

Designing Learning Experiences for Deeper Understanding

Article

I imagine the following scenario in middle school. As you read through it, ask yourself, “What’s happening in this conversation? How might it serve as an entry to collaborative teaching and learning?”

After tossing ideas back and forth in passing conversations in the mail room and hallways, Mr. Atkinson, the school librarian, and Ms. Gonzales, the 8th grade American History teacher, finally settled in after school to develop a collaborative unit on the Progressive Era.

Ms. Gonzales: I’m so glad you can meet with me today. I want to start the unit on the Progressive Era next week. You know, this year I’m trying to integrate the teaching of Common Core literacy skills and I’m not quite sure what skills will fit best with this unit. I also want to be sure that the students are doing the learning rather than my presenting information on this time period. I’d like for my students to truly understand the interesting trends that characterized this era, especially the social activism and political reforms.

Mr. Atkinson: Have you decided on essential questions for the unit or would you like to work on those together? Ms. Gonzales: Let’s develop those together.

Mr. Atkinson: Great. I assume that you will let students pick particular aspects of the Progressive Era to investigate. Are you planning to let them work in small groups? Some of your students did an inquiry project in Mrs. Hughes’s English class, but others probably have less experience, so we should think about what skills we must teach and what scaffolding we need to provide so that everyone can be successful.

Ms. Gonzales: Yes, I want them to work in groups. I’ll let them pick their top three choices for a topic to research and then we can balance the groups so that every group has someone with experience in doing an inquiry project. We can set up some guidelines for peer teaching that I think will work.

Mr. Atkinson: Let’s talk about how students will share their new understandings with their classmates. I was thinking that, since the topics that they will be researching involve social reforms, students might like to create opposing campaigns to convince the audience (their classmates) about the value of their point of view. For example, if two groups are working on women’s suffrage, one group could present the pro-suffrage ideas while the other group develops a campaign to show the negative effects on the family and society. With that assessment product, I can see two important skills to teach: evaluating point of view and interpreting primary sources based on historical context.

Ms. Gonzales: I’m excited about this unit already. The students are going to love this and I think they will really understand the Progressive Era when we’re through.

What cues did you pick up from this conversation that might be fruitful seeds for a unit that engages and challenges students? In this exchange between the librarian and teacher, we see the partners:

- Reaching beyond a topic and moving toward big questions that define the issues embedded in the topic
- Recognizing that goal setting and assessment must be the first targets in the planning process
- Supporting a student-focused learning emphasis that includes self-selection and peer exchanges
- Exploring the skills students will need to achieve the goals
- Realizing that the skills have to align with national standards such as the Common Core and the *Standards for the 21st-century Learner*
- Pondering what must be directly taught and what type of support or scaffolding might be necessary
- Valuing the notion of teaching as a collegial and collaborative partnership

ANALYZE THE CONTEXT: C.L.E.A.R. G.O.A.L.S.

Planning is the less visible part of the teaching and learning process; however, it serves as the blueprint for student learning. To conceptualize the unit or project as a holistic learning experience, we created the following C.L.E.A.R. G.O.A.L.S. guidelines that address the major elements of unit planning. An essential step is identifying the specific standards that should be addressed. It’s critical for librarians to be familiar not only with AASL’s *Standards for the 21st-century Learner* (2007), but also the standards that teachers must meet, e.g., the Common Core Standards, and to make the critical match between them.

CONTENT LEARNING GOAL:

What is the classroom teacher’s goal for the content learning? The goal is the desired end point and it answers the fundamental question: What will students understand

at the end of the unit? To pin down a goal, imagine how successful students will demonstrate and use their new knowledge in the future (Reeves 2011).

LEARNERS:

What prior skills and/or experiences must students have to successfully complete this unit? Do they already possess what they need to succeed? It's critical to determine the skill levels and background knowledge of the students. This data will give you a clearer idea of gaps that have to be addressed and the type of assistance that must be provided at different points in the unit.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

What are the big questions that drive this unit? These questions determine the depth of the study and the nature of responses to the investigation. The best questions invite the examination of issues and themes from diverse perspectives where no one answer is THE answer!

ASSESSMENT:

How will students demonstrate their content understanding? What product(s) will they create? Goal setting and assessment are inseparable elements of sound planning. Wiggins and McTighe emphasize the importance of backward design that starts with articulating the end goals and deciding how students will demonstrate their achievement of the goals (2005). This type of backtracking forces you to define not only what and how students learn, but also how they create evidence of this learning.

RESOURCES:

What resources and technology will the teacher and students find exciting and relevant? This is an opportunity to suggest resources in multimodal formats that pique students' curiosity and motivate them to raise intriguing questions and deepen their learning. It's important to identify these resources up front because the needed skills might differ depending on whether students are working in digital or print environments.

Along with having a C.L.E.A.R. understanding of the context for the unit, the librarian must also consider the following G.O.A.L.S. in developing specific inquiry-focused contributions to the unit.

GUIDING FRAMEWORK OF INQUIRY:

How does this unit fit within the framework of inquiry that is central to the *Standards for the 21st-century Learner* and the Common Core Standards? Stripling defines inquiry as a process for learning that

involves connecting to personal interests and a desire to know, gaining background knowledge, asking questions that probe beyond simple fact gathering, investigating answers to gather evidence from multiple perspectives and sources, constructing new understandings and drawing conclusions with support from evidence, expressing the new ideas through a variety of formats, and reflecting metacognitively on both the process and product of learning... [It should] result in new understandings for learners, but not final answers. (2012, 3)



Stripling's inquiry model (see Figure 1) defines critical phases of the process and describes thinking strategies and behaviors embedded in each phase. It clearly reveals the overlapping and recursive nature of the inquiry process. [Click to Enlarge +](#)

As part of the inquiry framework, librarians and classroom teachers also need to consider which specific skills(s) and standards to focus on. A common pitfall to avoid is producing a long list of standards that might be obliquely referenced in a particular lesson but that are not directly addressed. It's important to identify just those standards that relate to the learning outcomes you actively teach in your lesson.

OUTCOMES:

What should students know and be able to do as a result of your instruction? Which skills must students demonstrate at each targeted phase of the inquiry process? The learning outcomes are intended for the learner as well as the instructor and should be stated in student-friendly terms. They must be carefully selected, manageable, achievable, and teachable.

ASSESSMENT:

How will you know if students "got it" in terms of content knowledge and inquiry skills? What assessments will you use? Assessing for learning takes place at different points in a learning experience: it is diagnostic when administered prior to instruction, formative while learning is in progress, and summative at the end of a lesson. The

instruments and strategies vary from simple exit passes and checklists to detailed rubrics and reflection logs (Harada and Yoshina 2010). Selection of the appropriate tool depends on factors such as the learning outcome, nature of the task, and time available.

Assessment not only captures the quality of students' performance; it provides the learner and the instructor with indicators for improvement. It also recognizes and celebrates growth.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:

What learning experiences will enable students to successfully meet the learning goals for both the content and skills? How should you organize the lesson to build for understanding? Starting with clear goals and assessments will help you determine which tasks and activities facilitate students' construction of content knowledge and strengthen skills involving information fluency and critical thinking. By chunking the unit into meaningful learning experiences, you also develop a sequence that allows for students to incrementally acquire and experiment with new information.

SCAFFOLDING:

How will you scaffold this activity to make it manageable? How will you account for different types and levels of learners? In scaffolding the learning experience, you not only decide which skills will actually be taught, but you also decide which skills may not be taught although they are still necessary for successful work. For example, if the lesson focuses on evaluating websites, you can provide links for sites to examine so that students can immediately move to using evaluative criteria on a website without having to spend their time developing search strategies and finding appropriate sites.

Also critical in instructional design is accommodating different levels of ability and interest. Among the strategies you might use: provide resources appropriate for varying reading levels and introduce multimodal resources for different learning styles. Where possible, invite students to make choices in how they demonstrate their learning. For example, allow them to take notes in graphic forms as well as traditional outlines and challenge them to devise creative ways to demonstrate what they have learned.

We developed a unit planning sheet based on the guidelines for C.L.E.A.R. G.O.A.L.S. An example of a unit or project plan on the Progressive Era that builds on the 8th grade scenario in this article can be found in Figure 2, below.

DESIGN THE LIBRARY LEARNING LESSON(S)

Although the overall unit provides "the macrostructure for instruction, the individual lessons are the point of contact with students" (Marzano 2007, 180). Along with content knowledge that is considered declarative or informational knowledge, students must also gain procedural knowledge that is oriented toward the skills and strategies needed to acquire the content. Librarians can assume a critical lead in teaching these procedural skills embedded in the inquiry process. The following are questions to consider in designing specific lessons:

- What phase of the inquiry framework will you address in this lesson?
- Which specific skill will you focus on?
- How can students be actively engaged in learning and applying the skill?
- How will you assess for learning in this lesson?
- What resources will be most appropriate to include?

Students will be most successful at learning new skills when you provide a thoughtfully orchestrated sequence of activities beginning with the introduction and modeling of new skills and transitioning into student application of new learning to specific tasks. The sequence or phases include the following:

- **A mini-lesson that introduces and models the new skill.** This segment of a lesson activates background knowledge and establishes a foundation for the rest of the lesson. There are numerous approaches to launching a lesson including the use of analogies, scenarios, videos, visuals, and statements that provoke curiosity and interest.
- **Guided practice.** The purpose is to provide scaffolding and support to students as they try to apply the new skill. Knowledge construction is not done in isolation. Instructors must provide guidance and encouragement on the important aspects of the new content or skill as well as facilitate the processing of this content or skill through feedback and coaching (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari 2012).
- **Independent practice.** This portion of the lesson allows students to practice on their own and gives the instructor time to work more flexibly with different individuals and groups.
- **Reflection and sharing.** This phase allows students to identify points of confusion or uncertainty about what they are learning; at the same time, it provides the

instructor with valuable diagnostic information. By stepping back to think about their own thinking process as they try out a new skill, students develop a deeper understanding of new concepts. Shared reflections through discussion circles and debriefing sessions encourage students to learn from one another.

- **Extended learning.** Learning through inquiry is a nonlinear and spiraling process. Students should be encouraged to investigate additional questions that emerge, refine products they have created, and explore related topics that engage their interest.

Valuable references for standards-based lessons include the publication *Standards for the 21st-century Learner in Action* (American Association of School Librarians 2009), and the AASL Lesson Plan Database available online (<http://aasl.jesandco.org/>). AASL reviewers carefully vet the lessons contributed to the database ensuring that they meet established criteria for quality lessons. These lessons can be accessed by standard and indicators, content topics, grade levels, and other useful indicators.

CONCLUSION

Librarians across the country are taking an instructional leadership role in schools, districts, and regions by developing rich continuums of information literacy and critical thinking skills that reflect the basic tenets of the AASL and Common Core standards. One such example is the New York City K-12 Information Fluency Continuum with a grade-by-grade alignment to the Common Core (<http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/LibraryServices/StandardsandCurriculum>).

Good teaching and meaningful learning do not happen by chance. Thoughtful learning requires carefully designed pedagogy that merges effective strategies in instruction, class management, and curriculum design (Marzano 2007). Reeves calls this kind of planning “deep design” which addresses what and how students will learn and how they will demonstrate what they have learned (2011, 9). By working as a collaborative team of professionals, developing units based on C.L.E.A.R. G.O.A.L.S. and creating engaging lessons focused on the essential skills of critical thinking and inquiry, librarians can leverage their sources and talents to help students acquire enduring knowledge and the skills of lifelong learning.

Fig. 2. Unit or project plan for Progressive Era. - C.L.E.A.R. G.O.A.L.S.

<p>Name/Content Focus of Unit: Progressive Era (1890s to 1920s)</p> <p>Subject / Grade Level: American History - Grade 8</p> <p>AASL’s <i>Standards for the 21st-century Learner</i> (AASL 2007):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Select a variety of credible sources in different formats relevant to research needs (1.1.4) —Recognize that information has a social or cultural context based in ... point of view (1.1.5) —Explain the effect of different perspectives (points of view) on the information (1.1.7) —Analyze different points of view discovered in different sources (2.1.1) —Draw conclusions based on explicit and implied information (2.1.3) <p><i>Alignment to Common Core (2010):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources (RH.8.1) —Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source (RH.8.2) —Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (RH.8.6) —Integrate visual information with other information in print and digital texts (RH.8.7)
<p>Context of Content Learning - C.L.E.A.R.</p>
<p>Content Learning Goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Understand the context and essence of progressivism (social, political, economic) and climate of reform from 1890s to 1920s —Understand social activism of Progressive Era (including food and drug laws, censorship of motion pictures, eugenics or birth control, Prohibition, women’s suffrage, expansion of education) —Understand political reforms of Progressive Era (including exposure of corruption, movement toward modernization, election reform) —Understand economic policies of Progressive Era (including federal income tax, increased government regulation, growth of labor unions, immigration) <p>Learners:</p> <p>20 students with IEPs; 1 deaf student (lip reader); 12 ESL students (Spanish, Russian, Chinese); wide range of literacy scores (average of scores 2.5 out of 4);</p>

almost all students completed 7th grade exit project in science (with library skills instruction) last year

Essential Questions:

- How did the reforms of the Progressive Era (and the resistance to reforms) arise from the political, social, and economic environment of the time?
- Did the reforms implemented during the Progressive Era result in successful economic, political, and social progress?

Assessment Product:

Students will work in small groups to select one side or point of view toward a political, social, or economic reform of the Progressive Era. Each group will develop a campaign to convince the public (their classmates) that its point of view is the most valuable for social, political, or economic progress (with careful attention to historical accuracy of evidence to support the point of view).

The campaign should include a soapbox/campaign speech, an editorial, and web pages for the class wiki.

Resources:

- Digital resources from the Library of Congress and National Archives
- Books from the library collection placed on reserve

Library Learning Experience - G.O.A.L.S.

Guiding Framework of Inquiry	Outcomes (Skills) to Be Taught	Assessment of Skill	Learning Experiences - Overview	Scaffolding to Provide
Connect:			Background information and discussion provided in classroom. Students select the topic in the classroom for their investigations.	Video documentary & classroom instruction on Progressive Era Students given list of topics from which to choose.
Wonder:			In the classroom, teacher facilitates process of students generating inquiry questions that can be used to guide their investigations.	Template for generating questions provided to teacher by librarian.
Investigate:	Interpreting primary sources based on historical context Evaluating point of view	Graphic organizer that captures observations, inferences, analysis, and interpretation linked to historical context Evaluation sheet for each source	Lesson on interpreting primary sources, with emphasis on how to do close observation, draw inferences, analyze for main points, and then use these points as evidence to build deeper understanding of the background information gained in the classroom. Lesson that outlines the steps to evaluating point of view, including determining the creator; analyzing the text for conclusions, focus, opinion, and bias; comparing evidence with other sources; and drawing conclusions.	Links to primary sources Books on reserve
Construct:	Developing a line of argument with	Point / Counterpoint graphic organizer	This lesson is taught in the classroom by the classroom	Graphic organizer template is provided to the teacher by the

	evidence Organizing the layout of a webpage	Visual layout planning sheet	teacher. Lesson on factors to consider in web page design: navigation, focus, presentation of information to show line of argument, visual appeal, layout, linking, universal design guidelines	librarian Class wiki is set up by librarian with a template established for group pages
Express:			Classroom teacher facilitates writing the editorial and the soapbox/campaign speech in the classroom. Students build their web pages in the library with guidance and support from the librarian. Groups present their campaigns during the Progressive Era Reform Campaign days in the library.	
Reflect:			In the library, class members vote on the reforms that they would or would not have voted to implement, based on the effectiveness of the campaign presentations. As a class, students reflect on the impact of Progressive Era reforms and answer the essential questions. Students reflect on the use of primary sources to gain an understanding of multiple perspectives during an historical era. Students also reflect on the impact of point of view on the evidence they find and use in their inquiry investigations.	

Fig. 3. Lesson plan for Progressive Era.

<p>Teacher: Ms. Gonzales</p> <p>Grade: 8th</p> <p>Subject: American History</p>
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Context of Unit or Project Plan [Reference to C.L.E.A.R. G.O.A.L.S. Planning Sheet]:

Grade 8 American History - Progressive Era (1890s to 1920s)

Phase of inquiry framework to be addressed in this lesson / Length of lesson:

Investigation / 1 class period with 2 additional research days

AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (2007). Skills to be taught in this lesson [Reference to Common Core if applicable]:

- Explain the effect of different perspectives (points of view) on the information (AASL 1.1.7)
- Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (Common Core RH.8.6, 2010)

Assessment:

- Template to record observations and inferences
- Graphic organizer of evaluation process with space for notes and reasoning - to be filled out for each source consulted

Resources:

- National Child Labor Committee Collection: Leveroni Family making violets. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004000002/PP/>
- Library of Congress - Progressive Era to New Era, 1900-1929 - National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848-1921. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/nawbib:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(rbnawsa+n8334\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/nawbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(rbnawsa+n8334))):

Lesson Delivery Phase	Instructional Activity
Introduction and Mini-lesson of Direct Instruction	<p>Show slide of Leveroni family, with mother and children aged 6, 7, 9, and 10 making violets. Description: “These children work on Saturdays, on afternoons after 3 o’clock, and evenings until 8 or 9. Earn 4 cents a gross making violets. Can make 20 gross a day when children work all day.”</p> <p>Students use template to make observations and inferences about the photo. Discuss their observations and inferences. Why was this photo taken? What point is the photographer trying to make? Why has this photo been preserved as part of a collection at the Library of Congress?</p> <p>Introduce skill of lesson: Identifying and evaluating point of view</p> <p>Demonstrate by thinking aloud how the understanding of child labor during the Progressive Era deepens when a primary source is evaluated for point of view:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶Determine creator ▶Analyze text for overall conclusions and focal point of creator ▶Analyze text for opinion and leading language or bias in focus/format ▶Compare conclusions, focus, evidence of text with evidence from other sources and background knowledge ▶Draw own conclusions about the point of view of the text and its effect on the information presented
Guided Practice	<p>Project an excerpt from <i>Woman and the Republic: A Survey of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the United States and a Discussion of the Claims and Arguments of Its Foremost Advocates</i> by Helen Kendrick Johnson.</p> <p>Read through the excerpt together to understand the main ideas.</p> <p><i>Woman is to implant the faith, man is to cause the Nation’s faith to show itself in works. More and more these duties overlap, but they cannot become interchangeable while sex continues to divide the race into the two halves of what should become a perfect whole. Woman Suffrage aims to sweep away this natural distinction, and make humanity a mass of individuals with an indiscriminate sphere. The attack is now bold and now subtle, now malicious and now mistaken; but it is at all times an attack. The greatest danger with which this land is threatened comes from the ignorant and persistent zeal of some of its women. They abuse the freedom under which they live, and to gain an impossible power would fain destroy the Government that alone can protect them. The majority of women have no sympathy with this movement; and in their enlightenment, and in the consistent wisdom of our men, lies hope of defeating this unpatriotic, unintelligent, and unjustifiable assault upon the integrity of the American Republic. —New York, March, 1897.</i></p> <p>Work through the above process with the class to understand and evaluate the point of view on woman’s suffrage presented in the text.</p> <p>Review the process and the impact of point of view on the information presented.</p>
Independent Practice	<p>Provide students with URLs from the Library of Congress Progressive Era thematic collection. For each topic, approximately 20 URLs (with photos, ads, and text documents) are provided.</p>

	<p>Each group investigates the resources on their list, determining the ones that will be most useful for supporting their point of view.</p> <p>Group members use a graphic organizer to record their decisions and thoughts on each step of the point-of-view evaluation process, as well as their notes and inferences about the evidence presented in the text.</p>
Reflection and Sharing	<p>Ten minutes before the end of class, group members gather to share the evidence they have found and their thoughts about the point of view represented by that evidence. Group members determine if they have a good understanding of the process for evaluating point of view and ask for help from the librarian if they have questions.</p> <p>Group members determine a plan for their investigation during the next two days in the library</p>
<p>Extended Learning:</p> <p>Students research in the library for two additional days, taking notes, evaluating point of view, and building a line of argument to support their campaign.</p> <p>For some topics, students will benefit from consulting political cartoons. They can be referred to the National Archives for a collection of political cartoons: Teaching With Documents: Political Cartoons Illustrating Progressivism and the Election of 1912 (http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/election-cartoons/).</p>	

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Association of School Librarians. *Standards for the 21st-century Learner*. American Library Association, 2007. (Downloadable for free at: <http://www.ala.org/aasl/standards>); American Association of School Librarians. *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner in Action*. AASL, 2009.; Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). 2010. <http://www.cores-tandards.org/the-standards> (accessed August 2, 2012).; Harada, Violet H., and Joan M. Yoshina. *Assessing for Learning: Librarians and Teachers as Partners*. Rev. and expanded ed. Libraries Unlimited, 2010.; Kuhlthau, Carol C., Leslie K. Maniotes, and Ann K. Caspari. *Guided Inquiry Design: A Framework for Inquiry in Your School*. Libraries Unlimited, 2012.; Marzano, Robert J. *The Art and Science of Teaching: A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Instruction*. ASCD, 2007.; McTighe, Jay, and Grant Wiggins. *Understanding by Design*. Expanded 2nd ed. ASCD, 2005.; Reeves, Anne R. *Where Great Teaching Begins: Planning for Student Thinking and Learning*. ASCD, 2011.; Small, Ruth V., Marilyn P. Arnone, Barbara K. Stripling, and Pam Berger. *Teaching for Inquiry: Engaging the Learner Within*. Neal-Schuman, 2012.

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