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Placing Ourselves in the Story

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Placing Ourselves in the Story

Abstract

"Developing an understanding of the Civil War is an essential part of the curriculum in American schools today. And little wonder: unlike other conflicts in American history, the whole story happens here, at home. The story of the Civil War is the story of *us* fighting with *us*, and the conflict shaped not only the immediate situation, but also successive generations of Americans right up to the present day. How can parents and teachers help children and young adolescents understand this pivotal time period in American history?"

Posting about teaching and the Civil War from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/placing-ourselves-in-the-story/>

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Comments

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Placing Ourselves in the Story

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Dave Mulder

Developing an understanding of the Civil War is an essential part of the curriculum in American schools today. And little wonder: unlike other conflicts in American history, the whole story happens here, at home, rather than a beach in Europe or a jungle in southeast Asia. The story of the Civil War is the story of *us* fighting with *us*, and the conflict shaped not only the immediate situation, but also successive generations of Americans right up to the present day.

How can parents and teachers help children and young adolescents understand this pivotal time period in American history? What are the issues involved?

Issues in teaching the Civil War

There are several issues in particular that can make teaching the Civil War challenging or even controversial. This curriculum topic is ubiquitous in American education, but that does not mean teaching about the Civil War is at all *easy*. The conflict is part of history, certainly. But to understand the situations that led up to the beginning of the War, as well as the events of the War itself, and even to understand the aftermath, students need to develop a working knowledge of not *only* the history, but also the geography, politics, culture, technology and engineering, economics, psychology, and religion of that time period.

For example, most people know this conflict by the name I have been using throughout this article: the Civil War. But there are a variety of other names that have been used for it by different people and in different places. Some southerners continue to refer to the conflict as “The War of Northern Aggression,”¹ a term that seems to put the blame squarely on the North. Conversely, even immediately after the conclusion of the conflict, some northern writers referred to it as “The War of Rebellion,”² which shifts the blame to the South. Still others have used “The War Between the States” as an alternative, seeming to try to not place blame on either party, but also noting that war is so often not at all “civil.” Why use the term “Civil War” at all? Perhaps it is because President Lincoln himself used that terminology in his Gettysburg Address:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure...³

If there is controversy even over naming the conflict, how can teachers and parents then tell an honest, authentic story of the Civil War?

Use of Primary Sources

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand the story of the Civil War is through the use of primary source documents and photographs.⁴ “Primary source” refers to documents and artifacts that were produced during the time period being considered by the people who lived through the events. Many letters, journals, books, and newspapers written by people who lived through the events of the Civil War exist today, and have been curated by a variety of institutions. Photography was just becoming more

commonplace during this time period as well, and so there are many pictures that can be used to get a sense for the people and places of the Civil War era.

Take Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as an example. There are many ideas packed into this short speech, ideas that might prompt productive lines of inquiry for teachers and students. When students read the Gettysburg Address firsthand, there might be many questions that come up:

- Where is Gettysburg? Why was Lincoln giving this speech there?
- Is Lincoln quoting from the Declaration of Independence? Why would he do that?
- Who was listening to the speech? Northerners? Southerners? Would they have heard the message differently?
- What was the outcome of Lincoln giving this speech? Did it make a difference?
- Why would Lincoln say, "the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here?" (Since this speech is one of the most famous in American history!)

Answering these kinds of questions might mean further research and study! Examining maps of the battlefield and photographs of the event could enhance students' understanding of the context of Lincoln giving this speech. Reading the transcripts of the speech published in newspapers of the day (there were several different versions published!) might bring up the idea of bias in the media, and the role of perspective in telling a story. Beginning a study of the Civil War by a close reading of the Gettysburg Address might provide a frame for investigation of different perspectives on the war, why the war was fought, and the eventual outcomes of the war that echo through American history to this day.

The Importance of Narrative for Shaping Perspective

Among the primary source documents that have been preserved from the Civil War era are many letters and journals from the soldiers who fought on both sides. Allowing students the opportunity to read these for themselves can let the voices of these people speak through the years. Hearing the stories—and the emotions they contain—by the people who *lived* these experiences can make the events much more real to students than any textbook reading could achieve.

Another resource to consider is quality fiction about the lives of those living through the Civil War era.⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one such novel for me; when I read it in high school, I remember feeling incensed about the injustices of slavery—they became so much more real to me than the depictions in my history textbook. When reading the story, you cannot help but feel angry and frustrated. We empathize with these characters; their story becomes part of our story because we begin to feel what they feel.

Another novel that had this kind of powerful effect on me is *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen.⁶ This short novel is less than 100 pages in length, but that does not make it an easy read. It is written in a way that suggests the linguistic style of a slave; it's told as a first-person narrative from that perspective. *Nightjohn* tells the story of a slave in the American South who, against all the rules of the culture at that time, learns to read... and teaches fellow slaves how to read. Of course, there are repercussions, and the horror of what happens stirs up not just empathy, but real anger about the injustice that was a normal part of that society.

Stories have a way of capturing our imagination and our emotions. Whether through primary sources or quality works of fiction, narratives help us to understand and empathize far beyond the intellectual exercise of comprehending the facts as presented in a textbook. We need to understand that the story of the Civil War is *our* story, the story of the American people. Whether our ancestors came to this nation hundreds of years ago, or much more recently, the story is still ours, because the events of the Civil War had an essential role in shaping our national identity today. Teaching the Civil War through narrative can help students truly know the story—in both mind and heart.

Resources

The following is a list of resources available from reputable sources that parents and teachers might find valuable for helping children and young adolescents understand the life and experiences of the people living through the Civil War.

- [Civil War and Reconstruction-Era documents from the U.S. National Archives](#)
- Resources from PBS for [Ken Burns' documentary The Civil War](#), including lesson activity ideas and discussion questions.
- [Civil War photographs](#) from the Library of Congress
- [Primary source documents](#) for both the Union and the Confederacy from the Library of Congress
- A fascinating collection of [Civil War artifacts](#) from the Smithsonian Institution.
- A helpful resource page provided by Dr. Gayle Olson-Raymer, professor emerita at Humboldt State University, that includes discussion questions, maps, graphics, and links to other resources for [understanding the background of the Civil War](#).
- A repository with a wide variety of specific Civil War resources for different age levels (elementary, middle school, and high school) from [StudentGuide](#).

Please feel free to add other resources in the comments section below!

Dig Deeper

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War of the United States (1861-1865). To polish up on your [Civil War](#) history, we're featuring four articles on the Civil War this week. On Tuesday, Scott Culpepper discussed faith in the Civil War in the article, [They Prayed to the Same God](#). On Wednesday, iAt featured an article by Patrick L. Connelly on the flag-raising at Fort Sumter on April 14, 1865 called [Fort Sumter and the Rhyme of Hope and History](#). Paul Fessler encouraged readers to try the "staff ride" approach when visiting Civil War battlefields in yesterday's article, [Civil War Staff Rides](#).

Footnotes

1. See Benen, S. (February 11, 2009). "[War of Northern Aggression](#)". *The Washington Monthly*. Retrieved May 22, 2015. ↩
2. For example, Foote, H. S. (1866). [War of the Rebellion; Or, Scylla and Charybdis](#), New York: Harper & Bros. ↩
3. I think all American students should memorize the Gettysburg Address. It is short enough to be committed to memory with a little effort, and it is an excellent example of the power of rhetoric. The full text is readily available online. Here is one source, including commentary about it's writing [here](#). ↩
4. There are many helpful resources available online for getting started teaching history through primary sources; a simple online search for "primary sources for teaching _____" should yield productive results. Some suggestions from the Library of Congress for teaching the Civil War through primary sources can be found [here](#). ↩
5. I recently attended a session with Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor emeritus of philosophical

theology at Yale Divinity School. Dr. Wolterstorff was talking about the importance of the arts—including film and good fiction—for creating empathy and engagement in students. He even used [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#) as an example! ↩

6. I used to tell my middle school students that they could not graduate from 8th grade without reading this novel. (I was joking, mostly.) It's the sort of book that changed the way I think about slavery, and I wanted my students to have that sort of experience as well. I can't tell you how many students over the years came back to me expressing both anger and sorrow about what happens to Nightjohn, but glad they had read the book. It is *not* an easy read...but it's an important book, and one appropriate for middle school students. ↩