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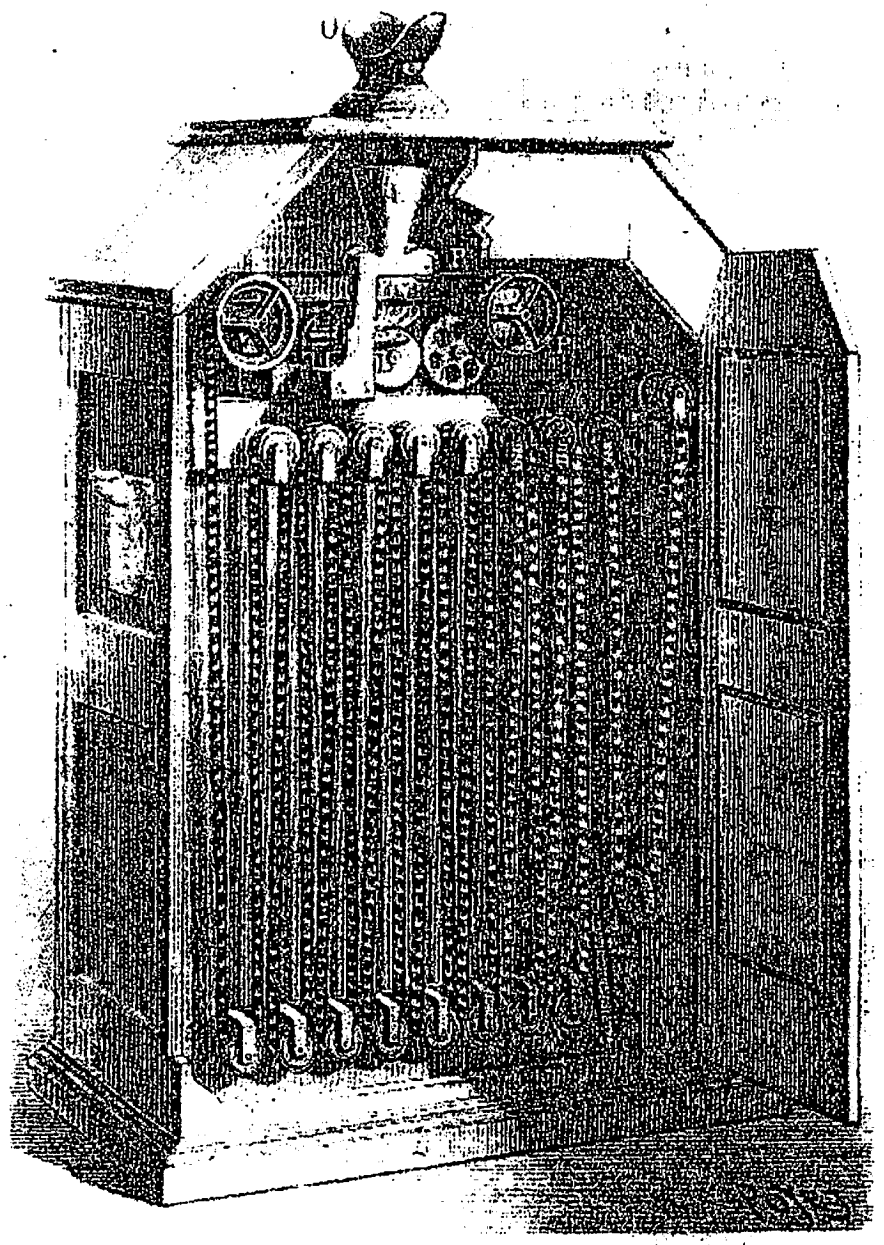

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Mingling 'Fact' with 'Fiction': Strategies for Integrating Literature into History and Social Studies Classrooms

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DESPITE NUMEROUS ATTEMPTS at reforming the teaching of history, high school students still rate it as the least exciting subject they study.[1] Yet recent research shows that interdisciplinary curricula, particularly in the humanities, can have positive benefits for students. These include increased student motivation, increased student performance, a better understanding of and ability to retain content, encouragement of multiple points of view and perspectives, increased critical and creative thinking, and a means of dealing with the postmodern problem of fragmented knowledge.[2] In addition, there are benefits particular to using literature in social studies classes. Using fiction may help break down artificial barriers between disciplines, engaging students in reading and thereby truly integrating literacy with social studies. Discussions of form and its impact on shaping the presentation of content are rarely clearer than they are when reading literature, and this can make students more aware of the ways content is represented in text books and primary source documents. Literature is also a powerful tool for integrating and highlighting voices from the past—especially those of children, minorities, women, and the poor—that may not be those generally heard or read by students in their historical studies.

In this article, we offer a series of strategies to help teachers integrate

literature into their history and social studies classrooms without losing the flavor or essence of either the literature they are using or the history they are trying to teach. None of the presented approaches is mutually exclusive of the others, and several may be combined together in effective ways. Each does ask for a different focus, however, and thus invites a different way of looking at a piece of literature, requiring classes to press literature into service for different historical understandings. Following this discussion of strategies, we provide a case study example, using Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, to illustrate our points.

Five Strategies for Using Literature in History and Social Studies Classrooms

1. Era Driven. The first strategy is to choose an event or era in history and then select a piece of literature—a whole book or selected chapters or even just a single chapter—accordingly. In this case, "era" may refer to the time period in which the piece of literature was written, the period about which a piece of literature deals, or the time period when the book might have been widely read. Useful examples of literary pieces include: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, which offers a keen depiction of the extravagance and ennui that characterized life for some Americans during the Jazz Age; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, which reveals as much about the troubled time period in which the author was writing, a period dominated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the HUAC investigations, as it does about the Salem Witch Trials described in the play; and Harriet Beecher Stowe's seminal *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which invites important discussion of not only the time period in which it was written and the portrait of slavery it presents, but also the temporal, social, cultural, and political contexts that saw it go from international bestseller to a work banned by numerous school boards and districts and finally to a book used frequently again.

2. Theme Based. The second strategy for using literature in history and social studies classrooms is to choose a theme that you want to explore with respect to a particular time period or other historical category and then choose a piece of literature accordingly. For example, a teacher might select the theme of "power," and then opt to examine such literary works as Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, or Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. The theme of "revolution" might be addressed by examining overt discussions, in such works as Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, or might be teased out of a work with less explicit revolutionary messages, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

3. Essential Questions. Another strategy is to begin with an overarch-

ing "essential question" and then choose a text that helps address it. For example, a teacher may pose the question, "What is worth dying for?" and then pick texts—or selections from texts—that invite discussion of this question, such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, or even Esther Forbes' *Johnny Tremaine.* Another key question might be, "Are all men (and women) created equal?" which would invite discussion of the whole or chapters of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* or William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*, to name two classics that are often taught in middle school English classes.

4. Identity Driven. The fourth strategy is to focus on a person or group of people and choose a piece of literature that helps illuminate that identity. Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* invites discussion of what it means to come of age in the United States as a female and a Dominican immigrant. *The Light in the Forest*, written by Conrad Richter, provides a stark comparison of white and Native American cultures in the eighteenth century and thus would be suitable for examining either white settler identity or Native American culture during this time period (this latter text also might be used with the first strategy, since Richter's intention was to comment on American policies in the 1950s, when he was writing, as well as on white settler treatment of Native Americans in the 1700s).

5. Literature Based. Finally, teachers may choose to select a particular text on its own merits and then design a unit around it, illuminating various aspects of the text. This is the standard "English class" strategy, and often teachers select this approach if a book is considered canonical or if they feel it merits examination in its own right. In a sense this strategy can best be used as a close reading approach to understanding the construction of narratives. For example, how does a writer use metaphor or simile to make a point more powerful? Langston Hughes' poem *"I, Too"* uses the metaphor of being excluded from a dinner in stanza two and the prediction of future presence at that table, to illustrate the particular struggle for acceptance African Americans faced in the 1920s. A teacher and his or her class might examine the text at the smallest level—that of word choice or sentence construction—or they might examine metaphors that run throughout the book and dramatically impact the reading of certain events. The literary devices of irony, exaggeration, and poetic language may also be highlighted by the teacher when looking at the power of language to influence reader interpretations.

Putting Literature to Use: Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, a cultural critique depicting the often-harsh social injustices facing contemporary Native Americans living

in the United States, is a fictional text that provides a wealth of curricular material for history and social studies classrooms. It recounts the fictionalized return to earth of legendary bluesman Robert Johnson, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil at the "crossroads" in 1931, receiving extraordinary blues skills in return. Johnson went on to record only twenty-nine songs before being murdered on August 16, 1938. Sherman Alexie "locates" Johnson in 1992 as he appears on the Spokane Indian Reservation. After Johnson passes his guitar on to Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a storyteller, musician, and overall misfit of the Spokane Tribe, the events that transpire take the reader on a journey that is at once tragic, humorous, "Blues-ical," and redemptive.

At the onset of the book, readers learn that in the 111 years since the creation of the Spokane Reservation, "not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident."[3] In fact, Wellpinit, the only town on the reservation, did not even exist on most maps. So when Johnson reappears with his guitar and meets Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the reservation is turned upside down. After any number of challenges and soul searching as well as a series of magical experiences, including mythical encounters with "Big Mom" (Alexie's metaphor for the metaphysical and spiritual forces that live in and among Native American myth) Johnson passes his magical instrument on to Thomas. Upon receipt of the guitar, Thomas, who never before possessed any real musical ability, becomes a talented singer and guitarist. Soon after, he and the notorious reservation bullies, Victor and Junior, form the rock-and-roll band, Coyote Springs. A magical, musical odyssey begins, which takes the band from reservation bars to small-town taverns, and then up to Seattle where they encounter Betty and Veronica, two white women who eventually become groupies of this Native American band. Then it is on to the Flathead Indian reservation where they meet Flathead sisters Chess and Checkers who eventually join the band, becoming integral players in Alexie's spiritual journey. Finally the scene moves east to the recording studios of Manhattan, and ultimately back to Wellpinit, to the reservation and a new approach to life.

Use of *Reservation Blues* in the classroom can inspire students to question and investigate the historical background of contemporary reservation life in the United States. Even more, the book provides an avenue for students to explore critical social situations such as poverty, inadequate housing, and unemployment—all conditions that they themselves might be experiencing in inner city or impoverished homes and neighborhoods of their own. Alexie highlights the somewhat destitute lifestyle of 1990s reservation Indians and juxtaposes this reality with the tremendous faith, strength, and determination of his characters. He exposes critical issues plaguing reservation life (gambling, alcoholism, poverty, inadequate education and housing), highlights governmental institutions involved

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in reservation life (the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Indian Health Services, the Bureau of Indian Affairs), and uses metaphor to detail historical circumstances that have shaped and defined white-Native relationships. For example, he discusses missionary attempts to convert Native Americans to Christianity using actual figures from history.

Reservation Blues welcomes treatment through the application of all five strategies addressed in the first section of this article. Teachers may choose to frame a unit around the various critical issues plaguing contemporary United States society. Using this approach, *Reservation Blues* can provide an opportunity to explore Native American struggles in response to these current conditions (strategy 1). In and of itself, *Reservation Blues* is an in-depth exploration of the themes of power, superiority, and paternalism and how these themes have played out in the nation's history (strategy 2). Alexie offers teachers and students an occasion to explore essential questions such as "What happens when cultures meet?" or "Why do we fear differences?" (strategy 3). The book also illuminates the evolution of Native American identity in the United States and is suitable for examining Native American culture during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries (strategy 4). As aforementioned, Alexie engages with magical realism, using metaphor, setting, and a host of other literary elements to illuminate his story and, as such, *Reservation Blues* stands on its own merit as a piece of literature worthy of engagement (strategy 5).

Reservation Blues thus serves as a meaty source for use in history and social studies classrooms, but even a text as rich as this should not be used on its own. Just as we would never expect one primary source document to "stand alone" for the whole history of an event or trend or time period, so too should teachers not expect one novel, no matter how "real" it may seem or how rich its insights may be, to bear the weight of serving as historical evidence all on its own. (See Appendix A for activities ideas to incorporate *Reservation Blues* into the classroom.)

We realize that often, the time constraints history and social studies teachers face due to state-mandated curricular requirements inhibit creativity and prevent departure from the "factual" and mundane. Nevertheless, we argue that use of fiction in history classrooms can serve as a potent vehicle through which to adhere to time constraints in addition to city and State learning standards for social studies and literacy, while simultaneously providing students with an enriching and thought provoking experience. The departments of education in both New York City and New York State, along with many other locations, command social studies students to "become life-long learners who construct authentic inquiry, read critically, evaluate information and take action." These mandates require teachers to create "in-depth, inquiry-based units of study," in which they

"help students form their own enduring knowledge," and provide "the tools and experiences necessary to study history critically and thoughtfully."[4] These institutional standards require teachers to utilize a variety of different sources as they push students to learn to think deeply, write skillfully, and argue cogently about complex historical arguments. The approach to studying *Reservation Blues* discussed here not only speaks to the aforementioned departmental missions and the multiple requirements of these state and city-mandates, but also succeeds in subjecting "historical evidence" to careful scrutiny by putting the book into dialogue with other sources.[5] At the same time, this approach invites students to invest themselves not only in the *facts* but also in the *stories* of history.

Notes

1. Jacquelyn Hall. "Don't Know History? Here's Why," Boston Globe. 20 March 2004. See also James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

2. Samuel Wineburg and Pamela Grossman, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Challenges to Implementation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001). See also, Deborah Dean, Susan Stone, and Don Forney, "The economy of curriculum integration: Profit and loss," *English Leadership Quarterly* 23.3 (2001): 2-5; Ronald Sion, "English: The Integrating Force," *English Leadership Quarterly* 23.3 (2001): 5-7; Roseanne D. Nelson, "Interdisciplinary experiences: Prospects and Pitfalls," *English Leadership Quarterly* 23.3 (2001): 7-12; Stephen Tchud and Stephen Lafer, "Interdisciplinary English and contributions of English to an interdisciplinary curriculum," *English Journal* 86.7 (1997): 21-29; Heidi Hayes Jacob, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation,* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989); James Bean, "Curriculum integration and the disciplines of knowledge," *Phi Delta Kappan* 76.8 (1995): 616-22; and Neil Anstead, "Hooking kids with humanities," *Educational Leadership Quarterly* 51 (1993): 84-7.

3. Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues,* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 3.

4. Elise Abegg. "Mission Statement," Department of Social Studies, <http://www.nycenet.edu/Offices/TeachLearn/OfficeCurriculumProfessionalDevelopment/DepartmentofSocialStudies/default.htm>, 2005.

5. "Learning Standards for Social Studies," New York State Education Department, <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/social.html>, June 1996.

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<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/>

Appendix A:
Materials and Suggestions for Using *Reservation Blues*

- Offer guiding questions to frame students' reading of *Reservation Blues*. Examples: Research the origin of the Native American reservation—when and why were the first reservations created? Define institution, reservation, Native American, white, Christianity, missionary. How are these terms institutions in and of themselves? What roles do these institutions play in *Reservation Blues*? Explore notions of culture. What does this term mean? Are there multiple definitions? Why? How many cultures live in and among the US? Is it possible for people to belong to several cultures at once? Examine the following list of themes—culture, superiority, religion, war, poverty—and find textual references that speak to one or more of these themes. What are some of the other themes examined in *Blues*? Find textual support. Research Alexie's social location, as well as the specific policies in effect with regard to Native American reservation life during the early 1990s, when he was writing the book. What might the results of this research suggest about the context in which the book was written? About the themes touched upon in the book?

- Have students write a 1-2 page critique of Alexie's use of literature merged with history to highlight social injustice in the United States using textual reference.

- Distribute *Child of the Americas* by Aurora Morales and challenge students to relate it to the themes raised in *Reservation Blues*.

- Use the "Introduction" to Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror,* the "Foreward" to Arthur M. Schlesinger's *The Disuniting of America,* or pages 7-11 of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* to examine themes of culture and conflict and explore the essential question, "What happens when cultures meet?" in depth. Discuss these aforementioned readings, their implications, and the larger themes touched upon.

- Revisit *Reservation Blues* for specific references to various cultural encounters (Native and white, Native and Native, Christian and Native, Native and black, etc). How does Alexie illuminate these encounters?

- Examine 19th century maps, speeches, acts and treaties; discuss their 20th century implications.

- Assign textbook readings detailing the history of missionary excursions, specifically those referenced by Alexie such as the 1820s excursion of the husband/wife missionary team Narcissa and Prentiss Whitman, who crossed the Oregon Trail to convert members of the Cayuse tribe to Christianity. Pose questions about the various cultural encounters that took place in the Whitman/Cayuse encounter, as well as questions on how different cultures justify their actions. Point students to the section in *Reservation Blues* where Alexie conveys the Whitman encounter. Discuss the themes and implications of the meeting as illustrated in the book and compare to your textbook's historical account.

- Have students search continuously for historical references in *Reservation Blues* and then have them research some of these events, laws, and actions in detail, looking online and in their textbooks. Ask students to share these findings in small groups or collectively, taking notes and exchanging information, exploring the origins of the act or event in and of itself, its effects and/or implications, and the themes touched upon. Pending class ability, encourage students to formulate questions about these events.

- Instruct groups to create annotated timelines during class, to chronologize their collective research. Share these timelines collectively. Choose events, incidents, laws, or acts that have impacted Native/white relations in the U.S. upon which to explicate and assign further readings.

- Revisit previously discuss
  the psychological/socioecc
  they face, and their affecti
  root causes, complicating fa
  newspaper, and journal arti
  sues. Assign selections dra
  students the following ques
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  - What are the origins of
    perform additional rese
  - How might student-crea
    institutions? Why might
    institutions? Do these in
    Americans in the US? In
    fect these issues? Is soci
    we appeal?

- Have students select one issu
  research on the current statu
  the policy proposal project i
  sion, audience engagement, a
  than tell their points, and dire
  arguments.

- Challenge students to addres
  tive bodies. Upon completion
  may want to submit their pro

Appendix B:
Native American Policy Pr

The objective of this assignment i
in the United States (US) today, l
to address this issue and sugges
Requirements are as follows:

1) Focus on an issue that accordi
   Expand on a policy already ir
   research.
2) Research and reference at le
   - A primary source (perha
     political figure, a picture, a
   - A secondary source (a n
     American throughout US
     Knee, etc.)
   - In addition, you should dr
     of the other sources distribu
     the textbook
     Howard Zinn's *A Peopl*
     any handouts received

- Revisit previously discussed themes to bring the discussion to current day reservation life, the psychological/socioeconomic state of Natives living on these reservations, the issues they face, and their affecting governmental institutions. Push students to really dig for the root causes, complicating factors, and implications of these issues. Provide current magazine, newspaper, and journal articles to explore what is currently being done to address these issues. Assign selections drawn from these readings for whole-class discussion and pose to students the following questions:
  - What governmental institutions mentioned in *Reservation Blues* are currently involved in the Native cause?
  - What are the origins of these organizations/institutions? Choose one upon which to perform additional research.
  - How might student-created time-lines explain the creation and evolution of these institutions? Why might they need to exist? What critical social issues inform these institutions? Do these institutions help or hinder the current societal state of Native Americans in the US? In your view, is the government doing enough to positively affect these issues? Is society doing enough? What else should be done? To whom must we appeal?

- Have students select one issue of particular interest and direct them to conduct independent research on the current status of the problem. This research will serve as the foundation for the policy proposal project in the appendix. Work with students on the language of persuasion, audience engagement, and proper citation of sources. Push students to really show rather than tell their points, and direct them on the use of multiple forms of evidence to create solid arguments.

- Challenge students to address their policy proposals to relevant governmental or administrative bodies. Upon completion, submission, and subsequent revision of the proposals, students may want to submit their proposals for evaluation by appropriate bodies.

Appendix B:
Native American Policy Proposal Assignment

The objective of this assignment is to remedy a **critical social issue** affecting Native Americans in the United States (US) today, living either on or off reservations. You will propose a policy to address this issue and suggest a method of implementation to put the policy into effect. Requirements are as follows:

1) Focus on an issue that according to your research, has not yet been addressed **OR**
   Expand on a policy already in effect that has thus far proven ineffective based upon your research.
2) **Research and reference at least TWO additional sources:**
   - **A primary source** (perhaps a statement/speech made by a Native tribal chief, or US political figure, a picture, a song, etc.)
   - **A secondary source** (a non-fiction text that examines any/all issues facing Native American throughout US history, such as Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, etc.)
   - **In addition,** you should draw upon Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, as well as any of the other sources distributed throughout the unit
     the textbook
     Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*
     any handouts received

3) The proposal should be no less than three and no more than five full pages, 12 pt font, typed, double spaced (include page numbers).
4) Include a works cited page and cite sources using MLA format (see teacher or manual for guidelines).

YOUR PROPOSAL SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS:

A. Introduction

Introduce the reader to the current quality of life for the majority of Native Americans in the US, both on and off the reservation, and reference how the past informs the present. In this portion:

1. Consider definitions/ideas about culture: What is culture? How has it been defined? Why is it important to understand cultural difference? Why are notions and ideas surrounding cultural difference pertinent to understanding the history and present situation of Native Americans in the US?
2. Reference at least three historical events (and give a brief synopsis) which help to explicate your point of view on the above. You should speak to events which are relevant to your issue and the policy you propose.
3. Introduce the issue you plan to address.

B. The Issue

Explain your social issue in depth. Convince the reader that this problem is in need of attention. Consider the following:

- Why do you feel this issue is significant?
- What research have you found to support your point of view?
- What sort of statistical data exist to substantiate the issue? You can create your own table of statistical information, or use already published statistical summaries (if available), as long as you properly cite the source.
- What has been done thus far (if anything) to remedy the situation and by whom (institutions, departments, or organizations of the US Government? the Natives themselves? non-governmental organizations?)?

C. The Policy Logistics

Introduce your policy and incorporate the following:

Description

- What is your suggested policy?
- Whom will benefit from your policy? How?

Implementation

- How might you implement this policy?
- Does it require any funding? How might the funding be obtained?
- What governmental and non-governmental institutions need to be involved (if any) in implementation?
- How will you monitor the policy's progress?

D. Hypothesis and Conclusion

- Hypothesize on what might happen to the standard of living/quality for Native American in the U.S. if this problem and/or issue is not addressed soon, and not addressed in the way you intend to address it
- How will the policy proposed positively affect the lives of Native Americans? How will it affect—for the better—the lives of the citizens and the overall society of the United States? As you conclude, consider Takaki's assertion that a "United States" needs a "different mirror" in order to be truly united.

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