



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2012 Volume II: The Art of Biography

The Biographies of April 1861

Curriculum Unit 12.02.10
by Jesus Tirado

Rationale/Objectives

My inspiration for this unit comes from a belief that history can not only inform us about the past but also enrich our own lives. Through research, analysis and comprehension, history explains the forces that shape our society. Students can especially benefit from an in-depth examination of a specific period. Knowing a lot about a little can be at least as rewarding as knowing a little about a lot. Focusing on the first two weeks of April 1861, a short but significant time period, will give students this opportunity.

Many of my students themselves experience violence and the aftermath of violence in their lives, families and neighborhoods and the local newspapers bear this out. History can help them understand that they are not alone. April 1861 will serve as a case study to open that door. Through it, my students will be able to connect with the emotional turmoil of the American Civil War, drawing from the lessons for today.

Overview

After working on some of Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs, one of my students commented that the images looked like the streets of New Haven. While I was saddened by the statement, I recognize now that the student had found a connection in the past to her own life. That experience inspired this unit. The Civil War itself presents many human stories for my students to connect with ranging from sacrifice, violence to recovery and redemption

The Civil War still looms over our nation, yet its origins and protagonists remain a mystery to most of us. Taking on the entire conflict in a survey class would not allow the depth and understanding that is intended for this unit. But focusing on the first half of April 1861, two weeks, can illustrate all of the major causes that led to the conflict, thereby, providing students with key insight into the entire Civil War. This would not be possible given the time limitations in a survey course. This in-depth approach also aligns itself with the goals and standards of the Common Core especially: Key Ideas and Details, Strands 2 and 3, Integration and Knowledge, Strand 9, and Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, Strand 10.

This project occurs in three distinct phases: the first involves compiling the day-by-day events of early April 1861, the second entails identifying these themes and causes of the Civil War suggested by these events, and the last requires students to evoke personalities that they uncovered in their research through role-playing in class. They will write up their own daily reflections and journals as they do this. Their work then becomes the collective biography of these critical weeks, from which students will examine the origins of violence at another time in our history while making comparisons with their own experiences.

The Civil War was fought far from New Haven. The only direct reminders are the war memorials at the intersections of York, Broadway and Elm Streets and on top of East Rock. Through this unit, my students will find meanings in these monuments, just as they did with Brady's photographs and the streets of New Haven. What makes a crisis? who is a leader, an instigator, or a destroyer? What are critical turning points? What is a war and what are the effects of war? These questions will emerge from our unit and force our students to think about the world they live in and how they interact with it.

Assignment and Goals

Students will investigate the daily events of early April 1861 through the online archives available from the New York Times and other papers of that era. They will then post relevant articles in the classroom to form a timeline. From these students will gain an understanding of how many different factors came together to provoke the firing at Fort Sumter. As the students proceed, they will begin to draw larger conclusions about how conflicts originate and what trends and themes bring conflicts about. The major themes of the Civil War they identify will probably include:

Abolitionism

Secessionism

State's Rights

Westward Expansion

Profitability of Slavery

Political Realignment and the Birth of the Republican Party

Emergence of Urban Areas and Industrialization

After the outline completing the timeline and extracting the extraction of themes, groups of students will explore and trace the origins of and leaders involved with and figures of each movement. Students will break out of April 1861 for this portion, taking their investigations as far back in time as they think appropriate and investigate the whole theme and how it developed. They will need to discuss and discover the ideological origins, the particular points and ideas they argued in Antebellum America and the people who pushed and promoted it in America. For instance, the groups investigating State's Rights and Westward Expansion will find Stephen Douglas as a major advocate of that movement and they might debate whether the crisis starts with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Great Compromise of 1850, or the Kansas-Nebraska Acts of 1854. and

"Bleeding Kansas". They can also reach back into the past and connect such individuals as John C. Calhoun, Stephen A. Douglas, or John Brown to these events and their aftermaths to the ideas of State's Rights. This segment drives students to see The students will discover, through this exercise, show their particular theme pushes the nation towards the Civil War.

This part of the project offers students the chance become historians. The task of researching the origins and evolution of a particular set of trends will demand a lot from the students, not only in terms of their research capacity, but also their ability to apply and test their analytical conclusions. Choosing Lincoln over John Brown to represent Abolitionists, for example, would force an argument about the nature of the movement. Students will be engaging the material in a compelling and comprehensible way that will advance their understanding of history as they debate who to include and who to omit.

After making these decisions, students will take part in a simulation which will return them to the initial point of contact with early April 1861. Having examined a particular long-term cause of the Civil War, each team will role-play the leaders they've identified, interacting both with the simulated leaders of other causes and with the day-to-day events of those critical weeks. These activities will build empathy, higher order thinking, and a deep understanding of the crises the United States experienced at the time. The crises will unite divergent learning that occurred through the research into a single classroom experience.

Resources

The best resource available for this unit is the New York Times website. It has an extensive archive collection that can be accessed by day, month or theme so that you can decide how your class will approach early April 1861. Students with independence and ability can take on the day-by-day searches of the Times while other students may need more guidance.

The Library of Congress also has a website, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, which includes newspapers from all over the country. These can be used to supplement the Times, especially with a view to providing regional perspectives on the events of April, 1861

One area I am concerned with is how to tie April 1861 to the rest of the Civil War. Film can be great in doing this given the limited time available. Some great ones are *Glory*, *Gods and Generals* and *Gettysburg* . Ken Burns' famous documentary *The Civil War* would be too long in its entirety but parts of it would help connect students and the work they've done to the rest of the conflict.

Structure of the Lessons/Lesson Plans

The lessons that follow are intended to provide more specific suggestions as to how this unit might meet your own students' need and push their knowledge and thinking. Each gives an outline, objectives, resources needed, student learning goals and even a few differentiations. There is considerable flexibility, though, for adapting this unit to particular needs.

Lesson One

The goal of this lesson is to introduce students to the research they will have to do with the New York Times website, keeping in mind the goal of building an outline of April 1861. Be sure to be familiar with the site yourself, but also with the background of the events reported there. New Haven Standards emphasize a general knowledge of the antebellum period but of course, this can differ teacher to teacher. It is also important to keep in mind what your students know, have seen and might need to be reminded that they know. Some Objectives you can use:

Students will learn how to research the NY Times Archive

Students will learn what made April 1861 an important month

This lesson also aligns with the "*Key Ideas and Details*" and "*Integration of knowledge and Ideas*" Common Core designed Standards.

Students will definitely need a computer lab in order to access and explore the Times Archives. They should be instructed to research April 1861 in chronological order, pulling several articles from each day. Timing will depend on how much help your students need navigating the site. Remind them to be searching for articles that can be printed out and displayed in the classroom.

Differentiation Strategies

One simple strategy might be to provide students with a list of questions to help them determine what articles are worth displaying. It would ask them to summarize each article, specifying what makes it important enough to include in the classroom timeline. Helping students be selective will ensure that the best articles are included, while still giving your students control over the timeline's contents.

Another strategy can be to put students in groups to look for articles. This might benefit a classroom of diverse capabilities and limited resources. Students could divide up several tasks or roles as they research the articles from the website. Some sample roles might be:

Web Surfer – In charge of leading the search for articles, works with Controller.

Controller – Keeps students on task and make sure they read the whole article.

Archivist – Asks the students to write down their reasons why the article is important.

Recorder – Makes sure that students are getting a diverse range of articles for every day they cover.

These roles are just ideas for what you can do with your students. You will know how to get your students working and enjoying the activity.

Lesson Two

After the articles have been collected, the next lesson gets students organizing the information they've collected. There are several ways of going about this, but I would divide the students into pairs or groups of 3 so that each date – between April 1st and 15th, can have one dedicated group. Each group will be given the articles that the class collected for a specific day and a large piece of butcher paper. Each will then organize

the articles on the paper in an order ranging from most to least important with the intention of presenting this to the class on a gallery walk. Gallery walks will require that the class visit each piece of butcher paper and have each group explain why they ranked the articles as they did. At the end of the Gallery walk, all 15 days before the firing on Fort Sumter will have been ordered and explained. Students will also benefit from a debrief exercise that will help inform the organization around the timeline.

This lesson's goal focuses on organizing the data to help the students distill the causes of the Civil War. Each group would also get the chance to organize and take ownership over a day of April 1861. Some objectives might be:

Students will be able to classify the important events of April 1861

Students will be able to differentiate the important events of April 1861

The debrief helps students organize their thoughts and what they notice about the articles. Teachers should point this out after the debrief is written.

Differentiation Strategies

The best strategies for differentiation will be organizing groups to build the exhibits for each of the dates. Make sure that you are balancing the different skill levels within the group. That will help ensure that each date gets a proper exhibit.

Another key strategy will be providing students with ideas on how to rank the articles. Remind them that the class is working towards the start of the Civil War so provide them questions like:

Does this make war more likely? Less Likely? Neither? Know why.

Assign a student within each group to ask these questions as they order the articles. Students will require a constant reminder to be thinking about the impending war and how the events of their date impact the road to war.

Lesson Three

For this lesson, start with debriefs to gather the students' ideas about the overall trends. This list should go on the board. As students start to see particular trends, you should start trying to align them with the larger trends that started the Civil War. Some, like Abolitionism and Secessionism, will be more obvious than others, like Emergence of Urban Areas and Industrialization and Westward Expansion. As the students generate these themes, start grouping so that every theme will be covered. After these themes emerge, there are some possible digressions that are possible:

One possibility would be to give each group string and have them connect from April 1st to the 15th all the articles that they believe are important to their theme. This will involve lots of choice and decision-making as the groups will be choosing the most important articles for their trend.

Another option would be to let students build their own timelines by taking copies of the timeline articles and building thematic-lines. You can hang these up around the classroom and have students write up an explanation of the important events in April related to their theme. Instead of a gallery walk, groups will write summaries and questions that they have about their theme. The questions will then be used in Lesson 4.

Some possible Objectives might be:

Students will be able to create a history of the different themes of April 1861

Students will be able to develop a history of their groups' history in April 1861

Differentiation Strategies

Once again, the best differentiation will be careful group selection. Other than that, be mindful of what theme you are assigning to each group. Given that the different themes have a variety of difficulty levels, it is imperative that you make sure the stronger groups get the more difficult themes and the weaker groups get the weaker themes. This will save a lot of frustration and help the class move through the different themes and prepare the simulation.

Lesson Four

At this point, all groups and themes are assigned and students will be ready to research the different themes. An important resource here is the library and the internet. Once in the library, give the students the assignment of researching the background of the movement. Some students will need more guidance than others. Providing a list of questions and requirements will help drive students' work forward and keep them on task. Another form of guidance will be letting students know what the end product will be. At this point students will be working towards the final simulation. They need to be investigating their theme, but also looking up people associated with it. Remind the groups that each of them will take on a persona that they discover in their research.

Students need to know that they are expected to take on personal traits of the individuals they are playing as the whole participates in the Simulation. Some groups will have an easier time than others picking people who exemplify their theme. Talk to students about how they should approach the task. It's important that they become informed about the theme's history and ideology along with the people.

Different assessments are possible at this time. As students work, you can fill out different worksheets that ask them questions about their people and theme. Another possibility is to ask the group to write a group essay about their theme and the people associated with it. I strongly recommend doing at least character sketches about their individual figures that tie in with the groups' research. Questions like: How does your theme influence your person's life? And what would your person say about another theme? Will help guide the groups' thinking about how to research and compile information.

Differentiation Strategies

Some students will benefit from seeing the big picture so they can understand how their work informs the simulation. Guiding questions and asking them to distill personal information would be useful as well. One exercise that might help would be to ask students to create a facebook profile for their person. This will help them imagine who their person was and how they can learn to channel them.

Lesson Five

This is the simulation. Your students should each have a character, theme history and their notebooks to be ready. Prepare them by telling that they will be reliving the events of April 1861. For students who need motivation, you can use props and name tags that will help them capture their persona. The simulation will work through a cycle of newspaper article distribution which the students will read, a discussion of how they feel and why the events are important will occur, and finally followed by reflective journal writing where the students, as their people, will write down their thoughts and ideas about the events of that day. To prepare, I would sit students in a circle and write, April 1, 1861 on the Board. Remind students of the work they've done and how it connects to the simulation. Hanging up the timeline and theme-lines may also help to provide context and connect the simulation to the work they've previously done.

The different cycles are important as they will help the students to progress through the days of April 1861. As you hand out articles, you can either select one from each date or a group of them. After the students read them over, ask them what they think and encourage them to respond to each other and speak as their characters. Make sure that you record parts of this conversation on the board with key themes. After the conversation, ask students to record their persona's thoughts and ideas from that date. You will collect this and compile it over the whole period of April 1861.

As you collect and compile the writings, your students will be writing the biography of April 1861. Students' writing will be variable at this point. Some will strongly embody the characteristics of their personas while others will be uncomfortable doing so or have difficulty with this kind of thinking. The idea is that the variable activities in the simulation, the reading, the discussion and the writing, will help students put themselves in the shoes of their personas and movements. Without this multifaceted approach to the simulation, more students will struggle to grasp the thinking necessary to participate fully and gain the knowledge and learning that comes with it.

Some possible objectives include:

Students will be able to interpret the Events of April 1861 through historical perspectives.

Students will be able to reconstruct the crises of April 1861.

Students will be able to assess the stresses of April 1861 through historical simulation.

Lesson Six

This lesson debriefs students from the work they've done and connections they have made. Start this class with an activity like a 3-2-1. Ask students to write down three things they learned about the war, two questions they still have, and one thing they think the Civil War can still teach us about our own world. These questions are meant to start conversations in the class. Sharing will help students explain what the Civil War taught them and what they still want to learn about the conflict. A KWL Chart might also help students gather their thoughts and begin a conversation about the Civil War.

After getting the conversation started, there are a few ways to continue it. After the discussion, students could be assigned to write a letter to their persona in April 1861. This letter could either be a warning, what they should do or not do to avoid the coming war. Students might also tell their persona what they learned from them and their actions.

To change the conversation, might be beneficial to show a few clips from movies like *Glory* or *Gettysburg*, to show students what the fighting was like. This would present students with the dilemma of whether or not fighting is worthwhile or justified. It would prompt students to think about the violence that they see in their own lives. If they can start to push their own understanding, they will to see their world differently. I am not a fan of didactic teaching, but it can be helpful for students to hear about the possible connections.

Some possible objectives for the class might be:

Students will be able to reflect on the start of the Civil War
Students will be able to reframe the Civil War

Assessment

The main assessment of the project will be the mini-biographies that students write at the end of the simulation. This is very important as it will amass all the work the students have done and challenge them personally to connect with the material. I would also make several mini-assessments and check-ins of the different phases. This will help you keep track of students' progress and learning as they go through the project.

To grade the final written assessment, I would recommend using a broad definitions and categories. This will differentiate the way students are assessed and give them multiple avenues for success so that you aren't relying on one or two assignments to determine their entire grade. Pass out all the rubrics before starting the project so that students will know what they are being graded on and expected to do. I would also distribute a projected timeline to help students not feel overwhelmed about this project.

Notes

Burns, Ken. *The Civil War*. DVD. 2004. USA: PBS, 2011.

Gienapp, William. *Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War: A Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Goodheart, Adam M. *1861: The Civil War Awakening*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.

Goodwin, Doris K. *Team of Rivals*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.

McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Turtledove, Harry. *The Guns of the South*. New York: Del Rey Books, 1992.

Willmott, Kevin. *CSA: The Confederate States of America*. DVD. 2006. USA: IFC, 2006.

Annotated Bibliography

The readings selected above outline a good introduction to the different facets of the Civil War and are intended to provide you with a good background on the conflict. McPherson's work stands as a good guide to the long term conflicts that led to the Civil War. In it, you will find lots of background information on the people, movements and crises that led our nation to the Civil War.

Gienapp's and Goodwin's books are about Lincoln and the moments Lincoln experienced as this nation was moved to war. Gienapp's work is especially useful, as it delves into how Lincoln, as first a President-Elect and later a President, responded, or did not respond, to the different crises of Antebellum America, while offering multiple perspectives into the conflicts of the time. Goodheart's work can also be included in this group as it explores what led to April 1861 being a critical moment in American History,

For different perspectives on the Civil War refer to Turtledove's and Wilmot's fictional works. Both ask the question what if the South had won the war and such a question is useful when thinking about the Simulation in this unit. If your students finished the simulation and particularly enjoyed it, you might "re-do" the simulation changing some critical points. Turtledove and Wilmot offer some creative re-imaginings of this critical moment that can help you and your students also reimagine this time.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>