



UNLOCKING

HOW FIVE IRREPLACEABLE TEACHERS ENGAGE, CHALLENGE AND INSPIRE STUDENTS TO EXCELLENCE

STUDENT EFFORT

Essays by

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KATIE LYONS

6th–8th GRADE LITERACY & SOCIAL STUDIES

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Since 2008, Katie Lyons has taught middle school students and coached new teachers at National Teachers Academy, a 97 percent low-income school near Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood.

Her teaching career began in 2005 with DC Public Schools, where she won Ward 5's "Outstanding Teacher of the Year" award after just her second year as a DC Teaching Fellow. Soon after, she took on mentorship positions in addition to her work teaching students. By the time Katie moved to Chicago, she had developed a passion for teaching and for preparing new teachers to be effective in high-need schools.

Katie literally goes the extra mile for her students; in 2011, after winning a fellowship to explore the ancient cultures of Mexico, she took her students along virtually through daily video lessons, blog posts and photographs of her journey. Last year, her students achieved an average of two years of growth in reading proficiency and she was honored as a "Teacher of Distinction" by the Golden Apple Foundation.

We love Katie because her appetite for becoming a better teacher is bottomless. She absorbs new techniques constantly and shares them with new teachers whom she is mentoring. As far as we can tell, her only frustration seems to be running out of fresh problems to solve. She turns Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood into the center of the world and hands her students the key.

In her paper, "**You Are Here**," Katie describes how she engages students in rigorous historical material by connecting it to their own lives and the rich, diverse neighborhood around them. She blurs the lines between past and present, distant and local. Her students love social studies because they are learning their own story whenever they are learning the story of others.



“YOU ARE HERE”:

INSPIRING CURIOSITY BY MAKING CONTENT PERSONAL

I get my students hooked by showing them that history is not finished and helping them locate themselves within it.

It's 10 AM on a cold December morning, but the 125 young researchers exploring the Chicago History Museum aren't worried about the weather. They have been challenged to identify a topic for their inquiry-based research project. As they enter the first exhibit, many immediately jump aboard an 'L' car while others head over to lounge in a recreation of an historic Chicago blues club. Several head over to the gallery, City in Crisis, eager to narrow down their topic.

“Have you ever heard of the Haymarket Riot? I'm totally going to research that topic.”

“That's interesting, but I'm more into learning about the 1919 Race Riots or maybe what happened during the Eastland Disaster. I really can't decide!”

Their enthusiasm is overwhelming. For all but 1 of the 125 students, this is their first time at the Museum. It's also the first time most of them have ever completed a major research project. But despite the fact that they have a limited personal understanding of the process, they are truly engaging in that crucial first step of curiosity and exploration. They are each finding their own way in.

One student in particular spends her whole day reading all of the exhibits in the Social Activism gallery. When I ask her about her topic choice, Miracle tells me that she would like to conduct research on the Illinois Mothers' Pension Fund, an extremely challenging topic for a 6th grader. Miracle adds that she is interested in learning more about how Julia Lathrop helped provide aid for women and children.

For Miracle, this story was not merely historical but personal as well. Her mom is raising her and her brother and sister by herself with government assistance. It is at this moment that Miracle reaffirmed for me the importance of providing opportunities for students to see how history is relevant to their real life experiences today.

But how did my students like Miracle get to this level of historical curiosity? It was only by making history personal for my students, offering them many different ways to connect to the content and validating their voices from the very beginning of the year. As the maps in the museum say, “You are here.” I get my students hooked by showing them that history is not finished and by helping them locate themselves within it.

Make Students' Personal Stories Matter

It's hard to get students curious about history – or any subject – when it seems so distant and disconnected from their daily lives. That's why I start each year with an exercise that encourages my students to think about how their own experiences have shaped their perspectives. I do this by asking them to develop personal narratives around a broad central question such as, “What issues affect adolescents today?”

My students reflect on their own experiences and narrow down the issue that they find most relevant and important to them. Brenda focused on the issue of family struggles because she has, “A daddy that left me behind.” Brittney, a quieter student who struggles with low self-esteem, chose the issue of peer pressure, asking, “Why should I believe that you are better than me because you smoke and drink, don't we bleed the same red blood?” And Roderick chose to focus on unsafe communities and gang violence because of his firsthand experiences and frustration with “the danger in the streets that stops kids from growing up and changing the world and being someone.”

Through this exercise, I help my students see themselves as part of a larger world and understand that their personal stories are important. It enhances their sense of self and motivates them to take action towards changing the issues that affect them.

I further validate my students' stories by encouraging them to create a product that showcases their narrative; for example, by transforming their written narratives into videos that they show to their peers. This public audience strengthens students' sense of having a voice and an ability to influence their world, which helps transform their understanding of “history” from a static series of events to an active, social concept in which they play an integral role.

Show Them What's Possible

Just as my beginning of the year personal narrative unit focuses on bridging the gap between my students' life experiences and the larger social and historical issues that shape those experiences, I consistently reinforce their sense of possibility by showing them concrete examples of former students' work. This way, my students build confidence in seeing how other kids like them have been able to illustrate their learning and create impressive projects. It also opens up their options, giving them a variety of ways to get into the content.

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When I share examples of student work, my students are still not completely aware of the process but they realize that success is attainable and they know what a final product looks like. For example, before Miracle and the rest of my students explored the Chicago History Museum, I played student-produced documentaries and performances, displayed exhibits that former students developed, navigated student-created websites with my students, and shared papers that students had authored.

Each one of my students was exposed to these five mediums with the understanding that they too would be responsible for creating a similar product after an intensive research process. While viewing the other students' products, they gained a sense of possibility. They got excited to pick the medium that they would use to display their final product and they began using the other students' examples as models for their own work. And when we traveled to the Museum, my students looked at the exhibits and watched the videos in the galleries through a producer's lens – they were not only eager to learn about the content but they were excited to observe more examples that they could possibly replicate in their own final product.

Bring Students Close to the Content

Making content personal and creating a sense of possibility in my classroom are both ways that I strive to get my students engaged and eager to learn. I also strive to make history real and immediate by giving them as much firsthand exposure to it as I can. I transform my students' thinking about what it

means to study history by helping them understand that it's more than reading out of a textbook; it is the active process of conducting research, analyzing evidence, evaluating multiple perspectives, and developing their own interpretations.

The message to my students is that history is a part of their story, and the way that they interpret historical content is through the personal lens of their unique life experiences. To this end, I provide a variety of source material for each topic we study and then I allow them to dig into it in an unfiltered way. I try to give them a sense of exploration and discovery.

For example, when exploring the theme of a person's "universe of obligation" and how it relates to the Holocaust, my students analyzed a variety of documents including a Proclamation that explained what would happen to non-Jews who helped Jews, a photograph of what happened to a non-Jew who sold merchandise to a Jew, and survivors' and rescuers' testimonies.

In facing the source materials, my students were forced to grapple with the difficult concept of how their personal value system and universe of obligation would have contributed to their own choice of action during this time. We then connected this larger concept to personal issues shared during the unit on personal narratives such as whether it is just to take on the role of bystander to the gang issues in their own neighborhoods. By exposing my students to historical content and then by making it personal, I enable them to see how their own story is interconnected with "history."

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I also bring my students close to the content by virtually bringing the content to them. During a research fellowship, I traveled throughout central and coastal Mexico and explored the ancient cultures of the Nahua, Aztec, Olmec, Toltec, and Mayan civilizations. At each historical site and museum I visited, I recorded an educational video that I uploaded to my blog (katielyonsnta.wordpress.com).

My students virtually traveled the path I took by watching my videos, reading my blog posts, and working in class to analyze nonfiction sources about the content. They also participated in online discussions by responding to my blog posts and those of their classmates.

By participating in this process, they not only sharpened their analytic and evaluative skills but also helped to produce a secondary work of history in the form of a collective blog. They were able to see how they could publically contribute to an academic discussion and, because of their newly obtained content knowledge, have a voice in conversations about historical content.

Some of the most authentic learning took place when my students viewed my videos and responded with questions about the content that demonstrated their genuine curiosity with the subject. After viewing a video that I made while in Palenque, Donesha was enthralled with the fact that the city, after 900 CE, was abandoned and overgrown. She wanted to know more about how the archaeologists uncovered the ancient sculptures and temples. Donesha was so excited in her quest for knowledge that she conducted her own research online to learn more about the work of archaeologists.

Another student, Mahogany, who loves to dance, wanted to know more about the origins of Ballet Folklorico after watching a video I took in Veracruz. She commented, “their culture and dances are different from what I see with hip hop and R&B artists, but their style is mature and wonderful.” Mahogany then set off to conduct research about whether this type of traditional dance has influenced modern dance.

These types of personal connections with the content provided the hook for my students. They have a strong desire to learn more about topics that they view as relevant to their own lives. My job is to provide a variety of high quality sources so that my students can satisfy their curiosity while also being exposed to historical content.

We highlight the research “find of the week” and celebrate a student(s) who finds an obscure fact or a piece of evidence that really influences the path of their project.

Celebrate the Process

Whether my students are analyzing several documents and using their interpretations to debate the concept of justice or whether they are engaging in historical research, they understand that there is as much value to the process of learning as there is with the product of it. At first, this is a challenging concept for them to understand but there are steps that I take to facilitate this.

For example, during difficult units that focus on project-based learning, such as my students’ research on their history project, I publicly celebrate the small successes throughout the process. In the classroom, we highlight the research “find of the week” and celebrate a student(s) who finds an obscure fact or a piece of evidence that really influences the path of their project. For example, when Kiara, who was extremely interested in WWII, came across an article about the Double V Campaign, she finally found a narrow focus for her project. This article became our “find of the week,” which celebrated Kiara’s research efforts and contributed a sense of excitement that was felt throughout the class.

Additionally, I post photographs both in the classroom and publicly in the hallway to draw attention to the process of learning. For example, Shayla and Kaela, who chose to research the South Side Community Art Center because of their own passion for performance art, spent hours at libraries and in the archives examining newspapers, photographs,



Shayla and Kaela at the South Side Community Art Center.

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brochures, and invitations to fundraising events for the Art Center. I displayed photographs of them at the archives digging in with their sources and interviewing the Art Center's curator.

Not only do these celebrations of the learning process highlight the small successes along the way, but they place the students at the center of inspired learning in which they share their knowledge with each other. This reinforces the message that the process of learning and encouraging future learning is what matters, not just the outcome.

Keep Students Engaged through Public Accountability

I try to give my students an audience for their personal narrative at the beginning of the year, and again at the end of major projects when they are required to share their work publicly. When I first introduced the historical research project, I told the class that each student would publicly present their final product to an audience of peers and judges at the school-wide history fair.

This introduced a measure of accountability that was beyond the class and beyond me; they understood that they were conducting research and writing about the past for an authentic audience. It elevated the importance they placed on their project and helped to maintain their motivation throughout the learning process. The students were even more motivated once they learned that ten projects would advance from the school-wide history fair to the city-wide fair.

Just as I provided my students with the element of choice in picking their topic, I also maintained their investment with the research process by allowing them to choose from one of five ways to communicate their learning: website, exhibit, paper, documentary, or performance. By letting them choose their own medium, the learning process ends as it began: organic, personal and self-motivated.

Most students were excited by the opportunity to use technology to create their final presentations. Only about 10 percent of my students have access to computers at home, so being able to use computers in school to showcase their learning in an interactive way was both motivating to them – and a way for me to enhance their 21st century skills. But students were also motivated by the fact that the websites and

documentaries would be published and accessible to anyone with internet access. This authentic audience created a sense of engagement that made the website category the medium of choice.

The emphasis that I place on encouraging all students to showcase their learning in a public forum creates a classroom community where their voices are valued. Just as in-class and online discussions through my blog initially taught my students how to articulate their thinking, presenting and being able to justify their final product increased their investment and allowed me to place them at the center of learning.

Practicing Real Democracy

As Miracle's project emerged, she began to take on the voice of Julia Lathrop. In her final performance piece at the state History Fair in Springfield, Illinois, Miracle channeled the spirit of Lathrop, declaring, "We cannot help the world toward democracy if we despise democracy at home; and it is despised when mothers or children die needlessly. It is despised in the person of every child who is left to grow up ignorant, weak, unskilled, unhappy, no matter what his race or color." These words echoed the heart of the historical work that my students created and the reasons I'm drawn to teaching.

Real democracy in the classroom means not only that students are allowed the space to create their own work but that they have the tools at their disposal to accomplish this task. If we as teachers do not provide a space where students have a say in their work but are held to high standards then we are not practicing real democracy.

Throughout the research process, I was able to encourage my students to engage with historical content that enhanced their content knowledge as well as their perspectives about how events in the past are connected and shape the present. By allowing my students to interact authentically with historical topics that they choose and felt connected to as opposed to a pre-packaged program, I saw a dramatic transformation in their motivation with challenging literacy tasks and I witnessed a major transformation with their critical thinking skills.

Knowledge is not produced or accessed in a void. Regardless of students' social economic status, they deserve access to high-quality resources and rigorous content-based instruction. As such, it is the duty of the teacher to bridge the knowledge chasms that young learners encounter every day.

On one cold day in December, in the archive of all places, I witnessed the democratization of knowledge. I think Miracle would agree.