

Engaging Students in World History with a Bog Body Mystery

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The word *history* comes ... from the Greek *historein*—meaning “to inquire.” ... The use of inquiry as a tool for learning history (and other topics in social studies) has a long tradition—or more accurately, recommendations for using inquiry have a long tradition. ... People learn through inquiry.... inquiry is an approach consistent with current theory and research on human learning. When understanding is needed, inquiry appears to be one of the best ways to get there.

—Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik
*Teaching History for the Common Good*¹

Getting students involved in the process of inquiry takes much more than pointing out a problem, offering sources, and setting them on their way. Fortunately, there are a number of teaching strategies that can be instrumental in engaging students in the process of inquiry. As a teacher of world history in the seventh grade, House of Avalon, at Hudson Middle School, two strategies that I have found particularly engaging for my students are *Discrepant Event Inquiry* and *Mystery*.² To illustrate these strategies, I have highlighted a lesson I created for my medieval unit called “I Love the Knightlife: Exploring the Middle Ages.” Using these strategies, students inquire into one of the most enduring mysteries in archaeology: the

Bog Bodies of Northern Europe.

Discrepant Event Inquiry

Picture the following: students come into class and see that the Smartboard has a projection of a cannon ball with a fuse. It’s the “online bomb timer” (a web 2.0 tool) and it is set for five minutes. Students begin to buzz with excitement. I dim the lights and relate the following story (in a dramatic fashion):

A few years ago, workers digging a trench in the county of Old Croghan in Ireland made a gruesome discovery. They uncovered the partial body of a person who was an apparent murder victim. Although only a portion of the body was found, it was apparent the death had been recent. The police were called and

took the fingerprints of the corpse and, as part of a murder investigation, began circulating them to local police offices, but no one could match the prints.

Finally, the detective in charge, Eadaoin Campbell got a call from a lab that had studied the body. She was told to forget about finding out the identity of the murder victim. “Why?” she asked, “Wasn’t the person from around here?” “Yes,” she was told, “Probably living very close to the area in which you discovered the corpse.” “Then why not keep looking?” she inquired, “Being from around here somebody will turn up the victim’s identity.” “No,” came the reply, “No one, no one, could possibly know this person.”

At this point, I inform my students that they have five minutes to figure out why no one could possibly know this person, and what might have happened to him or her. The fuse on the online bomb timer begins burning down and the countdown begins.

Hands shoot into the air. The first student asks, “Was the victim a real person?” Yes. Another student asks, “Was the victim from another country?” No. “Was the victim a man or a woman?” I prod



This bog mummy (“Red Franz”), pictured July 6, 2005, was part of an exhibit at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. Researchers said the mummy was a man in his late twenties when his throat was slashed almost 2,000 years ago and his body buried in a bog in Neu Versen, Germany. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar)

the student to rephrase the question, as I can only answer with a yes or a no.

The questioning continues until the bomb timer is put on pause. Students are gathered into groups of four, and I tell them to think about what they are trying to figure out. “Think about what has been asked, what you have learned, and the possibilities you have eliminated. Think about what else you need to find out, and come up with another question that will help us solve this inquiry in the remaining minutes.”

After a brief time for group discussion, the timer begins again as does the questioning (and the frantic waving of hands). Questions build upon questions as students fashion their yes/no questions to first verify the facts and then begin to form tentative hypotheses as to what might have happened and why the body could not be identified.

“I really liked the inquiries and how we had to think and figure it out. Much more fun than being told “today we will be learning about Mesopotamia or something.”

—Kenzie, 7th grader

Using the Discrepant Event Strategy

My lesson on the mysteries of the bog bodies of Northern Europe (the naturally preserved corpses that retained skin and internal organs over thousands of years) uses the two previously mentioned inquiry-based teaching strategies to have students become historical detectives and solve the mysteries of the bog bodies, decipher the societies that were responsible for them, and understand the processes historians use as they attempt

to interpret the past. Discrepant Event Inquiry is the strategy with which I begin every unit (and use several times within each unit). It is motivating, engaging for my students (and I have taught in every grade: 7–12), and begins each unit of exploration with their questions.³

In Discrepant Event Inquiries, students are confronted with a puzzle, a discrepant event, or paradoxical statement that they must work to solve—in this case, the story of Old Croghan man, one of the most recent bog bodies to be discovered. If students figure it out, great! If they do not, great! Either way it is a motivating entry into a unit or lesson, with students becoming history detectives: thinking, interacting, questioning, and discovering.

There are four steps to conducting a Discrepant Event Inquiry:

1. Students are told a puzzling story or statement and what they must figure out in order to solve it.
2. Students analyze the puzzle and form ideas by asking the teaching questions that can be answered with a yes or a no.
3. The teacher pauses during the inquiry to give students the opportunity to engage in small group discussions to enrich their thinking.
4. The inquiry is followed with the development of questions that

students wish to answer during the unit/lesson.

The stories or statements that you use must be puzzling (the more puzzling the better), and the questions the students ask of you must be answerable with a yes or a no. If a question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no the student must rephrase it. In this way, the teacher does not provide explanations for the students and the students learn how to focus and structure their questions as well as build on previous questions.

The Discrepant Event Inquiry is followed with a discussion of the topic and the development of questions that stu-

dents would like to answer in the unit or lesson. Although the inquiry provides enough of a spark for an excellent discussion, my preference is to add a picture or short selection from an appropriate DVD/video to really heighten interest. For example, following the inquiry on the bog bodies, I use a short segment introducing a Nova program titled “The Perfect Corpse,”⁴ and then develop the questions we wish to explore.

There are two additional points on the use of Discrepant Event Inquiry. The first is the importance of timing the students (I allow five minutes). There are a number of timers available both commercially and online (my favorite is the

Clues about the Bog Bodies (see page 20)

A peat bog is a marshy lake with a high acid content. It is very cold with little oxygen and so organic matter is preserved very well.

The high acid content of a bog will preserve organic materials in much the same way as a cucumber is pickled.

Although peat bogs are found throughout the world, only in the bogs in northern Europe have human remains been found.

The bodies found in the bogs of Northern Europe have been dated from around 500 BCE to about 400 CE. This is a period in Northern Europe known as *The Iron Age*.

The Iron Age people in the British Isles and Northern Europe were mostly farmers who raised grains, cows, pigs, and horses.

Over 2,000 years ago, the Celtic people were widespread across much of northern and central Europe. Traditional Irish lore paints a picture of Celtic warriors ruling from sacred hilltop citadels, with the bogs below, an entryway to the supernatural.

The oldest known Bog Body dates back to 8000 BCE. There was no apparent violence done to the body.

Many of the Iron Age people of Northern Europe did not normally put their dead in bogs but cremated them or buried them in the ground.

The bodies found in the bogs seemed to have been well dressed and groomed for their time, had no calluses on their hands or feet, and some appeared to have had manicures.

Many northern Europeans believed in a fertility goddess called

Mother Earth who made a good harvest. When there was a shortage of food, they believed that she was angry.

Over 700 preserved bodies have been pulled out of the bogs in Ireland, England, Norway, Denmark, Germany, and Russia.

According to Roman writer Tacitus, who lived in the first century, the people of northern Europe made sacrifices.

Most of the bog bodies have been found in Denmark and northern Germany.

The bodies found in the bogs had been hanged or strangled. A few appeared to have their skulls crushed. Many seem to have been tortured before they were killed.

Some northern European tribes believed that gods inhabited the bogs.

When scientists first studied the stomach contents of the bog bodies, they found many had eaten a grain soup before they died but no fruits, berries, or vegetables.

Some of the bodies were apparently weighted and staked down in the bog.

In many of the Celt families, according to ancient sources, those who had committed crimes against honor were executed and buried away from other bodies.

Some archaeologists believe that the bogs represented a limbo between the real world and the afterlife.

Online Bomb Timer), and I begin the timer as soon as the first question is asked. A second point is that when introducing the inquiry, let students know that if someone feels they have the answer, then when they are called on they must explain their answer and how they figured it out. The timing and the fast pace adds to the sense of fun; and the explanation is essential as the class begins to debrief the experience and discuss the topic. The competition between classes brought about by the timing, and the need to explain the answer, makes it less likely that students will exchange the answer with students in other classes.

The teacher develops the story or paradoxical statement to use in the inquiry, guides the activity by answering the yes or no questions, and gives students time to process their ideas. Following the inquiry, the teacher guides the students in developing the questions they would like to explore about the topic. I have found that whether or not the class has answered the inquiry does not really matter; what matters is that the discrepant event inquiry is a motivational tool for developing questions students will use as they inquire further into the subject. Developing the puzzling story requires a bit of imagination, but anything that can be stated in a puzzling way or stories that can be told about the subject (leaving out important pieces of information) are ripe for the inquiry. An excellent resource for teachers who would like an arsenal of Discrepant Event Inquiries at their disposal is the e-book *Mindtronics*, by William C. and Jean K. Bruce, which provides over 70 stories for use in social studies inquiries.⁵

In my lesson, after the pause for small group discussion and the additional questioning, one student who had asked a few questions, but had mostly been sitting looking perplexed, suddenly shot her hand in the air. “I think that I have the answer Mr. Yell!” she exclaimed. Then she proceeded to explain that the body was probably that of a murder victim, but that no one could know him because he had died many years earlier. For some

reason, she surmised, the body had been preserved. “Maybe he was one of those swamp people!” After a brief explanation of how she figured it out she completes her statement with an emphatic “That’s it!” The online bomb timer is stopped with only a few seconds before the fuse would have burned down. The inquiry has been solved, but now the mystery begins....

Mystery

“I liked the mysteries and then having to figure them out. I liked it because it was interactive and we weren’t just sitting there. We had to use our thinking factors. That was one of my favorite times.”

—Lauren, 7th grader

Mystery is one of the strategies that I use to follow up the discrepant event inquiry. The motivation to find out is now high, and, in this strategy, the teacher taps into the questions following the discrepant event to delve further into the content.

Following the inquiry and a short “media hook” using a portion of the introduction to *Nova’s* “The Perfect Corpse,” students, in their small groups, are given an envelope with a set of 24 clues (See page 19). Each envelope also contains a laminated picture of the most famous Bog Body (Tollund Man). “We will use these clues,” I tell them, “to help us in understanding the historical mystery of the Bog Bodies, and answer our questions.”

One student divides the clues among the group members. They silently go through the clues before discussing them in a roundtable fashion (each student relates the clues he or she has before moving on to the next student). As they discuss the clues, they begin to organize them into categories according to similarities, compare the clues, label their categories, and develop hypotheses as to who the Bog Bodies were, and why there were so many similar deaths.

At this point, we move on to group sharing of ideas and then whole-class

discussion. Although there are many enjoyable structures for groups to share their ideas, in this case I use *Numbered-Heads-Together*.⁶ In this short structure, group members number off (one through four, five if need be), and are then told to “make certain that everyone in your group understands your hypothesis and can explain the reasons you came up with it.” After a short time for discussion, a student selector tool that I have projected on the board is spun and lands on a number. Those students whose numbers have been chosen stand and in turn explain their group’s hypothesis about the Bog Bodies. This is later followed by the whole class discussion.

Using the Mystery Strategy

This strategy presents a mystery, but does not provide answers; rather, students develop their own answers by analyzing clues. Using the strategy of *mystery* is not only sound in terms of student interaction and thinking, it is motivating and fun. Mystery combines cooperative learning with inquiry as small teams work together to share and analyze clues and develop tentative hypotheses.

As with Discrepant Event Inquiry, students have been confronted with a puzzle, but in this case, they are also given historical evidence, in the form of clues. In working with these clues, students begin by organizing the clues according to similarities and common attributes, and developing a label for each category. It is then that the groups must begin to identify relationships between the clues and making inferences as to how they fit together and what they mean. Finally, they must develop tentative hypotheses that would explain the phenomena they are studying (in the above examples, the mystery of the Bog Bodies). Finally, the class discusses and evaluates the various hypotheses that have been developed.

There are three steps to the *Mystery* strategy:

1. Prepare a set of clues that are given to each group. Although the clues can take many forms (quotations,

short primary source documents, pictures, charts or graphs), I begin by using short written clues that contain basic information about the topic in question. The information can come from readings you have done, DVDs, or even from the textbook. The Bog Body clues that I used in the lesson came from articles that I had read on the Bog Bodies as well as from the *Nova* DVD that I referenced.

2. Pass out a set of the clues to each team. The teams then distribute and share clues, organize them into groups by similarity, label the groups, compare them, and use the information to develop hypotheses about the mystery topic.
3. Groups share their answers and the class engages in a synthesizing discussion.

There is something magical about having small groups open an envelope, spread out clues, and put their heads together to organize, discuss, and hypothesize. However, there are as many variations to the nature of the clues as your own creativity can create. One of my favorite variations is a lesson I developed on Pompeii for my Rome unit (“There’s No Place Like Rome, There’s No Place Like Rome: Follow the Appian Way”). In the envelope are laminated strips of paper but on each is a primary source quotation taken from inscriptions, graffiti, and signs found in Pompeii (such as “Kalidos the [gladiator] makes all the girls’ hearts throb” and “The whole company of late drinkers favors [the election of] Vatia”).

Final Thoughts

Organizing information, making sense of data, developing reasonable hypotheses and explanations based upon evidence are all essential com-

ponents of inquiry, and are essential skills and habits of mind for our students. To engage our students in this type of thinking, this type of work is not only more important than recall alone, it is more fun for all involved. With Discrepant Event Inquiry and Mystery we help our students develop questions and reason through information in order to answer those questions.

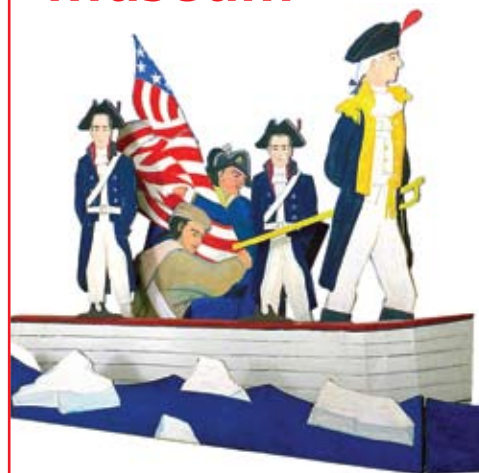
The journey from teaching history as a body of content to be memorized to teaching history as inquiry, as a way of thinking and questioning, is a powerful one. Teaching with inquiry can help our students to think, reason, and interact. It is motivating. And what is better for the kids in our social studies classes than to experience a “fun sense of learning” while inquiring, interacting, and using their “thinking factors?” 🌐

Notes

1. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Routledge, 2004), 185.
2. J. Richard Suchman (1962) developed the *Discrepant Events* strategy; *Mystery* was developed by Harvey Silver, Richard Strong, Matthew Perini in *The Strategic Teacher: Selecting the Right Research-Based Strategy for Every Lesson* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007).
3. Michael Yell, Geoffrey Scheurman, and Keith Reynolds, *A Link to the Past: Engaging Students in the Study of History* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2004).
4. “The Perfect Corpse,” WGBH Boston Video, 2006 (can be found on PBS.org)
5. William Bruce and Jean Bruce, *Mindtronics* (Hometree Media, 2009), available on Amazon.com.
6. Spencer Kagan and Miguel Kagan, *Kagan Cooperative Learning* (Kagan Publishing, 2009).

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Alex Katz, *Washington Crossing the Delaware: American Flag, Boat, and Soldiers* (detail), 1961. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection