

Rationale for Cycle of Study 1

Introduction

I have spent a lot of time in the last three days trying to figure out how to explain to myself why photographs of my family are magical. For an equal amount of time, I wondered how 7th or 8th graders in my community would find themselves relating to a dirty old bone, excavated in a quarry outside of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The impetus for the deep ponderance of these seemingly unrelated ideas is my cycle of study for the upcoming quarter, *Identity of Self*. Putting together the materials for the first 9 weeks of school that align with this theme has encouraged me to find creative ways to help my students explore the connections between these photos or bones, or what have you. Teaching *Identity of Self* forces me to scrutinize the connections I perceive and make around me. It operates on the acknowledgement that whatever we are courageous enough to engage with becomes a part of our identities, in one way or another.

The work that I have put into *Identity of Self* focuses on exploring how individual identities influence the way our personal stories are shaped, and our history is made. The concrete thread that will weave through this macro-level theme is the study of archaeology. Taking seemingly disconnected ideas like personal identity in 2019 and archaeology as the basis for a whole 9 weeks of learning may seem like the opposite of intuitive, however Daniel Siegel supports this connection. In *Brainstorm*, he spells out that “abstract and conceptual thinking, increased reward drive, and enhanced novelty seeking are three sources of the potential and passion for creative thought.” Siegel is in fact encouraging a dynamic approach to lesson planning for adolescents. I thought about this when trying to find a common link between all the aspects of my Humanities quarter. With a variety of standards to meet, but a drive to unlock students’ creative potentials, archaeology provides a useful framework to incorporate big-scale concepts like world history, writing skills, explanation of identity, group initiatives and games, and rooting them in the study of a concrete topic. In other words, grouping concrete areas of study with intellectual frameworks and the pursuit of joy fosters intellectual invention.

My cycle of study will exemplify Siegel’s sources of potential and passion for creative thought. The cycle project, cycle kickoff and culminating activity, and group games channel abstract and conceptual thinking, increased reward drive, and enhanced novelty seeking. The completion of these activities will lead students on an exploration of their own identity, its facets and its obscurities, and in the end, they will understand how their individual identities will shape society’s collective memory of the past.

Framing the Cycle and Montessori Thought

In the movie, *306 Hollywood*, the brother and sister directorial team, Elan and Jonathan Bogarín explore their grandmother's identity, after her passing, by looking at the objects she left behind as an archaeologist would at a new site. They bring in experts who help them with this archaeological dig: archaeologists, historical archivists, fashion designers, physicists, artists, and their mother-- who is their best resource for experiential evidence of just who their grandmother was. The information they receive not only helps them better understand their grandmother's life, their family, but themselves, and the world around them.

Elan and Jonathan's appreciation of their grandmother's house as a place for intense emotional and intellectual discovery is an allegory for how teachers interact with Montessori Practice. In the article, "Community and Engagement: Restoring the Process" Marta Donohue calls this process "...see[ing] our own school as if we were its co-owners." As the Bogaríns turned an unexpected place into a research institution, educators following best Montessori practices recognize the power they hold in molding educational experiences for students through their preparation of the environment. The care given to creating a place that you and the students can both have ownership over facilitates profound learning. What the Bogaríns did in their film had an effect so powerful, that I might as well have based my whole cycle of study off of the inspiration I tapped into after watching their film.

I have spent time setting up the premise of the documentary *306 Hollywood* because many of the activities for this unit (outside of what is required by my district) has been inspired by this film and its rich exploration of the connections between individual identity and the creation of historical archives and memory. I have designed a cycle of study project that asks students to look at the theme *Identity of Self* the same way the Bogaríns studied their grandmother. After seeing *306 Hollywood* at Full Frame, a documentary film festival in Durham, North Carolina, two years ago, I knew I wanted to emulate the same sort "deep" study of self, as depicted in the documentary, but was not totally sure how to go about doing it. I appreciated the concept of archaeology as an underlying current because it connected seeming disparate topics in a way that made sense.

When the Bogaríns were struggling with grief, their mother wanted to sell their grandmother's house as soon as possible so she could try to start moving on. But the siblings decide instead to immerse themselves in their grandmother's life by making an agreement with their mother: they can keep their grandmother's house for one year. They will sort through all of her stuff, clear it out, get the house ready for sale, but they will ask archaeologists, physicists, art historians and the like to look at the objects their grandmother as left behind, and help them make a kaleidoscope of image portraits. They wanted to answer, who is our grandmother? And how does her past affect their current identities and sense of place as adult artists?

My students will be answering the same questions for themselves: Who am I? And how does my past affect my current feeling of who I am?

Components of the Cycle

Putting together a Cycle of Study that truly *moves* students, and facilitates their grasp of big-picture and nuanced concepts, while also making room for joy is difficult; however, I tried to incorporate as many elements as I could when putting together the activities for this unit. Peter Block in his book, Community: The Structure of Belonging discusses that “transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale.” With this in mind, I realized that my goal of studying *Identity of Self* through archaeology and related activities was going to take the whole quarter. This was convenient, in a way, because Montessori projects are meant to be weaved throughout each cycle of study.

The state standards for my quarter were clear and bland: in English, the students should write an explanatory/informational essay, back up a claim, cite text evidence, and talk about theme and plot development throughout a reading segment. In World History, the students needed to study explorers, expansion, and imperialism. In reality, my department and I have been heavily pressured to not even teach history, and only focus on English, which is tested subject. With this in mind, much of my cycle of study is rooted in making sure that history is taught, but that the students are also clearly hitting English standards very hard. I am trying to preserve the integrity of our interdisciplinary, Montessori Humanities classroom.

On the surface the project is about having the students write an explanatory or informational essay; however, the components of the project that lead the students to be able to write their essay builds on Siegel’s idea that abstract and conceptual thinking unlock potential and passion for creative thought. Here are the aspects:

- Academic Lesson: Why do we study the past? To understand how personal actions face present manifestations of identity.
- Outside Opportunity: Expert speaker from the NC Office of Archaeology. Students will be taking notes on archaeological techniques and how a historical narrative is constructed based on the remnants (artifacts) of individual identities and of people who have long ago passed. Students will use the experience to explore how information can be gathered a diverse number of ways, and listening to “expert testimony” (or in this case, a presentation) is just as acceptable as internet research.
- Viewing of 306 Hollywood: Uses archaeological techniques to explore the unique identity of their grandmother, but also to conceptualize an aspect of their individual identities that will no longer be validated now that she’s gone-- their identities are her grandchildren. Students will also be taking notes on plot development, narrative arc, cinematic qualities, and character dialogue, to use in their explanatory essay.
- Group Game: Focuses on “creat[ing] healthier groups... minimize gossip, hazing, and other forms of false community” (Marta Donohue, “The Way We Gather”). Through this, students will be better at understanding how we present our identities to other people and what it looks like when others try to act like someone who is not true to their personal identity.

Conclusion

Recognizing the plurality of identity, we see that our school culture is the culture of each individual student. To understand ourselves in the context of our community, we must first get to know everyone on a case by case basis “understanding yourself is a basic mindsight tool for integrating your life” (Daniel Siegel, *Brainstorm*). This cycle, studying individual identities will set students up well to study how cultural and societal identities influence how history is made. Taking the concept we have already studied, and expanding the conception of identity further.