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Aiding Students Understanding of History through a Thematic Approach

Brian Schaeffer
Illinois Wesleyan University

Leah Nillas, Faculty Advisor
Illinois Wesleyan University

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AIDING STUDENTS UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY THROUGH A THEMATIC APPROACH

Brian Schaeffer and Leah Nillas*

Educational Studies Department, Illinois Wesleyan University

Themes refer to the ideas and topics that continue to weave through historical periods

Research Question

- How does the use of thematic approach (or use of themes in history) in teaching history allow students to grasp the cultural and historical change along with the contextual influence on subsequent history?

Literature

- Teaching thematically allows for students to think in a broader context (Kohlmeier, 2005).
- Thematic instruction allows for critical thinking and Socratic discussion (Blankenship, 2009).
- Use of personal narrative allows for better understanding and different perspectives (Davies, 2001).
- Use of technology can successfully reinforce themes (Metzger & Suh, 2008).
- Themes are often used over the course of a unit rather than in everyday lessons (Richburg, 2000).

Methodology

- Conducted *self-study research* in a classroom of about 27 students.
- Taught several lessons using specific themes such as Breakout of War, Culture, Cycle of Rule, Change, and Modernization.
- Administered pretests for each lesson
- Collected student work exit slips and scores from the unit test.
- Analyzed audio recordings of each lesson.

Results

A.) Thematic Lessons

1. Reasons for World War I (Breakout of War)
 - In groups in a geographic layout of Europe, Questioning
2. Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and Buddhism's role in Chinese Thought (Culture)
 - Slide Show, Guided Notes, Questioning, and Pictures
3. Dynastic Cycle in China (Cycle of Rule)
 - Slide Show, Worksheet, Game
4. Dynasty to Communism (Change)
 - Slide Show, Guided Notes, Questioning, Pictures, and Personal Narrative (Movie)
5. Technological Advancement (Modernization)
 - Newspaper Article, Questions

B.) Pretest

- Students (avg. score 64%) understood *Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and Buddhism*. After the lesson, very few students were confused about Daoism being a philosophy.
- Students (avg. score 46%) grasped the *Rise and Fall of Dynasties*. Following the lesson some students were unclear about religion's role in the Dynasties.
- Students (avg. score 38%) understood the change from the *Dynastic Cycle* to *Communism* and its major events. After the lesson, very few students were unsure about *China's Cultural Revolution*.

C.) Student Responses

- "Did the theme help? Yes, because it gave me a general basis to think off of." (Student A)
- "I thought the theme helped bring all the material together." (Student B)
- "The theme helped me learn the material because [it] made me understand better." (Student C)

Conclusions

- 1.) Thematic lessons helped students relate the historical material to a broader context.
- 2.) Students' conceptual understanding improved from the use of thematic lessons.
- 3.) Based on student responses, students believe they understand the material better after engaging in activities involving thematic lessons.
- 4.) As a history teacher, I have observed that by using a thematic approach, students are better able to grasp material and apply it to future events.

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