

**Storypath:
Why Is this Approach Engaging,
Especially for
Low Socio-Economic Students?**

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**Storypath: Freedom Summer can be downloaded from:
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“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

(Kipling, 1994)

“Dr. Martin Luther King personally called me to participate in the March on Washington,” stated ten-year-old Lee as he explained how he travelled to Washington, DC back in August 1963 to be part of this historic event. Lee had just placed himself in the civil rights experience and imagined himself at the side of Dr. Martin Luther King as he marched to the Washington Monument. Lee drew on his experience of observing King’s birthday each January and watching King’s “I Have a Dream” speech on television. Immersed in his role as a civil rights worker, Lee very much wanted to share his imagined experience with his classmates when the group was discussing the March on Washington. As the story moved forward Lee was engaged in considerable research and writing—tasks Lee often found tedious and boring. What happened to Lee and his classmates to cause them to engage in the hard work of learning about the Civil Rights Movement—historic times seemingly long ago and remote--and invest in researching and writing with knowledge and meaning about this time period?

Teaching for meaning means engaging learners

Over the past dozen years my colleague, Dr. Bronwyn Cole, and I have co-taught social studies units with classroom teachers in city schools, such as Lee’s, in low socio-economic, culturally diverse areas, both in Seattle, USA and Sydney, Australia. Our work builds on the Scottish Storyline (Bell, 2003) and focuses on social studies learning. The questions of: How do we get children to engage in making meaning? how do we know that children are making meaning? and, how do we know that education is helping children make sense of such historic events? have been the focus of our work in these traditionally more challenging classrooms. What we have found is that students participating in social studies units constructed around a narrative become engaged in learning in ways not seen with more conventional teaching approaches. Once engaged, a state that we define as cognitive (thinking), affective (emotional), and operative (doing) involvement in classroom work, students are more likely to construct meaning and find

purpose in their learning. What evidence do we have that this is occurring in these classrooms and why does it happen?

Activating prior knowledge and developing the characters through which to explore knowledge

Following one class through such an experience highlights how students become meaningfully engaged in powerful learning. In this example students are introduced to the Civil Rights Movement. This topic is introduced with a speech calling for volunteers to come to Mississippi to work in Freedom Schools and help prepare citizens to register to vote. The speech sets the context for the story and provides foundational information for student learning. Following the speech, the teacher activates students' prior knowledge about this time in history by discussing people's attitudes about civil rights at that time, the differences among people of different ethnic backgrounds and regions of the United States, how personal experiences can shape attitudes, and life in the 1960s. Surprisingly students actually have quite a bit of information about this time from having watched old television programs and movies set in this time period and having listened to rock and roll music of the 1960s. Of course they have misconceptions too and as the unit unfolds, these misconceptions are challenged and students come to new understandings of the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement.

Once the discussion is underway, the teacher introduces students to the task of creating characters, the people who were civil rights workers in the summer of 1964—characters such as Lee's who was a good friend of Dr. Martin Luther King. To engage students in the process the teacher asks such questions as:

- What kind of people might want to participate in registering voters in Mississippi?
- What jobs might they have that would cause them to participate in this activity?
- What would the person value?
- What kind of person could arrange to take a summer away to do this?
- Would there be any risks in participating? Risks at home? Risks in Mississippi?
- What kind of events might have happened in the person's life to make him or her want to participate?

As this discussion progresses, the teacher is weaving in historical information to scaffold the discussion while creating a “need to know” about this time period.

Following this discussion and brainstorming, each student creates both a visual representation and biography of a character and then introduces the character to the class. Through the character creation and introduction, the teacher’s role is to probe and respond to students’ understandings in order to lead them to new information and perspectives. Further, encouraging classmates to ask questions during the introduction of the characters develops ownership for the story and engages students in learning about the Civil Rights Movement, thus solidly launching the unit. Introducing the topic in this way is based on the belief that students learn best when they are active participants in their own learning and their efforts to understand are placed at the center of the educational enterprise.

Setting the scene for grounding new knowledge

To deepen students’ understanding of time and place, the teacher introduces the concept of planning a trip from their home to Jackson, Mississippi, where they will register voters. Students are arranged in groups to research and prepare information about travel routes, transportation, food, suitable clothing, and leisure activities appropriate to the 1960s. These activities require students to become familiar with this time period and give purpose and direction to their research. As their research is shared with the class, it is posted in the classroom to create an ambiance of the 1960s. Students interview older family members and bring to class old yearbooks, photos, music, and other artifacts.

Establishing a sense of place through the everyday activities of life in the 1960s grounds the story in the familiar. Guiding the discussion, students examined life experiences related to music, food, clothing, and television. Students constructed visual representation of life in the 1960s calls upon their cooperative learning skills as well as their artistic talents to create believable and realistic artifacts for the story. To further connect students to the story, word banks are created, developing and extending students’ vocabulary related to the new information they are learning.

The story is compelling; having a role in the story creates the lived experience. Too often the Civil Rights Movement is a social studies topic that is far removed from students' own experiences. Traditionally, topics such as these are organized around report writing where students write about Martin Luther King and other notable civil rights leaders. The experience is often sterile and students rarely connect to the human challenges faced by ordinary people willing to risk everything for the right of African Americans to vote. Issues of justice and equity are central to the social studies curriculum and students care deeply about what is fair and just. Thus, immersing students in the life and times of the civil rights workers brings this history to life in a meaningful way.

Confronting critical incidents and applying what we know to our daily lives

The plot or critical incidents are the events that happened in the summer of 1964. The teacher narrates the story to provide necessary background information and then introduces students to their arrival in Oxford, Ohio—a stop-off destination where they receive information about living in segregated communities and the work of the Freedom Schools. Bob Moses tells them: “Don't come to Mississippi this summer to save the Mississippi Negro. Only come if you understand, really understand, that his freedom and yours are one.... Maybe we're not going to get very many people registered this summer. Maybe, even, we're not going to get very many people into freedom schools. Maybe all we're going to do is live through this summer. In Mississippi, that will be so much!” (Cagin & Dray, 1988, p. 30).

In role, students review the “Security Bulletin” (McGuire, 2002, pp. 44-45) which includes such directives as not travelling alone or in a car at night, not carrying information about local contacts, knowing the roads in and out of town and not standing in a doorway at night with the light at your back. This primary document from Freedom Summer comes alive as students prepare for life as civil rights workers in Jackson, Mississippi. Imagining the safety issues and the reasons behind them gives students an appreciation for the risks people were willing to endure to ensure that citizens of the United States had the opportunity to vote. A number of other critical incidents are

introduced based on the historical record. Students are refused service at a restaurant because they are outsiders and through role-play must decide how to respond. Upon arriving in Jackson, they learn of the news bulletin of the three civil rights workers disappearing. The civil rights workers, in character, must decide if they will stay or return home. Excerpts from the video series, “Eyes on the Prize” (1986), add another dimension to the critical incidents and highlights for students that ordinary people did extraordinary things. As the critical events unfold, students are asked in character to keep a journal to record their responses to the incidents. This activity serves two important purposes: it provides students opportunities for personal reflection and the teacher with an assessment tool to evaluate students’ understanding of the events and how students make meaning of those events.

The events of Freedom Summer can be explored both in role and out of role depending on the learning needs of students. Providing time to discuss the role-plays out of character allows students to raise questions and reflect on their characters’ responses. The Freedom School episode is designed to increase students’ understanding of life in Mississippi in the 1960s. Examining the voter registration form raises important questions about the real purpose of the form and students come to understand how the form can be used to restrict a person’s right to vote. Students’ sense of injustice is real because they have grappled with the issues through their characters. To reinforce these understandings, students engage in such activities as creating “Get out the vote” posters, writing persuasive speeches for voter registration, and researching African American history. Students are eager to do this research because they have engaged in the cognitive, affective and operative aspects of the topic. They lived the experience through the story.

All stories need an ending. In this unit the story concludes with the students coming together to celebrate the register-to-vote campaign and the contributions of the civil rights workers. Songs of the Civil Rights Movement are sung and students like Lee, who often find school disempowering and a place to endure, share their reflections on the experiences with enthusiasm. Indeed, these activities, role-plays, and discussions have the

added value of fostering a disposition towards voting as a right we should exercise as citizens.

The Storypath teaching approach

The experience described is a teaching approach known as Storypath or the Scottish Storyline Method. Lee's experience in the Freedom Summer Storypath was not unique amongst his classmates. Nor was it unique in classrooms and schools similar to Lee's. Over the past dozen years, Storypath units have been taught by classroom teachers in city schools in low socio-economic, culturally diverse areas, both in Seattle and Sydney. What Dr. Cole and I have found is that in these traditionally more challenging classrooms, students become engaged in learning in ways not seen with more conventional teaching approaches. Consistently, we find the students asking, "Is this real?", "Is this really happening?" or "Are we really going to do this?". Why do Storypath units engage the traditionally disengaged students in making meaning and applying learning beyond the school gates?

Using narrative to structure learning and engage learners

In a Storypath a narrative is constructed to connect subject matter for a topic, in this case the study of the Civil Rights Movement, and to create a sequence of learning experiences. Students participate in the experiences from the viewpoint of a character in the narrative, engaging in role-plays that tread a path between imagination and reality to construct personal understandings about the subject matter. Employing a narrative to organize learning in this way is educationally useful. The underlying story conveys information and describes events and actions relevant to the topic whilst engaging the students' emotions, a defining component of substantive student engagement. As Kieran Egan explains, "The story form is a cultural universal; everyone everywhere enjoys stories. The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience" (Egan, 1988, p.2). Students make sense of new knowledge as they engage with the narrative of the Storypath.

Making meaning by treading a path between reality and imagination

Participating in the story through the creation of realistic characters allows students to imagine a time and place and how characters might respond. It connects what they already know and understand to the new learning. Imagination in learning is a key factor in distinguishing education that results in just “knowing a lot,” a cognitive approach, and “ensuring that students engage” and are able to use knowledge in meaningful ways, an educational approach that focuses on both cognitive and affective dimensions (Egan, 2001). Students typically add something of themselves when they construct their characters. In Lee’s situation, he was recalling the television clips he had seen of the March on Washington. When Lee eagerly volunteered that he had been at the side of Martin Luther King and explained how King had “personally” contacted him and asked him to participate, it was clear he had made a personal connection with the story and was constructing meaning from the experience.

Responding to critical incidents in daily lives

Planned "critical incidents" are strategically introduced in a Storypath to challenge students’ previous experiences and knowledge, and to engage them in inquiry and problem solving. Incident resolutions enable students to construct new, deeper understandings and to make decisions about their social, cultural and environmental world – their daily lives. In the study of the Civil Rights Movement, students were able to talk about racism of the 1960s and connect to current events.

Moreover, students develop ownership and investment in learning as they co-construct with the teacher, and via the characters, experiences that provide concrete contexts for developing a wide range of understandings, skills and dispositions. The teacher’s role here is salient. It is not a passive one of merely accepting student responses. Rather, the teacher has a responsibility to acknowledge, probe, respond to and challenge the students’ understandings in order to lead them to new information, perspectives, investigations, and answers. Because the students are exploring these ideas through their constructed setting and characters, they have a context in which to safely share their preconceived notions (Cole & McGuire, 2001).

The use of collaborative groups, in this case the civil rights workers, serves as a vehicle for enabling students to explore ideas and perspectives, and to tackle problems as a group. The Storypath structure gives students opportunities to interact with their peers, clarify their own thinking and reach conclusions and solutions that they may not have reached alone and or without the teacher's guidance. The Storypath venue allows for students to raise issues that may only bubble below the surface in a more traditional approach to teaching about the Civil Rights Movement. Students want to talk about these issues because they are aware of race, and society's response to racial issues (Perry, 2000). They hear family and friends talk about race—both implicitly and explicitly. Having a context to talk about race and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement through the characters that are created provides a strong foundation on which to build students' understanding for these complex historical issues. It is an important building block for students on the road to becoming critical and engaged citizens and of course that is a fundamental purpose of social studies.

Conclusion

Constructivist teaching and learning approaches encourage students to have ownership of their learning which is critically important for students, especially those of low socio-economic backgrounds or those who are struggling in school (Haberman, 1991). As students experience a Storypath, they develop ownership and engage in learning as they co-construct with the teacher, and via the characters, a story that provides a familiar context for developing a wide range of understandings, skills and dispositions. By participating in the story, students make personal connections and use their imaginations to develop meaningful understandings. The application of the learning through the resolution of critical incidents brings relevance and purpose to the students' learning. These factors working in concert with one another to make this approach a powerful teaching tool and students are the beneficiaries.

Storypath
The Civil Rights Movement: Freedom Summer*
Episodes

Episode 1: *Creating the Characters*

The Civil Rights Workers

Students learn about the Civil Rights Movement and then create civil rights workers.



Episode 2: *Creating the Setting*

Preparing for the trip

Students prepare for the trip to Oxford, Ohio (for training) and Jackson, Mississippi and learn about life in the 1960s.



Episode 3: *Critical Incident*

Service Refused

Students participate in training for the Mississippi Summer Project and then respond to the civil rights workers being refused service at a restaurant.



Episode 4: *Critical Incident*

Stay or Leave

Students learn of the deaths of civil rights workers and must decide if they will stay and continue to register voters or return home.



Episode 5: *Building Context*

The Freedom school

Students plan how they will convince the local people to register to vote and make presentations about voting and citizenship.



Episode 6: *Concluding Event*

The Farewell

The summer is coming to an end and the civil rights workers prepare to return home. A farewell gathering is planned.



Synthesis Activities

Assessment

Students demonstrate learning by completing a synthesis activity.

* A complete copy of the unit can be downloaded from <http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/mmcguire/civil.html>

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