

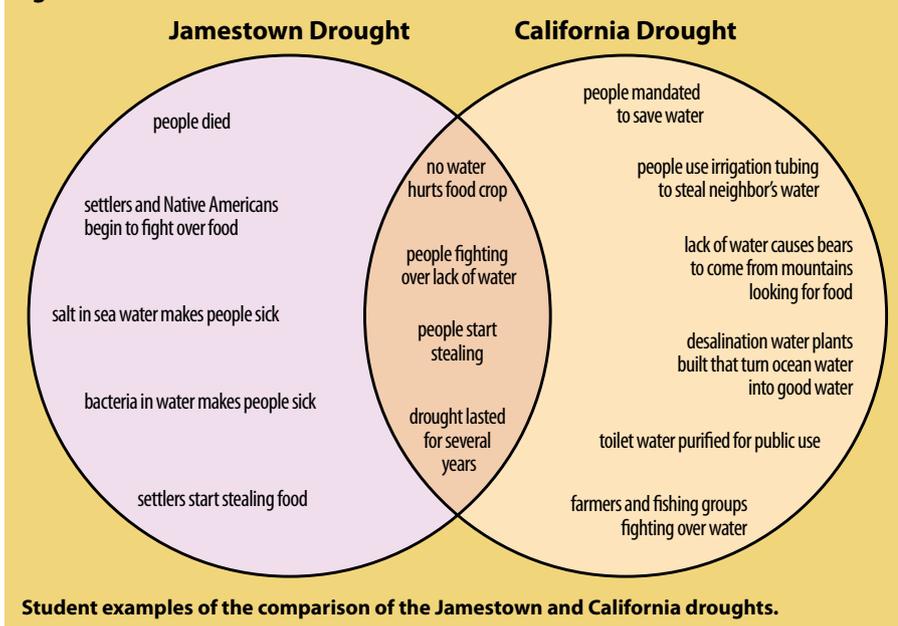
From Past to Present: Taking Informed Action

Tracy Middleton

Students often ask, “Why do we have to study history?” and teachers struggle with how to answer. If our purpose is to simply teach students about historical events, then Dimension Four of the *College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, “Communicating conclusions and taking informed action,” seems unapproachable. However, if our purpose for teaching social studies is to give students the skills to connect the past to the present and thereby be more effective citizens, then Dimension Four is highly relevant and crucial. Drawing conclusions and taking informed action gives purpose to studying history. Students are naturally curious and come to middle school asking questions, and teaching them how to take informed action helps them become engaged citizens. As social studies teachers, we need to help students understand how choices people made in the past have relevance today. By teaching students how to analyze past events and apply them to current events, we give students the meaning behind social studies.¹

explained the drought conditions experienced by the first settlers in Virginia. They also learned how the drought affected the settlers’ mortality rate, as well as the relationship between the settlers and the Native Americans.² Some students spontaneously began to transfer their knowledge of drought in Jamestown to the drought they were experiencing in California. It was then that I realized that I could give my students the opportunity to take informed action on the conclusions they were starting to draw for themselves. I pulled several articles on the California drought from Newsela.³ Students read and analyzed the articles and then came up with different ways in which they could save water. I asked students to compare the two droughts (see Figure 1), and after students discussed their findings, they took those ideas and created public service announcements, which were aired on the school television network.

Figure 1



A Teacher’s Dilemma

What does informed action look like in an 8th grade U.S. history classroom? How do I have my students take informed action on events that occurred centuries ago? That was my dilemma. It

was during my unit on Jamestown that I understood how I could meaningfully apply Dimension Four in my U.S. history classes.

While studying Jamestown, students analyzed primary documents that

Tackling the Problem of Relevance

In teaching social studies, it is not always easy finding relevance in events that occurred a long time ago, especially when teaching ancient world history. When teaching ancient civilizations, for example, it is important to think about the big picture. Consider this question: Are you teaching about rulers or about leadership? If your focus is teaching about rulers, students will struggle with finding connections when learning about dead rulers. However, if you are teaching about leadership and using ancient rulers as examples, students will find

relevance as they apply what they learn about leadership to current leaders.

Another way to help students find relevance in studying social studies is to link historical events to current events. For example, when studying the black plague, you could compare it to the Zika virus that threatens people's health today. After students have compared the two, and examined population movements and the spread of disease, you could take the lesson further and ask students to come up with ways in which to protect themselves and others against the virus.

The point of Dimension Four of the C3 Framework is to have students take informed action. Both words in that phrase are crucial: students need to be well informed by a thorough analysis of credible sources, but they also need to connect their conclusions to the context in which they live. Students can communicate their conclusions in a variety of ways such as creating a public service announcement (PSA) or an infographic. Having students create a product that will be shared with their community gives more relevance to the assignment because they are creating something that will be seen by others. A PSA on how to prevent the Zika virus, for example, could be aired on a school's television network and an infographic on protections against the virus could be published in the school or community newspaper. Finding a larger audience could be as simple as sharing information with students in another classroom. When students know their learning is important enough to share with a larger audience, they find relevance in studying historical events. Those actions can be as simple as starting a club, crafting a classroom position, and circulating a petition to more complex actions such as bringing stakeholders together for a forum and creating a community education pamphlet.

Connecting the Past to the Present

When choosing historical events in which students can take informed action, the first step is to create a compelling

question that transcends time. For example, in my Jamestown unit, the compelling question was, "Does survival lead to conflict?" In studying the drought at Jamestown, students looked at the conflict that occurred due to a lack of potable water. In that situation, students understood that the settlers' need for survival did lead to conflict with one another and between them and the Native Americans.

Once students reach a conclusion to the compelling question regarding the historical event, you can bring them to the present by introducing them to a similar current event. In my classroom, the 8th graders made their own connection to the current California drought because it was an issue their families currently faced. However, automatic connections may not always occur, and sometimes, the teacher will need to help students make the connection between past and present. For example, in a lesson on abolition, students learn about the actions of abolitionists, but the teacher may have to help them make the connection between fighting slavery in the antebellum period and the contemporary issue of human trafficking.

Once students see a connection between a historical event and a current event, the next step is to guide them to research the current event. Because my social studies classes are only 45 minutes, I chose to provide students with a variety of articles on the California drought. If you are teaching in an extended block, you may want students to research the issue on their own with guidance.

Once students have researched the current event, have them compare the two events to look for similarities, and then bring them back to the compelling question. When revisiting the compelling question, ask students to draw a conclusion based on their research. In my unit, after comparing the drought in Jamestown to the current one in California, students realized that the present California drought was not significant enough for survival to lead to conflict. However, they also realized that if the drought continued, it could lead to

serious conflict as the dwindling water supply reached a critical point.

Taking Informed Action

After students have made the connection between the past and the present and researched the current event, it is time for them to take informed action. In this unit, I wanted students to learn how to create a public service announcement, so that was the means by which they communicated their conclusion. Before students create their PSAs, I gave them the PSA Activity and Questions sheet from Read, Write, Think.⁴ Then I showed them a variety of PSAs from the Ad Council website, and had students analyze them and find the following components listed on the PSA Activity and Questions sheet:⁵

- the main message and whether or not it persuaded them,
- how the producers used words and pictures to get across their message,
- how actors portrayed the messages, and if and how voiceovers were used, and
- determine what changes they would make if they were creating a PSA on the same topic.

Once students view and analyze a few ads, they can begin the work of creating their own PSA. In my class, I chose to have students create a video; however, I realize that not all classrooms are equipped with the necessary technology for creating and editing videos. If you don't have the technology, then the PSA can take the form of a radio announcement that can be read over the school PA system, and the Ad Council has examples of radio announcements for students to use. Other options include flyers, brochures, and editorials for both the school and community newspapers.

In order for students to think through the message they want to convey, I suggest giving them a graphic organizer to force them to think through their mes-

Figure 2

Define the Problem	Determine Alternatives	Decide Which Alternatives Best Solve the Problem

sage. I found the P.A.C.E.D. Economic Decision Making Template on the EconEdlink website; however, it didn't completely suit my needs so I modified it.⁶ Figure 2 shows the modified graphic organizer with the three areas I wanted my students to focus on when crafting the message of their PSAs.

After students have completed the graphic organizer, they can begin sketching out their PSA. Once they have their idea sketched, they can begin looking for compelling images to include and/or create videos that support their issue.⁷ There were two challenges I faced in having students create PSAs. The first was having students limit the video to between 30 and 60 seconds. Eighth graders want to tell a bigger story than 30–60 seconds will allow; however, having them script out the announcement before filming helped solve that problem. The second challenge was assessing students' PSAs. Getting the videos off of individual iPads and into one place so I could assess them was a challenge; however, assessing the videos became easier once I began asking students to complete a self-assessment/reflection in Google Classroom upon completion of their videos. In the self-assessment, I asked students to reflect on the process of creating the PSA, the strength of their message, and the impact they think their message will have on viewers. In this issue of *Social Education*, Mary Ellen Daneels provides further guidelines for designing and assessing informed action in her article, *Thermometers to*

Thermostats: Designing and Assessing Informed Action.

Lessons Learned

For the past three years, I have worked with Dimensions One through Three of the C3 Framework, but struggled with Dimension Four. From my experiences engaging with colleagues through the C3 Literacy Collaborative, I now understand that the way to apply taking informed action to my U.S. history curriculum is by teaching students to transfer their learning of historical events to current events. The tradeoff, I have realized, is that to engage students in a full-fledged inquiry incorporating all four dimensions of the C3 Framework means I cannot teach all of the social studies content standards. I learned to embrace that reality because in the end, I know that the skills I am teaching my students in critical thinking, argumentation, and evidence-seeking will carry them further in their college, career, and civic life than teaching them facts about dead people and historical events. Also, when I realized that I was unable to cover all of the California History/Social Science content standards, I began to self-advocate and explain to my principal and district leadership that it is more important to teach students how to ask questions, develop hypotheses, and provide evidence to support those hypotheses, which will not only benefit them in high school and college social studies, but also transfers to other subject areas like science and language arts. Additionally, teaching students these skills helps them

become engaged and civic-minded citizens whose actions have a far-reaching effect on the future. I shared my successes with other social studies educators through the C3 Literacy Collaborative and also learned about other C3 proponents across the nation working to create meaningful and practical ways to help students connect with social studies. 🌍

Notes

1. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004)
2. The documents used in this unit came from The DBQ Project's Mini-Q titled, "Early Jamestown: Why Did so Many Colonists Die?" www.dbqproject.com/us-mini-qs.php
3. Newsela is an archive of leveled nonfiction and news articles and can be accessed at <https://newsela.com/>.
4. The PSA Questions and Activity Sheet can be found on the Read, Write, Think website within the activity, "MyTube: Make a Video Public Service Announcement" and can be accessed at <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/activities-projects/mytube-make-video-public-30157.html?main-tab=2#tabs>.
5. There are a variety of PSA videos and radio announcements available on the Ad Council website: www.adcouncil.org/Our-Campaigns.
6. The original P.A.C.E.D. Decision Making Template can be retrieved from the EconEdlink website at www.econedlink.org/lessons/docs_lessons/764_PACED1.pdf.
7. If you have never had students create short videos, the "MyTube" activity referenced above from the Read, Write, Think website might be helpful.

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