The [Face]Book of the Dead: Promoting boys’ creativity in History

Jason Lange MA (Hons)

Middle School Social Studies Teacher & House Dean

Chaminade College Preparatory School, St. Louis, USA

Abstract

Fledgling history students often say, “Why do we have to learn about the past? Who cares what Alexander the Great did or said? I don’t have anything in common with Julius Caesar!” “This is the 21st century, and we need to learn about our own world?” Ironically, these same critics will flock to movie theaters to see Gladiator or Troy or The Mummy (not to mention The Social Network). Films like these and other pop-culture creations (i.e. Sid Meier’s game Civilization) never fail to engage young people in conversations about pivotal moments, practices, and personalities in history.

Intrigued by this apparent attitude, I decided to place an action research lens on a unit of study with Year 7 boys as they enter their first years of studying History in their Social Studies course. I was keen to discover if, by using digital technologies, I could change such attitudes, and through this foster a more creative and empathetic approach to their study of the past. Using social media as my intervention, I discovered that boys are capable of empathizing with characters across millennia, and, in the process, I was able to remove a few of the barriers that young people often erect between the ancient past and the 21st century.

Rationale

To 21st century boys, the study of Ancient History could not be further removed from their contemporary existence. Many boys at Chaminade say that they think they have very little in common with the figures who shaped civilization thousands of years ago. It would seem that they fail to see, however, that they are living out the most contemporary chapter of human history, influenced by events and decisions made many years ago.
Chaminade College Preparatory School strives to be at the forefront of Social Studies education, and to that end, the Department’s mission statement promises to confront that challenge by developing courses which “meet the needs of students by implementing technology into the classroom” (Chaminade College Preparatory School Social Studies Department Mission Statement, 2010). Consequently, Chaminade has successfully integrated digital technologies into Social Studies lessons. Navigating the Internet, curating topical websites, accessing primary sources and researching information via online databases are necessary skills, for sure, but they rarely seem to spur empathy or deeper connections with the material. Thus, the question is begged, “How can the use of social media stimulate empathy, an element of creativity\(^1\), in boys as they imagine themselves as characters in Ancient History?” I set out, through action research, to investigate if digital technologies could be harnessed to unlock creative potential, especially empathy, and higher-level thinking skills in boys as they navigate the ancient past.

**Literature Review**

*Although the labor of men and women to improve their world is rooted in the material conditions of their era, it is also affected by their capacity to learn from the past, to imagine, and to plan for the future* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 129).

Is it possible that students of History fail to develop an empathetic understanding of the past, and its correlation to the modern world because traditional pedagogy fails to tap into their dynamic learning style? In his landmark essay *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, Prensky (2001) articulates the possible digital divide that exists between student and teacher:

> Today’s students…have spent their entire lives surrounded by, and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age... [and] as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interactions with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors (p. 4).

As noted by Prensky, students live in a digital, technology-rich world, and boys, in particular, respond well to lessons that include technology and novelty as Reichert, Hawley and Tyre (2011)

\(^1\) **Creativity** is a process viewed as a composite of intense focus, high motivation, freedom to innovate and essential skills such as risk taking, developing empathy, the ability to make clear and appropriate decisions, the ability to collaborate, developing deeper thinking skills. 

explain, “in many cases, the technology itself is claimed to be central to the effectiveness of lessons. Some teachers make the further claim that ready engagement and facility in IT are specifically appealing to boys” (p. 35). Thus, digital technologies might serve as hooks to
stimulate boys’ motivation (Pinker, 1997) and foster more creative, empathetic responses to their study of the past and its correlation to their contemporary world.

It is Richardson (2010) who expounds the richness of social networking sites and identifies how such social media may be used to stimulate creative processes and collaborative learning. Certainly social networks have become ubiquitous in the lives of digital natives. In his essay Why School?, Richardson (2012) estimates that nearly 95% of 12 to 17-year-olds in America go online on a regular basis and 76% use social networks (p. 9). It would seem, then, that boys in particular could benefit in the classroom from such strategies that give them a one-on-one learning experience that is to some extent kinesthetic and encourages a more visual approach to learning (Reichert et al., 2010; Gurian in Delisio, 2006). Using a social networking environment is one such strategy in which boys may develop the confidence they need to take risks, make decisions, and indeed unlock their creativity. As Loveless (2002) affirms, “Creativity involves being in relationship with oneself, other people and with subject domains” (p. 9).

Tied closely to this idea that creativity can be fostered in a collaborative environment is the aspect of empathy. According to Dr. Ruth Richards (2011), empathy is “more than simply ‘standing in someone’s shoes’, [it’s] a complex cognitive-affective capacity… found across time and space…” (p. 21). Reichert, Hawley, and Tyre (2011), too, praise the power of “empathic role play”, stating that many “peak moments and ‘best lessons’ occurred when boys were asked to identify personally with someone under study, to act and feel as the character would, and to produce an account of the experience” (p. 137). Further, they note, “many teachers found that requiring boys to take a role – whether an impersonation or as part of a purely physical process – was transitive to a deeper, surer understanding of the material under study” (Reichert et al., 2011, p. 129). Thus, it would seem that utilizing social networks to role-play imaginary conversations and provide reflection could foster creativity, and more specifically the element of empathy. As Richards (2011) says, “Together, our personal connecting in the moment can show relational creativity, enhancing intimacy, mutual growth and change, and personal (and social) development” (p. 21).

Therefore, if we believe that social media can engage boys in learning while fostering creativity, especially empathy, then perhaps we can help boys understand that History is not nearly as far removed from their lives as they think. Through action research, we can explore how using
social networks can help boys develop creative thinking through empathetic realization of characters in Ancient History.

**Research Context**

At Chaminade, integrating technology into learning tasks is imperative to our success in supporting young boys in their learning. However, such integration does not necessarily mean boys are building knowledge. Within the Social Studies curriculum, we teach History and it is within this context that I wondered how I could get boys to connect the past and its impact on the present. I wanted to lift their engagement in the study of Ancient Civilisations, specifically Ancient Sumer, and to foster a more creative approach to learning. Building empathy was my target focus and action research, my method. As McNiff (2010) clearly states, “action research is a way of working that helps us to identify the values that are important for our lives and to live in the direction of those values” (p. 17). With its focus on practitioner research and student voice, it appeared to be a reasonable approach in addressing big picture issues with grounded, calculated, novel activities that engage the boys.

**Participants**

Fourteen boys from 6th Grade Ancient History class were selected to participate because they appeared to be the more thoughtful and insightful of the 6th Grade boys. They were academically able, their productivity outstanding, and they had a sense of maturity well ahead of their peers. What’s more, during our class discussions, they asked the more engaging questions, connected content more effectively, and provided more creative responses.

Having submitted an action research proposal, the executive approved my project. Both the boys and their parents received an information sheet outlining the project, along with permission notes to be signed independently by the boy and his parent/caregiver. It was acknowledged that participation was voluntary, that confidentiality and anonymity would be guaranteed whilst collecting data and in any subsequent reporting of the research, and that the boys may withdraw
from the action at any time without penalty. It also assured parents that at least two executives would be able to monitor the social network to ensure appropriate conduct between and amongst students and myself as their teacher.

**Action**

Five 45-minute sessions were spent on the action, of which the first three sessions helped to scaffold the last two sessions. During the first and second sessions, the boys were randomly assigned a character from Ancient Egyptian history and they brainstormed ideas about their assigned characters. The third and fourth sessions saw the boys firstly considering social connections that might exist amongst the other boys’ characters, and then, once they had established their ‘contemporary historical friends’, they were asked to consider characters from more modern periods of history (i.e. the 20th or 21st centuries). These relationships would, hopefully, encourage the boys to seek out personalities and traits that transcend time or culture. For example, the boys may propose that Queen Hatshepsut (the first female pharaoh of Egypt) might be a friend with Margaret Thatcher (the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom) or Hillary Clinton (a woman who may become the first female president of the United States). These interactions were demonstrated through the creation of fake Facebook posts.

Once the boys completed their Facebook interactions for their character, I felt they knew the personalities well enough to engage in a ‘live’ online social network site (SNS), the final session and the main intervention. Their project became *The [face]Book of the Dead*. They each uploaded an image of their character, and began their online interaction by responding to a particular historical matter I posted. For example, the boy acting as King Tutankhamen was asked to make a comment about his magnificent tomb; the boy acting as the sun god Ra was asked to make a comment about sunrise or sunset. After each boy had made an initial comment, he was free to respond to comments made by his peers.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected from three sources: samples of student work, a post-task discussion, and my own classroom observations. The sample work came from their fake Facebook pages containing photos and text, rich with the voices of the students as they role-played their different characters. Sample posts were taken, too, from the SNS site. At the end of the action, I gathered the
participants for a group discussion. I reminded the boys that they were free to give criticism, praise, or other. During this session, the boys shared student samples and the prepared combined comments from the SNS. The participants had an opportunity to clarify the statements they had made and ask questions of other participants. I gave them feedback from my class observations, giving the participants the opportunity to correct or adjust my statements.

**Data Analysis**

The comments made by the boys were analyzed for historical accuracy and creativity, especially empathy, as well as for the impact the digital technology had on their freedom to express ideas.

The most valuable data came from the fake Facebook pages and the posts each student made on the SNS. The posts were consolidated into a single document for analysis. I searched for common themes or threads, such as posts or comments that related to pop culture, and these were tagged with one symbol, while posts relating to events in history were tagged with another. At first, too many threads seemed to emerge, but with a closer, repeated reading and a more generous berth given to each thread, a manageable number of themes emerged. Initially, the task seemed daunting and unproductive, but after repeated readings over the course of a few days, the common elements emerged and gave greater focus to my conclusions and reflections.

The audio recording from the group discussion was transcribed and analyzed. I had hoped the boys’ comments would have clarified their written work, adding depth and character. Instead, this transcript helped me gauge the success or failure of the project in the broadest terms. The comments harvested from the discussion were very useful when determining the implications of the research project and future research cycles.

**Discussion of Results**

The scaffolding of the project itself – from the brainstorming worksheets to the fake Facebook pages to the live interaction on the SNS – was absolutely essential to its success. Initially, the boys were intrigued by the idea of incorporating a SNS into the class, but also concerned about how they would be graded, how they would get started, and unsure about the end product. As Participant A stated, “we don’t know anything about people in Ancient Egypt. How are we supposed to act like them?” His classmate, Participant B, added, “I’m not very creative, so I’m not going to be any good at this.” Clearly, one of my biggest hurdles was going to involve
helping these boys build enough confidence to participate in the project at a level they felt comfortable.

The open-ended, undefined nature of a product intimidated a group of boys who preferred following a set of directions, “ticking the boxes”, or trying to reproduce an example from the past. To add to their discomfort was the idea of a SNS. I had taken for granted that their youth and exposure to digital technologies would have introduced them to the concept.

In order for the boys to feel confident about creating and expressing new ideas in a shared online space, they embarked on building a knowledge base about the Ancient Egyptian characters. As the boys moved from a simple fact-finding mission to a more in-depth research, some intriguing conversations emerged, which hinted at the first sparks of creativity. When one boy would discover an interesting fact (the cruder the better), he would share it with the class. For example, Participant C exclaimed, “Hey! Did you know Ramses II had more than 100 kids! How is that even possible?” While the second half of that comment showed mild empathy, it also sparked a classmate to outdo him. Participant C replied, “Oh, yeah; well, Narmer was killed by a hippo! I’d never want to die that way!” Quickly, there was a competition to see who could discover the most esoteric fact about his chosen character. I think Reichert and Hawley (2011) would be proud - I took advantage of “a boyish determination to show off to other boys by using drama or display to deepen learning” (p. 15).

Constructive conversations developed alongside the competitive remarks. As the boys were gaining confidence and knowledge, they appeared to be more inclined to discuss their characters with their classmates. By the time the brainstorming activity began, which required more creative responses about relationships (i.e. rivals and allies), the entire class was engaged in a conversation about Ancient Egypt. Most of the boys had enough detail to know who their character would or would not be friends with. The boys representing Isis and Osiris, for example, were inherently connected. However, when Participant D, who took on the role of King Tut, asked out loud, “Who would I be friends with?” one of his classmates responded, “How about Howard Carter? He discovered your tomb.” Participant D was thrilled, as was his classmate, because a real, authentic connection across time was made. Importantly, this class conversation demonstrated that they were not working alone; that they could rely upon their classmates when
they got stuck. We were not online (yet) and a lot of ideas were lost in the ether, but the first sparks of creativity, and indeed one of its important elements, collaboration, was evident.

The next step in the project, the fake Facebook pages, focused the boys’ knowledge and introduced them to the context of a social network. Armed with details about their selected character (and with increased confidence), the Facebook activity forced the boys to shape their character’s persona by developing a profile page. Almost all of the boys began by selecting a profile photo for their character. What I thought would be a quick decision ended up being one of the most time-consuming steps of the project. The boys were very selective about the photo or image they chose to represent their character. One boy asked, “Do we have to pick just one photo? Can’t we have more? How am I supposed to decide on just one?” His comment was echoed by enough of the boys that I amended the template to include ‘Photos of Me’. This decision proved invaluable in stimulating some creative energy in the classroom. Participant E, who represented the Nile River god Hapi (a hippopotamus), debated between three images: a hippo in Africa, a cartoon, a small blue Hippo statuette. When asked about which one he liked best, he replied, “I like the cartoon from Hungry, Hungry Hippos best because it shows a hippo having fun. Any hippo named Hapi would have a fun profile pic.” His desire to empathize with the character was well founded. Ultimately, he chose the third image as a compromise, but he was clearly giving some careful thought to the visual representation of his character. Interestingly, though, Participant E was more of an exception than the rule as most of the boys chose expediency, using either Wikipedia or Google Image Search. Although the selection of the image/s could have shown greater focus and creative application, I was really
focused on how the boys would exhibit creativity and empathy in connecting their singular, historical character to a vast plurality of contemporary topics.

The template asked the boys to include at least ten posts; half of which had to come from another character in the class. At first, the boys were stuck: “I can’t think of anything to write,” stated more than one boy, whilst another exclaimed, “I have enough trouble making a post as myself. How am I supposed to know what another character will say?”

The boys’ anxiety was natural in the early stage of being creative. However, as the boys traded places and made comments, in character, on one another’s Facebook ‘wall’ about Ancient Egypt or about pop culture the boys actually discovered their voice. For example, Participant F, who represented the Egyptian Sun god Ra, made a post about the NBA’s Miami Heat while Participant D, who represented King Tut, commented on the merits of a new pop song by Ke$ha entitled Die Young. For the first time, the boys appeared to be making a connection across millennia by putting themselves in the shoes of the Ancient Egyptians and bringing their personalities into the 21st century. Whereas the historical comments could be posted from memory or research, these took a moment of thought and deliberation. Something more than a superficial understanding of historical figures seemed to be emerging and the boys were again networking, whether they realized it or not; I observed a sense of focus, determination and engagement in the boys – elements of being in the flow – as they lived in the creative moment.

Not all was perfect, however, as the boys began to make a few critical comments when they returned to their own computer after three rounds of exchanging comments on other boys’ fake Facebook pages. Some boys didn’t like what other boys had posted on their wall. The boy representing Osiris (god of the underworld) was unhappy with a comment left about his wife, Isis. Apparently, Ra had asked Osiris if he could take Isis out on a date sometime and Osiris felt violated. Participant G exclaimed, “Ra is hitting on my wife. Mr. Lange, that’s not right. Make him delete it!” In addition to being a little bit fun, his comment was revealing for two reasons. First, he was clearly empathizing with his character on a meaningful level. He called Isis his wife, removing the barrier between student and fictional character. Second, he was upset that he could not control what someone else posted on his wall. “Mr. Lange, will you delete his post?” became a common cry as the project continued. If the posts were truly inappropriate, I would delete them and have a serious conversation with the perpetrator. More often, however, I
encouraged the boys to respond to the posts as their character would, practising empathy as they made connections. Ultimately, it was the fake Facebook pages that allowed the boys to bridge the gap between a basic, lifeless research presentation and a living, dynamic social network.

The final stage of the project, the live interaction on the SNS, was the most disappointing. Almost immediately, the boys began complaining about the limited nature of the network, the speed of the interactions, and the lack of control they had over what appeared on their wall. The boys were very proud of the information they had gathered about their characters, and they wanted a platform that would allow them to share that information. The SNS used, however, did not allow users to create robust profile pages. Beyond a profile picture, the boys could not share the background information, relationships, or other key features of the profile developed in the previous stage. I refocused their efforts by encouraging them to incorporate their knowledge into their posts. The posts also came too fast. “I can’t keep up with all the comments,” stated one boy. Another observed, “I made a post on Narmer’s wall, but he won’t respond because there have been three other posts since mine.”

Lack of control became a recurring theme, but more positively, for those boys who were still hesitant to dig deep into their creative selves, could simply wait for another character to post something on their wall or mention them in a conversation, and they could respond or get involved. Participant H stated, “the [SNS] part was the best because we didn’t always have to be creative. We could rely on others to start or continue conversations.” Many of the boys saw the SNS stage as one where they could be more passive, as one participant noted, “It was more fun to watch others post on your own wall than to have to post stuff on other people’s walls.”

From my perspective, the boys were often at their most creative when they were being reactive. When Narmer stated, for example, that he wanted to be reincarnated so he could reunite Egypt, Anubis, the god of mummification replied, “I don’t know. We’d have to go through a lot of paperwork and we’d have to unmummify you (Appendix C). The boy acting as Anubis appeared to be empathizing with the amount of work it would take to reincarnate a deceased pharaoh, an emotional response. Sadly, these instances were fewer and farther between during the SNS stage. Too often, the boys would pose questions about pop culture and the conversations would quickly degenerate into mindless banter, maybe creative and engaging, but certainly off topic.
On the whole, a deeper connection between the boys of the 21st century and their appointed historical character, and those of the class, was forged. Participant I observed, “It was good that each student was a different person because Student C acted just like Narmer would in real life, so I got a better idea of who he was.” All of the boys involved agreed that they felt like they knew the people of Ancient Egypt much better than those of any other civilization. Participant J summed it up simply when he said, “I had to learn to think like him.”

**Conclusion**

This action research set out to explore how social media could stimulate creativity, and in particular, empathy, and develop higher order thinking skills as boys begin their formal study of History. Using social media proved to be effective in eliciting empathetic connections in the boys between the ancient and the modern world. To some extent, the boys were able to identify with the characters they adopted, forming a deeper connection with the material they were studying.

The five distinct stages of the action served the project well. While the first stage helped the boys overcome the fear of inadequacy in an open-ended product, the other stages simultaneously freed them to think more creatively, thereby turning the focus from their immediate environment to imagining life as someone else. It came as no surprise that the boys felt some connection to figures in Ancient Egypt and appeared to be more aware that there were identifiable connections between the ancient world and modern one.

The boys, too, realized that the journey is often more important than the destination. At the outset, the boys were mostly concerned with how they would be graded or what type of product they would have to produce. As the project evolved, however, they moved away from their individual concerns and began to focus on their contributions as a collaborative entity, whilst also forming connections between the ancient world and the modern one.

**Implications of the Study on Practice**

Social media can be applied to a broader range of topics and subject areas to promote deep, meaningful connections in learning. The boys themselves expressed a desire to do something similar with characters of a novel in English class, characters from the *Bible* in theology, or as animals in a Life Science class.
The boys seemed to feel as if they had some stake in the future of the class, and they wanted to affect change in a positive way. That notion became most evident when Participant H summed up for the majority of the boys, “Other teachers should use [social networking] in their classes because it’s fun, educational, and makes us think about people on a different level.”

**Implications for Further Research**

Perhaps another cycle might be asking the boys to mimic characters from different civilizations (not just Ancient Egypt, but also Rome, Greece, China, or India). This may lend itself to the discovery of even greater universal themes or threads that connect humanity across time and space. It might also lend itself to fruitful discussions about globalization and the increasingly collaborative, interconnected nature of humanity in the 21st century.

**Reflection**

This action research project was one of the most difficult yet formative tasks of my professional development. Choosing digital technologies and developing an intervention were easy enough, but focusing my goals and distilling the results proved far more labor intensive than I had ever imagined. During the literature review process, particularly, I found myself redefining my goals and tweaking my guiding questions. I persevered in large part thanks to the support of my colleagues on the action research team. Our regular meetings and discussions reaffirmed my desire to refine my practice as a classroom teacher while simultaneously giving something back to the education community. I found great satisfaction in partnering with the boys in my class, too. When they realized they could teach me something, they engaged in the action research process with increased vigor. I’m satisfied with the results. I’ve given my students an opportunity to view history through a critical lens, and I’ve developed a new classroom learning strategy that I can share with future classes and with colleagues in other disciplines. Perhaps greater than that, however, I’ve learned that the pedagogy I deliver in my classroom is fluid, and to be effective it should be deliberate, measured, and reflected upon.
References


Creativity is a big deal in the 21st century classroom. Many countries include it as a core aim for their students in national curricula and even countries such as Singapore that come top of world education league tables are recognising the need for more of it in their schools. This surge of interest in creativity among teachers, school leaders, academics and governments is partly driven by a growing belief that a fast-paced global economy requires workers with the flexibility of mind to adapt to constant change rather than follow a traditional career path. We live in a world where increasing Yes, creativity skills can be learned. Not from sitting in a lecture, but by learning and applying creative thinking processes. Here is an abstract from a study on The Effectiveness of Creativity Training. An examination of the factors contributing to the relative effectiveness of these training programs indicated that more successful programs were likely to focus on the development of cognitive skills and the heuristics involved in skill application, using realistic exercises appropriate to the domain at hand. The implications of these observations for the development of creativity through educational and training interventions are discussed along with directions for future research.