

Using Personal Avatars in History Survey Courses: An Alternative Learning Project to Deepen Understandings of Historical Change and Social-Emotional Learning

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Introduction

History and social studies educators often face challenges in terms of getting students to empathize with people from the past, develop critical thinking skills, and make long-term connections among historical processes. The topics covered in history and social studies courses can often seem remote from the preoccupations and interests of many contemporary students, causing some to become disinterested or unmotivated. This is especially the case “when instruction emphasizes only memorialization and factual recall” (Hutton, Keirn, & Neumann, 2012, p. 25). Further, several significant and enduring concerns are often relayed in a language and register that is hard for students to relate to and thus comprehend. Educators must look for new ways to modify instruction to address students’ academic and cultural needs (Martins-Shannon & White, 2012). The history/social studies curriculum is crucial to developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, democratic values, empathy, and emotional intelligence. To help provide a way to help overcome such challenges, this article presents an alternative learning project that history and social studies educators can use to develop a deeper and more personal engagement with the past and historical change. Through this project, students develop individual avatars and think and act as their avatars when faced with various historical issues over time. While elements of this project are not new to teaching history and social studies, this article seeks to contribute to this approach by demonstrating how it could be adapted specifically

to the high school and undergraduate levels, which typically feature survey courses covering broad periods of time and regions.

Using Personal Avatars

This approach to teaching history and social studies, which attempts to create an engaging learning environment, involves the use of “avatars.” Each student develops his or her own historical avatar and will then think and act from the point of view of this character.

“Avatar,” derived from the Sanskrit word for “descent,” was used for the incarnation in physical form of a Hindu deity. Over time, it came to be used broadly for any type of manifestation in human form as well as the physical embodiment of abstract concepts. In our techno-scientific global age, it can refer to an image that an individual uses to embody himself or herself in diverse electronic media. Thus, in modern usage, an avatar can be viewed as one’s alter ego (“Avatar,” 2020). Once these unique avatars are developed, students will have to think and act (or at least attempt to think and act) from the avatars’ points of view.

The educator, as the facilitator, will pose different events and scenarios, and pose questions, to guide the learning process. This approach provides a means for structuring the curriculum to allow learners to construct individualized understandings of their environment as well as develop a range of skills. Students are therefore compelled to present their ideas about these different historical events and scenarios from their avatars’ perspectives. In so doing, they must refrain from thinking and acting as themselves, but rather as their avatars. In general, this requires them to adopt other perspectives that are different from their own and expand their thinking skills, forming new ways of examining their values, beliefs, and assumptions. Understanding human behavior “comes from trying to put oneself in the other person’s shoes,

from trying to discern how others think, act, and feel” (Patton, 2001, p. 49). This process can also help students realize the complexity of history and that there is not always a single answer to a problem, particularly as different stakeholders will inevitably feel, think, and act differently. Thus, teaching and learning history and social studies in this way makes the past more “real” to students. It also further develops social-emotional learning, as students develop empathy for people of the past through their avatars dealing with historical events, learn how to problem solve, and view situations from others’ perspectives (“What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?” 2020; Volk, 2012).

History of the Approach

This approach to teaching history and social studies is not new. The foundations of the approach are rooted in the Storyline/Storypath strategy, which uses the basic elements of a story—scene, characters, and plot—as a way to structure the curriculum into meaningful and memorable learning experiences for elementary-level students. Originally conceived as the Storyline strategy in Scotland during the 1960s, it soon spread to other parts of Europe. Fostering a literature-social studies connection, the strategy was grounded in constructivist philosophies of learning and was built on the notion that learning that is memorable will ultimately be more meaningful to students (McGuire, 1991; Barr & McGuire, 1993). The approach was later popularized in the United States as the Storypath strategy, largely by Margit McGuire during the 1990s (Fulwiler & McGuire, 1997; McGuire, 1997; “Storypath,” 2020). The strategy continues to be extended to upper education levels. For example, some have presented ideas for how this concept could be used in higher education (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013; Volk, 2013; Volk, 2012;

Sheffer, 2009). Moreover, academics in other fields, such as education, have expanded the concept for use in the instruction of pre-service teachers (Wasmuth, 2016).

The Storyline/Storypath approach assumes that our world is complex, and that students already have accumulated much information about how it works. Students thus have a vast wealth of knowledge obtained elsewhere, such as other classes/courses or through their own interests, that often goes unused in traditional classrooms because of limited opportunities to bring in/incorporate such knowledge. The story form has the potential capacity for integrating content from various disciplines. It can therefore create a context for students to reflect on diverse experiences and find meaning in the world. This approach thus allows students to tap into that knowledge and build upon it, developing new understandings, through such activities as questioning, investigating, and researching. Critical thinking and problem solving are skills at the heart of history and social studies learning (Barr & McGuire, 1993).

Although initially targeted for elementary social studies, the typical sequence of events in a Storypath is the same for avatar learning projects for upper-level students. This sequence includes: 1) establishing the setting, 2) establishing the characters (avatars), who are generally created by the students with guidance from the teacher, 3) establishing context building, in which students take on activities that involve learning/thinking about the people and places they are focusing on, and 4) establishing the events/critical incidents that will drive the exercise. Students are therefore engaged in taking on introduced problems/scenarios that further the objectives to be learned through the Storypath. Most Storyline/Storypath exercises also have a concluding episode to provide closure (McGuire, 1997). The table below presents one possible Storypath idea for a unit in US history and one for world history.

Table 1

Social Studies Topics	Title of Unit	Sample Characters	Sample Setting	Sample Events/ Critical Incidents
US history	American Revolution	Merchant families in colonial Boston or New York Sons of Liberty	Colonial Boston or New York	--Taxes from Britain --Arrival of British troops --Boston Massacre --Boston Tea Party --Battles of Lexington & Concord --Battle of Bunker Hill --Battle of Long Island --Declaration of Independence
World history	Middle Ages	Serfs Free peasants Knights Lord of the manor	A Fief	--Living and working in a fief --A challenge to the king --A drought --A siege

Sample Avatar Project for AP European History/Western Civilization Survey Courses

Beyond the elementary social studies curriculum, most articles advocating for the use of an avatar-based project for teaching history have been focused on its use in higher education classrooms, particularly in upper-level history courses (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013; Volk, 2013). This is logical for many reasons, including the fact that such courses typically cover more compact periods of time (and sometimes geographical areas as well) to better correlate with a

human lifespan. It therefore lends itself toward creating a more “realistic” experience for the creation and lives of students’ avatars.

However, the sample avatar project below demonstrates how this approach could be used in upper-level (particularly AP) high school courses and introductory-level undergraduate history courses, both of which are typically survey courses that study extensive periods of time, and often countries and regions as well. Although some liberties need to be taken to make it work (such as suspending reality, as in the example below, in which students pretend that their avatar is “immortal” or a multi-generational approach in which a student uses multiple avatars that are different generations of a single family), there are many benefits for using this approach with students taking history courses to meet the general education requirements for a high school diploma or a bachelor’s degree as opposed to upper-level history courses largely taken by majors already interested in history.

Among the purposes of the avatar approach, and in keeping with its Storyline/Storypath roots, is to make the history/social studies curriculum more relevant and meaningful to students, as well as deepen their sense of historical change and social-emotional skills. As a result, this approach is perhaps best tailored to students who may not typically enjoy more traditional history and social studies classes and learning. Moreover, this type of assessment project can appeal to multiple learning styles and its narrative structure helps students understand concepts and make connections between events that they may not be able to do in a traditional assessment. When presented with such an opportunity, students often respond with remarkable creativity and relay a wealth of prior knowledge.

In the sample project below, which was used in a 15-week undergraduate Western Civilization II course, students created an avatar and responded every few weeks by writing

journal entries reacting to and reflecting on new events/critical incidents introduced through a short narrative and series of prompts that related to the material we were covering in the course. As their responses were posted online in our Blackboard course shell, they were referred to as “blog” assignments.

For the purposes of this course, you will suspend the realm of reality to develop an “immortal” character for yourself. This fictional character, created with a specific gender, religion, and social background, will be your “avatar” and experience many of the major events and themes of Western Civilization that we will cover in the course. You must write original blogs (diary entries) from your character’s perspective, reflecting on how these events/themes are impacting your daily life. Since the course covers a large span of time (much longer than a single lifespan), the “immortal” angle allows you to create a single character that can experience all of these events and themes as well as to develop a unique way of making connections between change and continuity within the Western experience across time. These entries, as well as the creation of the characters, will be done using a series of provided prompts/questions to guide you. Each blog should be brief (no more than a page) and in the form of a diary entry.

Creating your character!

It is the beginning of the seventeenth century. Europe is amidst a sea of change: The Renaissance, the ongoing Reformation, and the beginning of settlement in the New World. Into this society and culture, a new baby—you—are born. Who will this new baby be?

Name?

Date of birth? (Use your own day of birth and then select a specific year in the early 1600s)

Gender? (Male or Female)

Place of birth? (This will serve as your place of origin and provide subsequent details about your identity, like your primary language, to which religion you would likely subscribe, your name, etc.)

Social background? (The family of a serf? A slave? A former slave? A peasant? An artisan, or skilled craftsman? A rich member of the bourgeoisie (like a merchant or lawyer)? A member of the minor nobility? A powerful noble? The choices are endless. Remember, however, that this choice will impact your perception and participation in the events to come, as well as your level of education, etc.)

Blog # 1

It is the 1660s. Absolute monarchies have consolidated themselves in much of Europe. But elsewhere, the institution of the monarchy is being challenged. The English Civil War, Restoration, and Glorious Revolution, for example, have sown the idea that kings' power is not without its limits.

Questions: What has your early life in the first half of the seventeenth century been like (briefly describe your school experiences, your profession, your family situation, your living situation, any traumas or tragedies or successes, etc.)? How have your life experiences influenced your perception of the monarchy in the region you are from?

Things to keep in mind when creating your blog entry:

- 1) Which social class are you from? How would this impact your views?
- 2) How would your gender and/or race impact your perception of events?

3) Which European country are you from? How would this influence your perception of events and the monarchy?

Make sure to reference actual people, places, and events within your entry.

Blog # 2

It is 1746. Dynastic battles and the consolidation of the state system are common. An Atlantic system is growing in complexity, connecting Europe to the wider world. The urban and rural living experiences are changing. Amidst this growth and expansion, a new era of skepticism and challenges to the existing order begins to emerge: The Enlightenment!

Questions: What impact has the early Enlightenment and its growing number of social critics had on your social views?

Things to keep in mind when creating your blog entry:

1) Which social class would you most likely identify with? How would this impact your views?

2) How would your gender and/or race impact your perception of events?

3) Which European country are you from? How would this influence your perception of events/ideas?

4) Based on your answers to questions 1-3, think about the ideas of the Enlightenment and social critics emerging at this time. To what extent are you familiar with the new social and political ideas of the Enlightenment? Do you agree or disagree with them? How have Enlightenment ideas influenced your opinions of women or slaves?

Make sure to reference actual people, places, and events within your entry.

Blog # 3

It is early 1794. The Terror is in full swing. The French Revolution has become more radical: Enemies are found within and without of the country's borders. A republic has been declared and the king and queen executed. God has been replaced with the cult of reason. France faces war with much of Europe...

Questions: What would you have been doing at the time of the French Revolution? How would you have viewed the French Revolution?

Things to keep in mind when creating your blog entry:

- 1) Which estate would you most likely identify with? How would this impact your views?
- 2) How would your gender and/or race impact your perception of events?
- 3) Which European country are you from? How would this influence your perception of the French Revolution?
- 4) Based on your answers to questions 1-3, think about why the French Revolution became more radical and what your political views might be. Would you have sympathized with the first phase of the French Revolution (c. 1789-1792) but not the radical second phase (c. 1792-1794)? Alternately, would you have thought that the first phase had not gone far enough and needed a more radical turn? Or would you have been opposed to the entire French Revolution?

Make sure to reference actual people, places, and events within your entry.

Blog # 4

It is 1850. The ideals of the French Revolution have spread throughout Europe. After Napoleon, waves of revolutions broke out in 1830 and 1848. Liberalism is gaining traction. Meanwhile, an Industrial Revolution is transforming individuals' daily lives...

Questions: What would you have been doing during this "Age of Revolution"? How would you have viewed these monumental changes?

Things to keep in mind when creating your blog entry:

- 1) Which social class would you most likely identify with? How would this impact your views?
- 2) How would your gender and/or race impact your perception of events?
- 3) Which European country are you from? How would this influence your perception of events?
- 4) Based on your answers to questions 1-3, think about how you would perceive the legacies of the French Revolution and the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution (i.e. how would these changes affect your everyday life?)

Make sure to reference actual people, places, and events within your entry.

Blog # 5

It is 1908. Global tensions are escalating: Colonial competition, nationalism, arms and technology races, economic competition, and secret alliances are commonplace. New trends are emerging in the arts and a world economy is growing in complexity. Is this the calm before the storm?

Questions: What would you have been doing during this time? How would you have viewed these monumental changes?

Things to keep in mind when creating your blog entry:

- 1) Which social class would you most likely identify with? How would this impact your views?
- 2) How would your gender and/or race impact your perception of events?
- 3) Which European country are you from? How would this influence your perception of events?
- 4) Based on your answers to questions 1-3, think about how you would perceive the global state of affairs at the time. Use your “immortal” experience to view things in larger perspective: How have your centuries of life influenced the events unfolding before your eyes?

Make sure to reference actual people, places, and events within your entry.

Blog # 6

It is 1945. The accumulated devastation of two world wars has wreaked havoc on Europe. After WWII and the Holocaust, Europeans are rethinking how to pick up the pieces, how to remake Europe differently so that something like this never happens again. What can this next generation of leaders do differently from those that negotiated the peace terms following WWI?

Questions: What would you have been doing in the era of the world wars? How would you make sense of this devastation?

Things to keep in mind when creating your blog entry:

- 1) Which social class would you most likely identify with? How would this impact your views?
- 2) How would your gender and/or race impact your perception of events?

- 3) Which European country are you from? How would this influence your perception of events?
- 4) Based on your answers to questions 1-3, think about how you would perceive the global state of affairs at the time. Use your “immortal” experience to view things in larger perspective: How have your centuries of life influenced the events unfolding before your eyes? What advice could you give to the leaders seeking to transform Europe?

Make sure to reference actual people, places, and events within your entry.

Rubric for Avatar Blogs

	4 points	3 points	2 points	1 point
Content	Content reflects a vast amount of knowledge about the historical period	Content reflects above satisfactory knowledge about the historical period	Content reflects a satisfactory amount of knowledge about the historical period	Content reflects limited knowledge about the historical period
Point of View	Insightful understanding of how point of view affects interpretation of events	Very good understanding of how point of view affects interpretation of events	Good understanding of how point of view affects interpretation of events	Limited understanding of how point of view affects interpretation of events
Fluency	Excellent fluency	Very good fluency	Somewhat disjointed	Disjointed
Grammar and Usage	Up to three grammatical errors and proper word usage	More than three grammatical errors and proper word usage	Less than three grammatical errors but improper word usage	More than three grammatical errors and improper word usage

Benefits of the Approach

In general, the use of avatars as demonstrated in the previous activity helps humanize the history/social studies curriculum, placing it at the “core of humanistic education” (Ciancia & Sheffer, 2013). In other words, it helps put “the social back in social studies” by “re-establishing human beings as the central subject of social studies—their lives and stories, their triumphs and abysmal failures, the enduring dilemmas embedded in the study of family and society over time” (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 4-12). This approach assists students in getting a better understanding of how individuals shape and are shaped by their environment, and how they are consequently both producers and products of history. Moreover, such an approach creates contexts for active learning experiences as students make sense of and construct meaning in relation to the events presented before them. This approach, which provides a more integrative, rather than single subject-based, approach to the history/social studies curriculum, offers students the ability to incorporate material learned in other parts of the history/social curriculum as well as outside it (such as art, literature, and science). For example, on course evaluations, one student responded, “We progress throughout the year and move from topic to topic in my classes, I generally forget about what it was that we previously covered in class. But this activity not only helped me remember it, it helped me see more clearly how the topics covered in this class have interconnecting themes and how things relate to each other. I also noticed there were some things in my other classes that related to what we were discussing. This actually made me more interested.” Viewing problems from a multidisciplinary perspective can help students become better critical thinkers and problem solvers, skills much needed in democratic society.

In approaching topics, issues, problems, etc. from the point of view of their avatars, students also build on their personal experiences. By continually connecting what they know to

the developments/issues being presented to them, students are provided with the opportunity to directly experience the content and pull from their prior knowledge and beliefs. The process of sharing prior knowledge and experiences, thereby making “personal purposeful connections with their academic work,” is especially important in culturally and academically diverse classrooms (Enright, 2012, p. 67). Such experiences can also help students learn about themselves, including how history may have shaped events in their life as well as some of their perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs, as well as how they might become agents for making history/change. For example, on course evaluations, one student responded, “As we moved closer in the class to the present day, the situations that my avatar faced allowed me to make connections to my great-grandfather and some of my own family history. It helped me develop a deeper understanding of my family and myself.”

Despite such benefits, educators seeking to incorporate this approach should also be mindful of some of the difficulties involved. Difficulties can be grouped into two main categories, which are not mutually exclusive: staying in character and understanding the historical contexts. Some students can get carried away with creating their avatars and backstory elements, so much so that they become distracted from the historical contexts. By incorporating some of their own personal interests or background to the character, students may need reminding to separate the avatar from themselves and to approach the issue, situation, or problem from the avatar’s point of view. A related issue is that students may sometimes impose modern and/or American culture beliefs and attitudes on their characters that are anachronistic to the historical periods. For example, on course evaluations, one student responded, “I had trouble reacting as my avatar. I basically just kept thinking as if my avatar was me just transported to the past.” The inability to gain sufficient understanding of the context is perhaps the most

challenging potential difficulty. When students do not have sufficient understanding, they will typically fill in the gaps with assumptions that have no historical basis. Students may therefore need to use some additional resources to obtain sufficient understanding of the historical contexts.

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