poetic. The point is less about which posthole to dig, than it is about pausing in the transmission of a historical narrative to focus on one imaginative anchor point so that the deluge of additional content has a deep foundation upon which to be built.

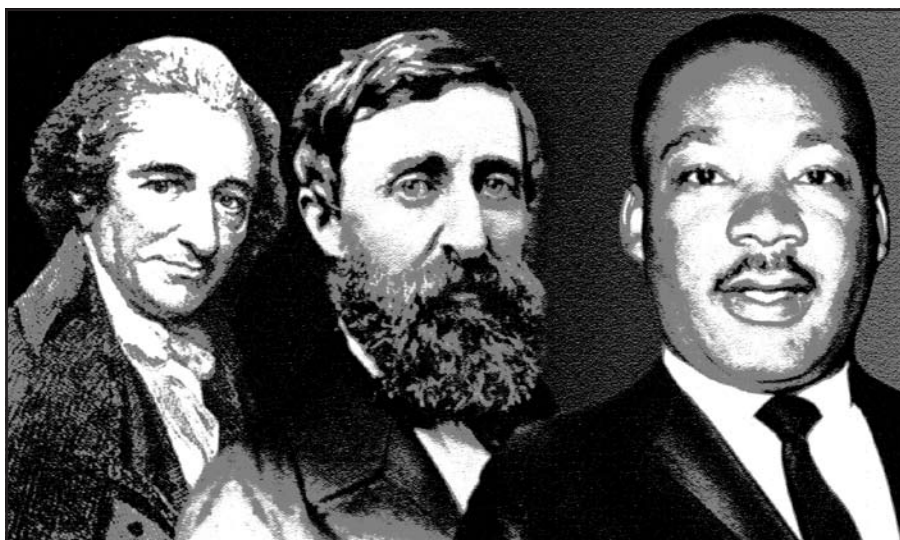
Posthole #2: The Enduring Theme

Powerful themes appear cyclically throughout any social studies curriculum. The astute teacher can focus attention on the same theme at different times in a course. For example, Thomas Paine, Henry David Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr. offer some of the most elegant expressions of the American mind. Their respective struggles over the meaning and importance of civil disobedience reflect a common idea that teachers can reinforce over and over again. Consider the following excerpts, each embedded in a different century, yet calling for similarly revolutionary actions in pursuit of an emerging national identity.

I am not induced by motives of pride, party, or resentment to espouse the doctrine of separation and independence; I am clearly, positively, and conscientiously persuaded that it is the true interest of this continent to be so; that every thing short of that is mere patchwork, that it can afford no lasting felicity—that it is leaving the sword to our children, and shrinking back at a time, when, a little more, a little farther, would have rendered this continent the glory of the earth.

—18th century, Thomas Paine,
*Common Sense*⁷

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. ... [W]hen the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not



have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is that fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

—19th century

Henry David Thoreau,
*Essay on Civil Disobedience*⁸

In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

—20th century,

Martin Luther King Jr.,
*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*⁹

Imagine revisiting this theme in three separate units, comparing the conditions

and effects of visionaries as they stare down a barrel of choices that each man deems worthy of punishment. The teacher might pull up Paine’s words repeatedly—for example, when exploring America’s sense of manifest destiny and willingness to use the sword to lay claim to a continent. Thoreau, on the other hand, challenges us to consider what happens when a practice such as slavery makes our use of the sword pernicious, that is, we become “our own invading enemy.” And in similarly rhetorical fashion, King dares us to think about times when defiance is not only justified but a morally superior act. When students consider poetic statements by those who conclude that respect for law must yield to a higher authority, knowledge is deepened. Rather than a mere reference in the margins of a book or another primary source worksheet, a genuine posthole invites students to consider such essential questions for themselves, without denying them the rich experience of framing those questions in the original poetry of the framers. It provokes students to ponder the heroic and sometimes tragic nature of their own obligations—to authority, security, individual liberty, and truth—as they consider the fate of these forebears and the role of rebelliousness in their own lives and times. Inquiring about civil disobedience in multiple contexts elevates a conceptual idea while helping each individual gain deeper understanding of his or her role in society.

Posthole #3: Where's Waldo?

A final method for digging postholes is to look for references that crop up again and again during a course or curriculum. By highlighting serendipitous occurrences, the teacher encourages development of incremental knowledge over a period of time. One year, I began a course by asking students what “We The People” meant in the Constitution’s Preamble. Throughout the year, we found ourselves looking for instances of the concept, both literally and figuratively. I still remember one student’s expression of excitement upon hearing Ma Joad’s comment to Tom in *Grapes of Wrath*: “Rich fellas come up an’ they die, an’ their kids ain’t no good an’ they die out. But we keep a’comin’. We’re the people that live. They can’t wipe us out; they can’t lick us. We’ll go on forever, Pa, ‘cause we’re the people” (emphasis added).¹⁰

We also stumbled across a repeating reference to “shoes” embedded in our “people” theme. Once I turned out the lights and asked students to imagine themselves lying about their age in order to take part in a romantic event of dramatic proportions. While their eyes were closed, I smuggled a student actor into the classroom and had him lay prostrate on the floor. My students filed silently past the “corpse,” pausing to stare into his eyes and taking note of the soles on his shoes. Then I read aloud from Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*:

Once the line encountered the body of a dead soldier. He lay upon his back staring at the sky. He was dressed in an awkward suit of yellowish brown. The youth could see that the soles of his shoes had been worn to the thinness of writing paper, and from a great rent in one the dead foot projected piteously. And it was as if fate had betrayed the soldier. In death it exposed to his enemies that poverty which in life he had perhaps concealed from his friends.¹¹

The scene invited us to ask meaningful questions and to look at history

poetically and personally: How can a corpse force a way for itself? How can one transitory event be so momentous in the life of a single boy or girl—one of “we the people”? Later, the populist poet William Carlos Williams provided a similarly moving allusion to shoes and “ordinary” people. His 1917 street scene *Proletarian Portrait* paints a picture of poverty and frugality, two unintended consequences of industrialization (for some). Before I read this to my students, I had them trace their feet, cut soles out of cereal boxes and insert them in their shoes.

Proletarian Portrait

A big young bareheaded woman
in an apron
Her hair slicked back standing
on the street
One stockinged foot toeing
the sidewalk
Her shoe in her hand. Looking
intently into it
She pulls out the paper insole
to find the nail
That has been hurting her

Like viewing a confederate corpse, stuffing cardboard in one’s shoe is a gimmick. Nevertheless, the poem planted a touching visual image, and the tactile experience forced us to think about that prototypic woman preserving the life of her shoes every time we put on our own. Several students visited me months after the course to report remembrance of the poem, including their feelings about “we the people” and the collective “shoe” experience. By highlighting such recurring references, it turns out we had been digging a posthole, one sole and one soul at a time.

Conclusion

It only takes a few words to reveal the power that poetry has in shaping our personal lives and capturing our collective story. “Listen my children and you shall hear...” “Brother, can you spare a dime?” “Shouting fire in a theater...” “Hell no, we

won’t go!” “Ask not...” Richard Rorty wrote that “to fully live, to fully be,” requires that we “recapture the force of the most elementary words of Being.”¹² These words are often found in poetic postholes—deep inquiries that expose the raw nerve ends of humanity. Such pedagogy provides an enduring and authentic vehicle for understanding the human condition, the *raison d’être* of the social studies. 📖

Notes

1. This reference to Pollock’s tombstone is found on page 20 of Roger Housden’s *Ten Poems to Change your Life Again and Again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007).
2. Michael Yell invited me to update my views on authentic pedagogy since writing about it 10 years ago in an edition of *Social Education* that we guest edited on “Constructing Knowledge in Social Studies.” See *Social Education* 62, no. 1 (1998), 23-25.
3. Post-holing was a term used during the era known as the New Social Studies, particularly by the director of the Amherst History Project. See Richard H. Brown, “Learning How to Learn: The Amherst Project,” *The Social Studies* 87 (1996): 267-273.
4. Edward J. Larsen, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Monkey Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 241.
5. An excellent source for postholes in American and world history, including a unit on the Salem Witch Trials, is *The DBQ Project*, authored by Phil Roden and Chip Brady (See www.dbqproject.com/).
6. *Inherit the Wind* was first performed as a Broadway play based on the script by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (New York: Ballentine, 1955). The first film version was produced by MGM in 1960 and starred Spencer Tracy. It has subsequently also aired on television.
7. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776. For full text with background information, see www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/.
8. Henry David Thoreau, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (originally published as “Resistance to Civil Government”), 1849. For full text, see www.constitution.org/civ/civildis.txt.
9. Martin Luther King, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963*. For full text, see www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/letter.html.
10. Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* was first published by Heron Books in 1939 and made into a movie starring Henry Fonda by 20th Century Fox in 1950.
11. Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* was first published in 1895.
12. Rorty was talking about the ideas of Martin Heidegger in his book *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37.

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