

HISTORICAL TRUTH and IDENTITY

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Purpose :

Big Concept:

Historical narratives are often biased representations of a limited historical perspective.

Essential Questions:

- From whose perspective is “history” told?
- How do we prove what happened in the past?
- Is it possible to change the past?

Rationale:

- Students will understand Orwell’s abstract, and seemingly impossible, concept of the mutability of the past and apply it to misrepresentations of historical truth.

Materials:

- 1984 by George Orwell
- Notes on 1984
- Lost Names by Richard E. Kim
- Excerpts from Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States of America.
- Copy of the film “Grave of the Fireflies”

Background for Understanding:

In George Orwell’s 1984, the main character, Winston Smith, vividly remembers seeing a photograph that contradicts a recent “historical” event. After Winston’s capture, he is

interrogated by a member of the Government (“Inner Party”) who attempts to explain to Winston that the past is whatever the people believe it is; i.e. whatever The Party says it is. One of the central tenets of INGSOC is that “the past had no objective reality except in records and so could be altered at will through doublethink.”

Activities

1. After reading 1984, lead class discussion or Socratic Seminar to reach an operational definition of “The Past”. Continue discussion to understand what it means to change The Past (or whether that is possible at all). Ask students why anyone would want to control the past. Have them analyze Orwell’s quote - “who controls the present, controls the past; who controls the past, controls the future.” How might this be true?
2. Define Doublethink and Newspeak. Pass out handouts on Newspeak and Doublespeak.
3. Read excerpts from Zinn’s book, allowing students to view historical events from the perspective of the conquerors’.
4. Read Lost Names.
5. Have students compare the Japanese Thought Police to the Thought Police in 1984 in their journals. Richard Kim’s narrator in Lost Names describes an experience where he is interrogated by police officers who force him to adopt a new name. Additionally, at school, they are forced to learn a new history, one that describes Japan as the mainland, the source of all culture and context for their lives, ignoring their previously accumulated senses of self and Korean identity.
6. Compare this forced assimilation to what European expansion did to Native Americans.

(As to your question regarding foreign students studying in the US, their adoption of new names is voluntary. I know they are encouraged to do so, but not everyone does. Two of my exchange students this year, Haje and Dain, did not change their names for the sake of their classmates’ convenience. I do, however, think looking at the psychological impact of adopting a “new” identity would be interesting. Perhaps it’s no different than when someone is given a nickname. The difference between what happens in the book and what happens with exchange students is, of course, exchange students are not told they must abandon any connection to their past in order

to assimilate culturally. Once again, I do think it'd be interesting to explore this with the students as well.)

Closing Activity:

Students respond to the possible loss of identity when the narrator and his family are forced to adopt Japanese names. Compare the attempted assimilation of the Korean culture into Japanese culture to any other historical instance of forced inhabitancy.

They will also conduct interviews with family members to compare their versions of early childhood memories with the versions told by parents, grandparents, or older siblings in order to help apply the concepts to their experiences.

Assessment:

Students will write a paper addressing the importance of self-determination in the construction of identity.

State Standards:

12.3 – Reading Process

1. Apply reading comprehension strategies, including making predictions, comparing and contrasting, recalling and summarizing and making inferences and drawing conclusions.
2. Answer literal, inferential, evaluative and synthesizing questions to demonstrate comprehension of grade-appropriate print texts and electronic and visual media.
3. Monitor own comprehension by adjusting speed to fit the purpose, or by skimming, scanning, reading on, looking back, note taking or summarizing what has been read so far in text.

12.4 – Reading Applications

5. Examine an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

12.5 – Reading Applications Literary Text

1. Compare and contrast motivations and reactions of literary characters confronting similar conflicts (e.g., individual vs. nature, freedom vs. responsibility, individual vs. society), using specific examples of characters' thoughts, words and actions.

2. Analyze the historical, social and cultural context of setting.
5. Analyze variations of universal themes in literary texts.
7. Compare and contrast varying characteristics of American, British, world and multi-cultural literature.

12.6 – Writing Process

1. Generate writing ideas through discussions with others and from printed material, and keep a list of writing ideas.
2. Determine the usefulness of and apply appropriate pre-writing tasks (e.g., background reading, interviews or surveys).
3. Establish and develop a clear thesis statement for informational writing or a clear plan or outline for narrative writing.
4. Determine a purpose and audience and plan strategies (e.g., adapting formality of style, including explanations or definitions as appropriate to audience needs) to address purpose and audience.
5. Use organizational strategies (e.g., notes and outlines) to plan writing.
6. Organize writing to create a coherent whole with an effective and engaging introduction, body and conclusion and a closing sentence that summarizes, extends or elaborates on points or ideas in the writing.
7. Use a variety of sentence structures and lengths (e.g., simple, compound and complex sentences; parallel or repetitive sentence structure).
8. Use paragraph form in writing, including topic sentences that arrange paragraphs in a logical sequence, using effective transitions and closing sentences and maintaining coherence across the whole through the use of parallel structures.
9. Use precise language, action verbs, sensory details, colorful modifiers and style as appropriate to audience and purpose, and use techniques to convey a personal style and voice.
10. Use available technology to compose text.
11. Reread and analyze clarity of writing, consistency of point of view and effectiveness of organizational structure.
12. Add and delete examples and details to better elaborate on a stated central idea, to develop more precise analysis or persuasive argument or to enhance plot, setting and character in narrative texts.
13. Rearrange words, sentences and paragraphs and add transitional words and phrases to clarify meaning and achieve specific aesthetic and rhetorical purposes.
14. Use resources and reference materials (e.g., dictionaries and thesauruses) to select effective and precise vocabulary that maintains consistent style, tone and voice.
15. Proofread writing, edit to improve conventions (e.g., grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization), identify and correct fragments and run-ons and eliminate inappropriate slang or informal language.
16. Apply tools (e.g., rubric, checklist and feedback) to judge the quality of writing.
17. Prepare for publication (e.g., for display or for sharing with others) writing that follows a manuscript form appropriate for the purpose, which could include such techniques as electronic resources, principles of design

(e.g., margins, tabs, spacing and columns) and graphics (e.g., drawings, charts and graphs) to enhance the final product.