Introduction
Teaching Interpretation

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Introduction
The AP U.S. History Curriculum Framework defines interpretation in the following way:

Interpretation
Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate, and construct diverse interpretations of the past, and being aware of how particular circumstances and contexts in which individual historians work and write also shape their interpretation of past events. Historical interpretation requires analyzing evidence, reasoning, determining the context, and evaluating points of view found in both primary and secondary sources.

Because the skill of interpretation requires students to judge historians’ arguments and construct arguments of their own, it is best to work on it after students have been introduced to the content. Having historical context enables students to better interpret the secondary and primary sources used.

In the first activity, students work on diverse interpretations on the causes of the Civil War. Looking at causes helps instruct students on the historical thinking skill of interpretation; particularly since questions about the cause of the Civil War is one of the central questions to any U.S. History course. This activity would work well in any period with a robust historical debate about causation. A few possibilities would be: World War I, The Great Depression, World War II, and The Cold War.

In the second activity, students grapple with another of the central questions in U.S. history: whether or not Reconstruction should be considered a failure. This activity asks students to compare a historian’s interpretation with the perspective of various historical actors of the period.
Activity: Interpretation Matching

Procedure

Part I: Analyzing evidence

- In order for students to analyze an interpretation, they need to have an understanding of the evidence and how it can be used to support an argument. In this first part, students work with evidence to understand four common historical interpretations of the causes of the Civil War.

- Introduce students to the essential question, “What are the most significant long-term causes of the Civil War?” Essential questions help focus students’ attention to the over-arching goal of the lesson.

- Next, give students four categories that relate to four common historical interpretations of what caused the Civil War: Slavery, Economic Differences, Cultural Differences, and Fear.

- NOTE: Students have already encountered these categories in whole-class discussions prior to this activity. Those discussions should be used to help students contextualize each of the categories to the time period. The idea of “fear” as a category is based on David Blight’s explanation of the Fear Thesis—the argument that the South seceded due to fear of racial uprisings that might result from the end of slavery and fear of what Southerners believed was an “abolitionist conspiracy” in the North. Students could also include in this category Northerners fear of what they believed was a “slave-power conspiracy.”

- Give students a graphic organizer and a list of twenty specific factual terms to categorize. These terms are the evidence they will use to analyze the historical interpretations. This list and the graphic organizer are provided as a resource in this module.

- Students then take at least twelve of the terms from their list and, using the graphic organizer, categorize them under one of the four interpretive categories (slavery, economic differences, etc.). Some terms may be used more than once. This step gets students thinking about what evidence would be used to support each of the interpretations.

- Students should also indicate which terms are short-term or long-term causes of the Civil War. This keeps the students focused on evidence that helps to answer the essential question: “What are the most significant long-term causes of the Civil War?”

Guided Practice

In guided practice, the teacher closely monitors and directs the students as they practice a task for the first time independently.

Purpose

In this activity students work through evidence to develop their own interpretation of the causes of the Civil War. They then use their interpretation to analyze historians’ interpretations. Finally they match their interpretation with a historian’s.

Essential Question

What are the most significant long-term causes of the Civil War?

Objective

After this activity, students will be able to:

- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of varying historical interpretations.
- Support and refute varying historical interpretations using evidence.
Although students are working in groups, each student must fill out the graphic organizer individually. This not only ensures full engagement but gives them the resource they will need to complete the next part of the activity.

**Part II: Choosing an interpretation**

- Once the groups have completed their graphic organizers, students return to their original seats and complete the next task individually.

- The next step for students is to look over their categories of interpretation and select which interpretation they think is best supported by the evidence they have gathered in their graphic organizers.

- Following that selection, students are given a chance to write their own interpretation using the essential question: “What are the most significant long-term causes of the Civil War?” Students are instructed to center their response on one of the categories:
  - Slavery
  - Economic Differences
  - Cultural Differences
  - Fear

- Students write out their answer in two or three sentences. They must include what they consider to be the best evidence from their graphic organizer to support their chosen interpretation.

- Pair-Share: After they write the response, students do a pair-share to check in on their thinking. Student A shares which interpretation s/he has chosen and why. Student B responds with questions only—Student B should not share her/his choice yet. The idea is to force Student A to clarify the choice and support it with evidence. The students then trade roles.

- Once students have had the opportunity to pair and share, students share their interpretation in a whole-class discussion. Use this discussion to check for any misunderstandings before the students look at the historians’ interpretations. This is another opportunity to re-center the students on the original point of the lesson.
Part III: Matching Interpretations

- The next step involves having students match their interpretation with a historian.

- Give students four separate historical interpretations about the causes of the Civil War. Each of the interpretations matches one of the four categories they used in the anticipatory set. Each excerpt is about 150 words long. It is important that the readings are short and focused so that the students can read them in about 10 minutes. The sources are provided in the bibliography that accompanies this module.

- Instruct students to first identify the argument of each historian. They should annotate for this argument.

- Once they have identified the arguments for each reading, the student should identify which historian matches their chosen interpretation.

- After identifying which historian matches their interpretation, students report to a corner of the room labeled with the historians’ name and the title of the excerpt.

- The goal is to have students accurately match their interpretation based on categories (Slavery, Economic Differences, Cultural Differences, and Fear) with the various historical interpretations.

Check for Understanding

- In each corner, students compare which category they chose. In their corners, students may discover they have incorrectly matched their interpretation. This is a great opportunity for students to physically as well as mentally correct their misunderstanding. If they realize they have misinterpreted, they need to move to a different corner of the room. Do not be concerned if your students do not match each correctly the first time. Work with them to correct their understanding and move to a different part of the room.

- This last part of the activity serves as a check for understanding for both you and the student. In the process you not only check their understanding of the historical interpretations but also the possible causes of why the Civil War happened.
Activity: Using primary sources to analyze interpretations

**Procedure**

- Assign the article by James MacGregor Burns, “Reconstruction: The Revolution that Failed” as homework.

- Before students read, they should be familiar with the following groups:
  - Radical Republicans
  - Freedmen
  - The Reconstruction Presidents
  - Redeemer Governments

- In order to give student purpose for the homework reading, give them the following homework questions:
  - What were the goals of Reconstruction for each group?
  - What were the outcomes of Reconstruction for each group?
  - What is the legacy of Reconstruction for each group?

- At the beginning of the lesson, project or write on the board the three guiding questions. Talk with students about the relevance of the questions for the activity and how the three questions are going to help them extend their analysis of each document. Students should use these questions to guide their work through all three steps of the lesson.
  - What were the goals of Reconstruction for your respective group?
  - What were the outcomes of Reconstruction for your respective group?
  - What is the legacy of Reconstruction for your respective group?

- Divide students into groups. Each group is given one of four perspectives regarding Reconstruction that are addressed in the article and that they read for in the homework reading:
  - Radical Republicans
  - Freedmen
  - The Reconstruction Presidents
  - Redeemer Governments

**Guided Practice**

In guided practice, the teacher closely monitors and directs the students as they practice a task for the first time independently.

**Purpose**

This activity builds students’ understanding of a historical question and prepares them to construct their own interpretation. By using an article that addresses a fundamental question associated with the period and that takes a strong stance on the question, students will naturally be invited to debate the positions that the author makes. Furthermore, by tying the primary source analysis to the historians’ interpretation, students engage in analysis of the interpretation using primary sources as evidence.

**Objective**

After this activity, students will be able to:

- Analyze and interpret the historical actors and their perspective, through the use of primary sources.

- Construct their own interpretation of whether or not Reconstruction was a failure.

**Essential Question**

Was Reconstruction a failure?

**SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT—Long Essay question**

Some historians have argued that Reconstruction should be deemed a failure. Support, modify, or refute this interpretation providing specific evidence.
Students are then asked to brainstorm, based on the James MacGregor Burns article, what they already know about their assigned group’s perspective regarding Reconstruction.

Students must come up with at least eight specific factual terms as evidence of their group’s perspective. In addition to the article, they may consult any of the readings they have read in the unit (textbook, secondary sources, other primary sources, etc.) to create their list.

After students complete their brainstorm, give each group a set of four primary documents that illustrate their group’s perspective. For each document, the group will write a point of view statement.

Students are given the following documents:

**Documents**

**Reconstruction Presidents Documents:** Lincoln’s Second Inaugural; Johnson’s Cleveland Speech, 1866; Lincoln’s Letter to James C. Conklin; August 26, 1863 [Disagreement over Emancipation]; Johnson, October 1865 [Speech titled, “Danger in Negro Suffrage”]

**Radical Republican Documents:** Opposing Images of the 15th Amendment
Matthew Brady Images of Richmond, 1865; Language of 14th Amendment; Thaddeus Stevens, 1865, “The Conquered Provinces”

**Southern Redeemers:** KKK Cartoon, Thomas Nast; Alexander H. Stephens on Readmission, 1866; Map of Readmission Dates; Mississippi Black Codes

**Freedmen:** Sharecropping Contract; “Conventions of Freedmen” example, 1865; Jourdon Anderson, Letter to My Old Master, 1865; Frederick Douglass, The Composite Nation

**Reconstruction Gallery and Thesis Statements**

Once the groups have completed their POV statements they move to create a presentation about Reconstruction, from their assigned POV. The presentations are on a large poster board and, when completed, are displayed throughout the room. The primary sources are left with the finished product so other students can reference the documents when they view the finished product.

There are three requirements for the finished product:

- Each group must integrate the three essential questions in their finished product.
- Each group must integrate their primary source point of view statements.
Each group must find and display another primary source that is a graph, map, cartoon, chart, or picture to be included on their poster board. No text-driven documents may be selected.

Interpretation involves understanding a variety of perspectives. The goal of having them display their poster is to allow each group to develop a deep understanding of one perspective, while being exposed to other perspectives. Also, students take more ownership when they must present to their peers.

Other than that, students are encouraged to be creative and create a unique product that synthesizes their assigned point of view on Reconstruction. It is important to emphasize to students that the final product should convey a message through pictures, graphic organizers, art, cartoons, and very little text.

Check for Understanding

Following the completion of the poster boards, the class has time allotted to walk the Reconstruction Gallery. For each presentation, students must write in their notebook a thesis that they believe is supported by the poster presentation. That thesis must reflect that particular group’s answer to the third essential question: What is the legacy of Reconstruction for this group?

Finally, using James MacGregor Burns’ interpretation and the various historical actors’ interpretations, students must turn in a thesis that answers the summative assessment question and a list of at least four pieces of evidence that support their thesis. In other words, they must construct their own interpretation of the question “Was Reconstruction a failure?” This gives an opportunity to check their understanding before assigning the summative assessment essay.
Causes of the Civil War Graphic Organizer

Using the graphic organizer below, categorize at least twelve of the terms on your list under one of the four interpretive categories. Be sure to write the term in the correct column indicating if it was a short-term or long-term cause of the war. Some terms may be used more than once.

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