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**Paneling History: Using Storyboards to  
Engage Students in the Social Studies Classroom**

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**Introduction**

One of the major issues in middle schools is how to make classroom activities engaging and meaningful to students. Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children (AFCEC) stresses that there is a positive relationship between student time on task and their achievement (AFCEC, 2010). In this article, the author describes his experience in a sixth grade world history classroom, working with students who created storyboards about a primary source. Further, the author will discuss how student work illustrates some possible benefits of the storyboard activity that relate to current best practices in the middle school classroom.

For middle level instruction, teachers need to use divergent approaches to actively engage students in the learning process (AMLE, 2010). The classroom atmosphere that teachers should strive to construct should encourage creativity, exploration, and inquiry by students in all academic disciplines (NCSS, 1991). Students need to analyze and evaluate the content of varied sources (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2009). The examination of different sources will allow students to be able to discover and articulate alternative points of view. Students can gain a better understanding of the cultural

values of different groups around the world through the inspection of alternative points of view (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2009). By establishing a classroom atmosphere that incorporates these factors, teachers utilize teaching strategies and classroom activities that help students gain the appropriate skills and attitudes to be lifelong learners (NCSS, 1991).

### **Benefits of Primary Sources**

Primary sources may be thought of as the remnants left by a previous society. Primary sources serve as the raw material that historians use to create an analysis and dialogue between the past and present (Kobrin, 1996; Welborn, 2000). Some types of primary sources include newspapers, diaries, advertisements, and photographs. Students benefit in several ways from working with primary sources. Vest (2005) stressed that students can study multiple points of views through reading primary sources by examining authors' opinions and biases. Veccia (2004) emphasized that the examination of primary sources can help students probe deeper and gain a better grasp of social studies content.

Working with primary sources has great potential for engaging students in meaningful activities. Bickford's (2010) approach to using primary sources has great potential in the social studies classroom. In Bickford's study (2010), primary sources about Japanese internment camps were used to examine the historical event. The students then used Microsoft Paint and PowerPoint to create political cartoons to describe the content of the primary sources about Japanese internment camps. The strength of Bickford's activity is that students read a primary source and then applied content knowledge to create an artifact.

### **Benefits of Storyboards**

For this project, the author had students create a storyboard about *Dining with Attila the Hun, 448*. Storyboards use multiple panels through words and imagery to convey meaning of a story in chronological order (Essley, Rief, & Rocci, 2008). Students can demonstrate their understanding of the material by retelling the story through a combination of words and imagery (Doherty & Coggeshall, 2005). Storyboards are an alternative that a teacher can use for students that struggle with literacy and writing skills (Essley, 2005). Through the process of creating storyboards, students can learn valuable skills like creative writing (Abraham, 2008). Storyboarding allows students to learn content material by using a combination of linguistic and visual representations of their understanding.

### **Participants in the Activity**

The author conducted this class activity in a suburban middle school in a southeastern city. The activity was conducted in a sixth grade honors World History classroom with 23 students. The author sent home a parental consent form to be signed for the students' work to be used in this article. The classroom teacher took a class that the

author co-taught at a local university. The author and teacher developed a collaborative working relationship with numerous projects in the teacher's classroom.

### Methodology

The classroom teacher printed copies of *Dining with Attila the Hun, 448* for each student in his classroom. *Dining with Attila the Hun, 448* tells the experience of envoys from the Eastern and Western Roman Empire that had dinner with Attila the Hun. The envoy from the Eastern Roman Empire, Priscus, is amazed by the differences that exist from stories told about Attila as compared to the man that hosts the dinner (Robinson, 1905). This primary source can be obtained from Eyewitness to History, <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/attila.htm>. The class read the short primary source aloud together. The classroom teacher and author stopped frequently to check students' understanding of the content material. After reading the primary source, the classroom teacher explained the purpose and steps of the storyboard assignment. The students created a storyboard in eight panels explaining the central content of *Dining with Attila the Hun, 448*. The author provided five storyboard examples for students to see. One of the examples, related to *The Gettysburg Address*, is provided in Appendix A.

After the classroom teacher and author answered questions, the students took some time to review and analyze *Dining with Attila the Hun, 448* before starting their storyboards. The students then divided their sheet of computer paper into eight parts and brainstormed pictures in chronological order to tell the main events of the primary source. The students worked on their storyboards in class and finished this activity for homework.

### Findings

The author examined the students' storyboards for ideas that they tried to convey and noticed three central themes that were recurrent. These three central themes were common throughout students' storyboards. Students were able to take events in the primary source and create a chronological narrative in their storyboards to explain the primary source. The majority of the students created a narrative in their storyboards that contained a beginning, middle, and end. While creating continuity in their stories, students also supplied details about the dinner. Half of the storyboards mentioned that Attila gave his guests fancy silverware but drank out of a wooden goblet himself. Students also frequently mentioned the simplicity of Attila's attire. The details about Attila's discipline to not laugh during the dinner festivities show that these students gained a better grasp of his personality from analyzing the primary source.

While the students discussed personality traits of Attila often in their storyboards, they were also fascinated by "the Scythian" and Zerkon. Both individuals were described as being factually challenged but nonetheless humorous to all except Attila (Robinson, 1905). Ten of the students referenced either "the Scythian" or Zerkon in their storyboards. The students pointed out the eccentricity of these two individuals and their ability to entertain Attila's dinner guests. Weeks after doing the storyboard activity, the

classroom teacher conveyed to the researcher that students could still identify personality traits and details about Attila, “the Scythian”, and Zerkon from the primary source discussed. Primary sources are a useful tool that can humanize historical figures for students (Wilson & Herman, 2000). See Appendix B for an example of a student’s storyboard that utilizes Zerkon.

The storyboard example about Zerkon also describes a common theme of the social relationships that students discussed about the primary source. Six students’ storyboards had images that illustrated and discussed Attila’s strong relationship with his youngest son. The idea of personal relationships is another aspect for teachers to consider when selecting primary sources. Students need to read primary sources that show historical figures as complex people with strengths and weaknesses. Educators must try to present a holistic view of historical figures to draw the students into classroom discussion.

The paradox of Priscus’ account about Attila the Hun as compared to common perceptions of him as a warrior is conveyed in students’ storyboards. The classroom teacher asked the students to describe Attila and the Huns before reading *Dining with Attila the Hun, 448*. The students used the term “barbarians” to describe the Huns as fierce warriors that were uncivilized. The students’ storyboard in Appendix C shows how students typically described the Huns at the beginning of class discussion. The ending of this storyboard example perhaps speaks to the potential of primary sources and storyboards in the classroom.

Panel seven of this students’ storyboard is very insightful and illustrates one of the goals social studies’ educators strive to achieve. This particular student acknowledges while the Romans and Huns have differences that there is a chance for mutual understanding between different groups of people by having a Roman and Hun shake hands. Eight students in their storyboards articulate co-existence between different groups of people. The idea of co-existence between groups can happen according to the students’ storyboards because people have certain core experiences in common like Attila’s love of his youngest son. While the Huns, Western Roman Empire, and Eastern Roman Empire did not share these students’ idealism about co-existence, the activity did illustrate that these students learned about multiple historical points of view. Students could see that while Attila was a fierce warrior that he was also a father that cared deeply about his son. Through working with primary sources, students can see alternative points of view about historical figures and events that they previously had not conceived possible (Vest, 2005). It is not necessary that students agree or empathize with Attila the Hun but rather that students acknowledge that historical figures are complex with motivations for their actions.

## Conclusion

The activity like the one in Bickford’s study (2010) showed that students can not only learn from primary sources but also demonstrate deep insight about the content material through the creation of an artifact. With the author’s activity, students were

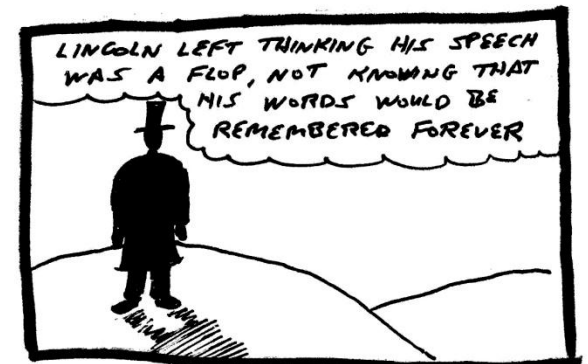
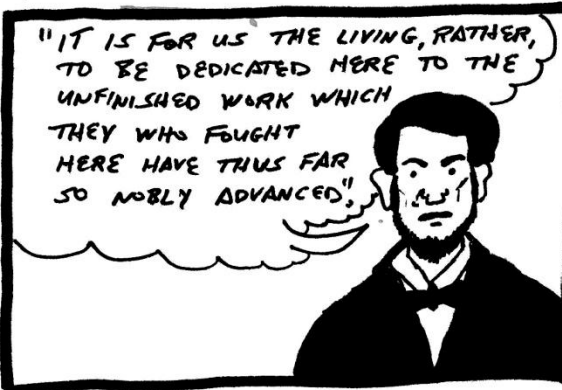
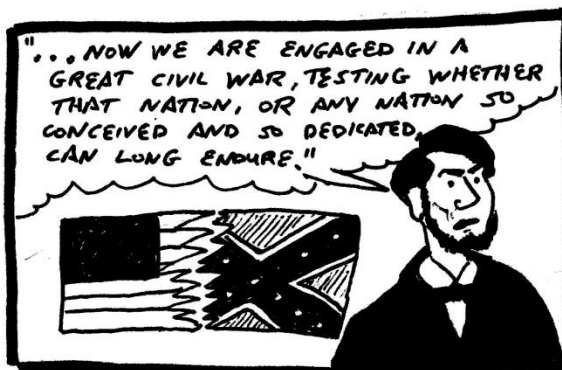
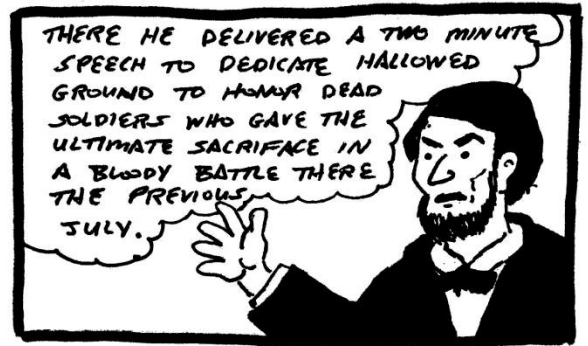
engaged in the learning process through class discussion of the primary source and when they were working on their storyboards. There is a need for more research on having students create artifacts to represent their content knowledge from working with primary sources. The storyboard activity with this group of students embodied principles of ideal middle level education discussed in the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills by having students be able to gain a better grasp of the Hun's culture and better understand their point of view. The process of creating a storyboard also made students examine a primary source and synthesize their understanding of the document through a project that utilized students' creativity. Activities utilized in middle school classrooms need to not only engage students but allow students to work more critically with the content material by analyzing the content and applying the content into meaningful projects. I would like to thank Shannon Hamblen for his artistic contribution to this article. I would like to also thank the classroom teacher that allowed me to explore this activity with his students and to a group of sixth grade students that inspire me with their creativity and enthusiasm to learn.

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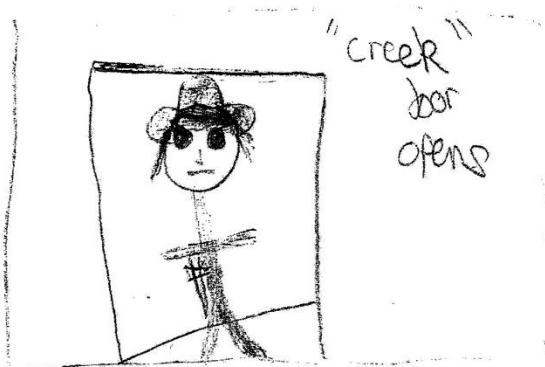
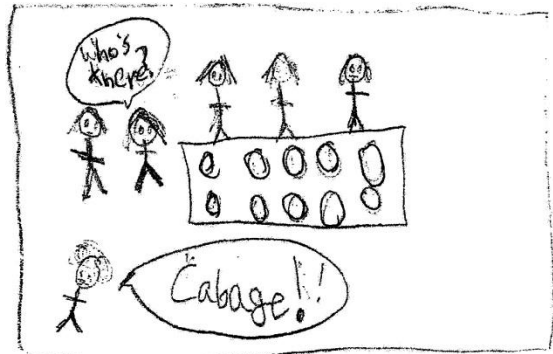
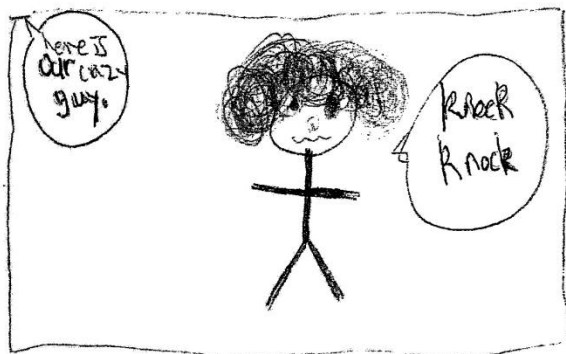
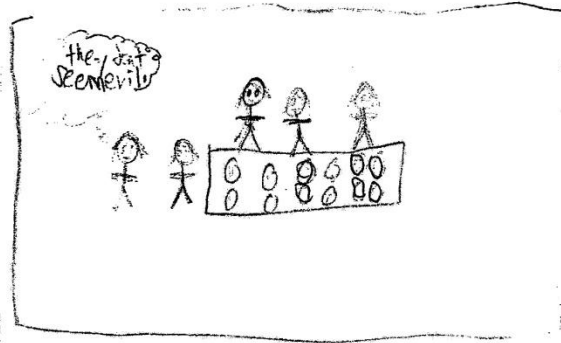
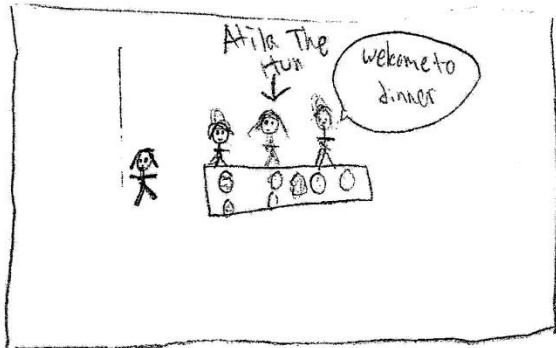
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## Appendix A



Appendix B



### Appendix C



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